

THE
WOMAN
AND HER
STARS

a novel

PENNY HAW

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*For Laurence and Glen,
because this is a story about stars, a sister, and her brothers*

GLOSSARY

- APERTURE:** The opening in a telescope through which light travels. The larger the aperture, the more light the telescope can gather, improving the clarity and detail of the observed objects.
- ARQUEBUSADE:** A lotion, typically containing alcohol, used to clean wounds during the eighteenth century.
- CHESTERFIELD:** A style of sofa invented by the Earl of Chesterfield in the mid-1750s with a low seat and high back to allow men wearing suits to sit comfortably.
- COMET:** A celestial object consisting of a nucleus of ice and dust. When near the sun, it heats up and releases gas, forming a glowing head and often a tail. Comets were significant in eighteenth-century astronomy for expanding the understanding of celestial bodies.
- FORTY-FOOTER:** A giant telescope with a forty-foot focal length for deep-sky observations. William Herschel's forty-footer was considered "a wonder of the world."
- GEORGIUM SIDUS:** Means "George's Star" and is the name William Herschel originally gave the planet Uranus in honor of King George III when he discovered it in 1781.
- HANOVER:** The Kingdom of Hanover is a former state of northwestern Germany. It was administered by the House of Hanover, which ruled Great Britain and Hanover as part of a personal union from 1714 to 1837.
- LAUDANUM:** A tincture of opium mixed with alcohol, widely used in the eighteenth century as a painkiller and sedative and also highly addictive.
- NEBULAE:** Fuzzy, cloudlike regions observed in the night sky, made of gas, dust, and sometimes star clusters. In the eighteenth century, nebulae were important in the study of astronomy.

NEWTONIAN REFLECTOR: A type of reflecting telescope invented by Sir Isaac Newton that uses a concave primary mirror and a flat diagonal secondary mirror to reflect light to an eyepiece, improving magnification and image clarity.

REFLECTOR TELESCOPE: A telescope that uses mirrors instead of lenses to gather and focus light. Reflector telescopes became more widespread in the eighteenth century due to improvements in design and materials, with the Herschel family leading the way.

REFLECTORS: The mirrors used to gather and focus light in reflectors. Also referred to as specula.

ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON: A learned society founded in 1660 dedicated to promoting scientific knowledge. It played a key role in the scientific advancements of the Enlightenment Period, including astronomy and physics.

SMALLPOX: A deadly infectious disease caused by the variola virus. Devastating outbreaks occurred during the eighteenth century.

SPECULA: Mirrors or reflectors used in telescopes, particularly reflecting telescopes.

SPECULUM: A mixture of copper and tin that, once cast, can be polished to make reflective surfaces. It was used for telescope reflectors or mirrors, which were referred to as “specula.”

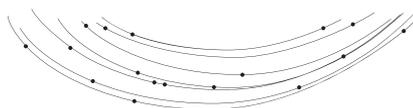
TURNSPIT DOGS: Dogs specifically bred to run in a wheel, known as a turnspit, which rotated a spit for roasting meat. Turnspit dogs were commonly found in kitchens in eighteenth-century households in England.

TWENTY-FOOTER: A telescope with a twenty-foot focal length, like the “forty-footer” but smaller. Such telescopes were used for detailed astronomical observations.

TYPHUS: A group of infectious diseases caused by *Rickettsia* bacteria, often spread by lice or fleas. Typhus was a common and deadly disease in the eighteenth century.

URANUS: The seventh planet from the sun, discovered by William Herschel in 1781. Initially referred to as “Georgium Sidus,” it was later renamed Uranus.

CHAPTER 1



July 1782
Bath, England

IT WASN'T THE FIRST TIME I'D FACED CHANGE WITHOUT THE PROSPECT OF opposing or escaping it. If it was my brother's will, it was my destiny, wasn't it? Still, when Dr. Watson confirmed William would give up music because he had been appointed King's Astronomer, I sank onto a chair like someone much older than my thirty-two years.

Neither the doctor nor Alex noticed. Their conversation continued as I stared outside with little regard for the trio of housemaids waiting for a cart drawn by a gray pony to pass. I didn't marvel at the morning light bathing the houses opposite in honey-colored tones. Nor did I admire the burgeoning of the lime tree saplings lining the street like leafy sentries. On any other day, I'd have cherished the sights of Bath's lively lanes, the proliferation of trees, and the way the sun lit the buildings. Today, my thoughts were otherwise occupied.

With my brother's new occupation came the obligation of living close to court. King George III would demand William always be available on short notice. Should His Majesty, Her Majesty Queen Charlotte, or their guests wish to sweep the skies for celestial objects or discuss astronomy on a whim or otherwise, my brother would have to immediately pack his telescope and hurry

to Windsor Castle to indulge their curiosities. Bath was almost a hundred miles away. William would have to move, and because I took care of household matters for him, and sang only with his orchestra, I'd have to go too. Besides, William was a man of his word. He'd honor his promise to our mother, which meant I must stay with him.

I stood, took my bonnet from where it hung against the wall, and made for the door. Alex squinted at me from beneath his brows as if surprised to find me in the room. Had he forgotten I lived there and he was visiting?

"I'll be back shortly," I said, avoiding his eye.

Outside, the sticky air sent me hurrying down the cobblestone streets to the shaded footpath following the River Avon to the edge of town. I lowered my head and, with the brim of my bonnet encircling my face, realized I was panting like a dog on a hot day. Clenching and unclenching my fists, I slowed and breathed the way William had taught me to do before launching into song. I exhaled, inhaled for four counts, held still for four, exhaled for another four beats, and repeated the exercise.

Calm breathing begets clear thinking, I told myself once, twice, thrice.

Ten years had passed since I, fearful, artless, and without a word of English upon my tongue, had arrived in Bath from Hanover. At twenty-two, I'd been unschooled in everything but scrubbing floors, sweeping ash, and knitting socks and ruffles. For weeks, I'd hidden my face in my bonnet and stood, pinned to the sidewalk, gawking at the processions of ornate carriages drawn by the grandest horses I'd ever seen. I was dazzled by how their glossy coats provided earthbound backdrops to the frothy headdresses, flimsy gowns, and extravagant overcoats paraded by the townsfolk. I'd been as spellbound as I was shocked.

The daily routines of Bathonians had seemed to involve little more than showing up and showing off on the streets before disappearing into places with peculiar names, like the Pump Room, Upper Assembly, and King's Circus. Eventually, I learned that, while indeed most were in Bath to see and be seen, others came to take the waters, immersing themselves and drinking the naturally warm water, which promised to heal all and every ailment. Whatever their reasons for visiting the town, they came with light hearts and heavy purses.

After the drab, earnest garrison town and laborious confinement of my childhood, the opulence and frivolousness first struck me as affected and excessive. Hanover might've been on another planet. However, as life would have it, the novelty waned. Although I didn't participate and never removed my bonnet, I came to admire the fanfare and reckless gaiety that swelled and spilled onto the streets. I'd settled in and learned the ways of the locals, and one day, as I gazed out onto the street, I realized I belonged. Bath was home.

It was no coincidence I'd experienced the warmth of fitting in shortly after I'd sung for an audience with William's orchestra for the first time. When I'd arrived in England, astronomy was little more than a pastime to my brother. Then, he was a musician, conductor, teacher, and the esteemed musical director of Bath's public concerts. Music was everything. Indeed, William fetched me from Hanover with the single-minded intention of teaching me to become a useful singer for his concerts.

The Herschels were a musical family, with my brothers following our father's profession as a military bandsman. However, during my childhood, though I'd dreamed of learning how to sing, my mother's rules prohibited me from doing more than chanting quietly to myself as I scrubbed her flagstone floors. With William's instruction in Bath, I discovered a new world and became a different person.

Whether rehearsing or performing, I never felt more alive than when my voice lifted to meet the musical notes and vibrations of my brother's music. My skin tingled, my heart swelled, and my blood seemed to flow faster. Sometimes, I imagined I'd taken flight and soared above the band and audience. When I sang, diminutive, scar-faced Caroline transformed into someone powerful and commanding, a soprano whose voice and passion took her and everyone within earshot to an unexpected and marvelous place.

Indeed, my brother's lessons and concerts, and Bath's hunger for entertainment, parties, and socializing, brought me music. Singing gave the shy girl from Hanover a life she'd never imagined. But it wasn't only Bath's musical ways I'd miss. The town's fashionable streets, its pretty gardens and paths, and the vigor of its inhabitants typically energized me. Now, though, as I thought of moving, my legs felt heavy. I paused to watch the Avon flow deep and slow,

breathed in its silty scent, and admired the leafy branches arching across it. A pair of swans glided by, silent and graceful. I envied their serenity.

I don't want to be anywhere else, I thought.

It was only when I felt a tiny, telltale spatter of rain on my arm that I noticed the dense, charcoal-bottomed clouds billowing in my direction. I turned, homeward bound, but it was too late. Within a few steps, heavy raindrops pelted my bonnet and skirt.

Confident the shower wouldn't last long, I ran to an alder tree and pressed my back against its lichen-coated trunk. The canopy offered little shelter, and with the rain coming thicker and faster, my arms were soon damp.

That's when I saw the little dog huddled against the door of a garden wall several yards above me. Although shallow, the alcove offered better shelter than the tree. I lifted my skirts and scrambled up the bank. As I approached, the animal shrank from me. When I ducked into the doorway alongside him, he tucked his scraggy tail between his legs and bolted beneath a nearby bush.

"It's all right," I called after him as I settled in the dry recess. "Come back. There's enough space for the two of us."

He stood, head and tail hanging. The spindly plant he'd chosen provided scant cover. Water soon dripped from his wiry brown coat, rivulets trickling between his ribs. I shook my skirt. The dog started and stared at me in alarm. I shuffled to the far side of the alcove, crouched, and leaned against the door. He blinked, alarm replaced by resentment.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to chase you away," I said, patting the ground alongside me. "Come. There's ample space."

The dog looked down. He had the long body, pointy snout, and short, bowed legs typical of the many strays that skulked around the streets and alleyways of Bath. His elongated, oval shape made me think of a comet, the first of which I'd seen when my father led me and my brothers out one icy, clear Hanoverian night and pointed out what I briefly had imagined to be a distant, dirty snowball with an odd glow and a tail. It was my introduction to the stars and their heavenly companions.

"They're the out-of-work progeny of turnspit dogs," William had

explained when I'd commented on Bath's proliferation of homeless hounds, most of whom were small and misshapen, like me. "They're bred to work in kitchens where they're placed in wheels and forced to run to turn meat as it roasts over the fire."

I'd stared at him. "Caged in a wheel and made to run?"

"Yes," he'd replied.

I'd pictured the small pack of dogs I'd seen tearing across a meadow near our village in Hanover. Their energy and eagerness were exhilarating. I'd imagined leaping over the grass and charging into the woods with them. The idea of dogs trapped and working in hot kitchens troubled me.

"Are they treated kindly when they're not turning the Sunday roast?" I'd asked William.

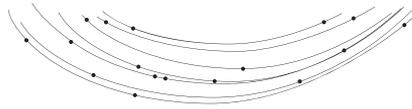
"I don't know. I've heard they're sometimes taken to church, where they're made to lie on their owners' feet to warm them," he'd replied.

Having until then always been a servant and never waited upon, I'd been uneasy when we'd moved to 19 New King Street a few years ago and William employed a cook. For weeks, I'd looked away when she served us, sitting on my hands to prevent myself from taking plates from her. However, learning to accept help in the kitchen was one thing. I couldn't imagine putting a dog to work there, particularly one as pitiful as the creature cowering beneath the bush.

I tapped the space alongside me again. "Come, Comet. Come," I called.

He ignored me, and I was ashamed. All I'd wanted was to get out of the house and calmly acquaint myself with the idea of leaving Bath. It seemed wrong to have caused the animal discomfort. I stood, stepped into the rain, made my way down the slippery bank, and once more leaned against the tree. It didn't take long for the dog to slink back into the alcove, where he shook his coat, sat, and looked at me, his dark eyes reproachful.

CHAPTER 2



July 1782
Bath, England

AS I'D ANTICIPATED, THE DOWNPOUR DIDN'T LAST LONG. HOWEVER, IT WAS enough to soak me. I took off my bonnet, squeezed it, and tied it back on. The bodice of my dress, already close-fitting, clung to my skin. My skirts were heavy, and my toes squelched in my shoes. There was nothing to do but head home.

"Goodbye, Comet," I said, glancing at the dog.

He looked the other way.

Despite my soggy feet, I was sidestepping the puddles along Chapel Row when, alerted by the urgent rapping of knuckles against glass, I saw the statuesque form of Miss Lydia Hudson at a window. Even at home, her hair was piled high, a perfect, powdered mound held aloft by a ribbon matching her lilac gown. I raised a hand to greet her, but she motioned I should meet her at the door. Itchy and eager to get out of my wet attire, I groaned quietly but nodded my compliance. It would be rude to refuse her.

Miss Hudson was a confidant of Miss Anne Fleming, the dance teacher William had engaged to teach me the ways of English gentlewomen when I arrived in Bath. For reasons unclear to me, Miss Hudson also attended my lessons, adding an unremitting flood of commands to the teacher's instructions.

“Your curtsy should be lower, Miss Herschel. You want it to be explicit.”

“Head up, Miss Herschel. Lengthen your neck. You’re tiny enough—like a sprite—without allowing your head to disappear into your chest.”

“It’s ‘weather,’ Miss Herschel, ‘weather.’ Not ‘wezza.’ Remember, we practiced last week.”

When my lessons with Miss Fleming had ended, Miss Hudson surprised me by regularly calling on me at home. Later, she was often in the audience when William and I performed. Moreover, and even though I rarely had occasion to accept, she frequently invited me to concerts, recitals, and card parties.

Now, she opened the door. “Miss Herschel! You’re wet!” she said as if I might be oblivious to my sodden state. “Come in. I’ll call for a towel for you.”

I stayed on the doorstep. “No. Please don’t trouble yourself, Miss Hudson. I’m on my way home and—”

“Nonsense!” She stood back and ushered me into the hallway. “I can’t let you go on like that.”

She turned her head and called into the house. “Abigail! Bring Miss Herschel some towels. Quickly. And then we’ll have tea.”

So it was that I, damp and uncomfortable despite Abigail’s vigorous towel-ing, came to perch on the edge of a chair in Miss Hudson’s drawing room.

She handed me a cup of tea. “You must be so proud of Mr. Herschel. The King’s Astronomer! What an honor. Will he give up some of his musical responsibilities? Even someone with his extraordinary energy surely cannot do it all.”

It didn’t surprise me she already knew about William’s appointment. News traveled fast in Bath, and that people were talking about how His Majesty had appointed the town’s musical director a court astronomer was gossip-worthy, shocking even. For many, William’s interest in astronomy had only come to light the year before when he’d discovered a planet and delighted King George by proposing it be called “George’s Star,” or *Georgium Sidus*. Until then, Bathonians had admired only my brother’s musical prowess. Unlike me, they hadn’t regularly found him slumped over his notes at the table in the morning after he’d spent the entire night stargazing. Only those close to William knew how his curiosity about celestial objects had evolved into an obsession, which eventually outweighed his interest in music.

“He’ll be back from London tonight. I don’t know his plans, although I understand they’ll include leaving Bath to live closer to court,” I replied.

She stared at me over the rim of her teacup, her narrow eyebrows curving sharply upward. “Leave Bath? Out of season, you mean?”

I nodded my head.

“What? For good? He’d leave permanently? Surely not. What about the music?” she asked.

“My brother must be closer to Windsor Castle. His Majesty requires him to work full-time as an astronomer. He’s to give up music. We will have to move.”

“*We?* But surely your place is here, Miss Herschel?”

“Not without my brother,” I replied, glancing away.

Aside from William and Alex, no one in England knew the life I’d fled in Hanover.

Miss Hudson put down her cup. “But if he dedicates himself to astronomy, what will you do? If you moved anywhere else, you’d have to live in London to experience performing opportunities similar to those offered by Bath. Even then, they’d be lacking.”

I smiled, hoping to make light of it. “I’ve only ever sung with my brother.”

She stood and walked to the window. I marveled that someone so powerfully built moved with such grace.

“But you’ve worked so hard and become so accomplished despite, um, despite everything,” she said, turning to me without lifting her eyes to my face. “Why, even the Marchioness of Lothian declared that you pronounced your words like an Englishwoman when she heard you singing the *Messiah* at Easter. And let’s not forget how Mr. Palmer proclaimed you ‘an ornament of the stage’ after your performance at the Bath Theatre.” Finally, she looked up. “You could sing with another orchestra.”

She made it sound so simple, and yet I shuddered at the thought. “I couldn’t. I’ve never—”

Miss Hudson ignored me. “There’s no place better for you than Bath. Could you not move in with Mr. Alex Herschel?”

That she imagined I could swap one brother for another wasn’t unreasonable. William and Alex were equally good men who might’ve seemed alike

to those who didn't know them well. After all, they shared a history. Both had moved to England from Hanover and were musicians, and—though not one to observe the skies—Alex was fascinated by the instruments required by astronomy. When William had grown frustrated with the expense and limitations of the telescopes available and decided to build instruments, Alex's interest was piqued. He was a patient, meticulous tinkerer. Together, my brothers began designing reflecting telescopes, incorporating curved mirrors rather than the glass lenses used in refracting telescopes. I was roped in to help cast and polish the reflectors, and although I'd rather be singing, the three of us worked well together. However, while William had the energy and optimism of a hare in springtime, Alex was dour and pessimistic in all seasons. Even if I wasn't beholden to William, the prospect of living with Alex held no appeal.

"No, I must go. I help him with his astronomy and take care of household matters," I said.

"My dear Miss Herschel, you said it yourself; your brother will be a member of the royal house. He'll employ others. Your service will be unnecessary," she said.

I wondered what Miss Hudson would think if she knew how miserable I'd been in Hanover, how I'd come to leave, and how terrified I was I'd be made to return. Even after surviving life-threatening episodes of smallpox and typhus—the former would forever be publicized by the deep pits on my face, and the latter had inhibited my growth so I'd never be taller than an average ten-year-old—I had suffered. I recalled how, shortly after my father's funeral, I'd overheard my mother and oldest brother, Jacob, discussing my future.

I was accustomed to the sneer in Jacob's voice, but still it stung. "She says she wants to go to school like Sophia Elizabeth, William, Alex, and I did. Wants to be a governess. Insists she should at least learn music."

My mother had groaned. "It would be an absolute waste," she said. "She must stay away from others. Remain here in the house. There's no hope for her with her ugly scars and puny body. No man will ever want her."

Jacob sighed dramatically, as if my very existence weighed heavily upon him. "She should be grateful for the roof over her head and that we feed her. It's not unreasonable to expect her to repay us by keeping house."

"She should be grateful," my mother had echoed.

My tears had flowed hot and fast, and I'd wanted to burst through the door and tell them I didn't care that no man would want me. Matrimony held no appeal for me. My parents had never seemed content with one another, and I'd seen what marriage had done to my sister.

Sophia Elizabeth—the oldest of my siblings and seventeen years my senior—was a sprightly, hopeful young woman before she married Mr. Griesbach. She radiated warmth in an otherwise cold, dark home and had taken care of me with patience and affection I'd not received from our mother. It was Sophia Elizabeth who'd gently washed and dabbed the swollen cysts strewn across my face and body while I recovered from smallpox and who'd chastised my brothers when they mocked my tiny form. I was shocked when she'd told me about her pending nuptials.

"Don't worry, Little One," she'd said, stroking my hair. "I'll visit often and ensure Mother doesn't work you too hard. Even she can't expect you to take on my chores and keep up yours. You'll see, Caroline; it'll be fine."

I'd stood quietly alongside my brothers as our sister laughed and waved us goodbye after her wedding. I prayed for her quick return. However, Sophia Elizabeth didn't visit for more than a year. Marriage and her new home consumed her. When eventually she came, it was fleetingly and I didn't recognize the exhausted, irritable wife and mother my sister had become. Her smile had disappeared into a low-slung chin I'd never seen before. Sophia Elizabeth's husband and child demanded all of her. I'd held up my hands to her. They were rough and raw from the endless washing and scrubbing I undertook at Mother's behest. My sister had promised to defend me.

"There's nothing I can do," she said, turning away. "I have my own difficulties."

Sophia Elizabeth no longer had any time, energy, or affection for her sister. I'd been abandoned.

"It's the lot of a wife," said my mother, when I cried about how haggard, cold, and frustrated by everything and everyone my sister had grown.

I didn't want a husband. All I wanted was to be educated so that I might find purpose beyond cleaning. I was as curious about the world as my brothers were. I listened to their conversations about bold adventurers who crossed the oceans, explored faraway shores, charted the stars, looked deep

into matter, and philosophized about music, poetry, mathematics, and the human psyche.

I don't want to be locked away in Hanover. I want to know more about the mysteries of the world, I'd imagined yelling at them.

Instead, I'd turned, knelt at the hearth, and scrubbed the floor, afraid that if Jacob and my mother saw my tears they'd throw me out. They believed I was worthless, and I had no evidence to the contrary.

What would Miss Hudson say if I told her how lonely and despondent I'd been until William returned from England and rescued me? I imagined her horror if I explained how our mother and Jacob had only agreed to my leaving with William when he reimbursed them for the cost of a servant to replace me. What would she say if she knew he'd promised to send me back to Hanover if I wasn't useful to him? That even after all these years, Jacob regularly wrote to William to ask if I might be dispatched back? I pictured her shock, but sipping my tea, I said nothing.

She persevered. "You're settled here, happy."

"My brother brought me to England to help him. He has a new profession. I'll have to adapt," I said.

"So you'll learn astronomy?" asked Miss Hudson.

I smiled. "Yes. If that's what he requires."

Already, I helped William by writing up his observations, copying catalogs, and working on the telescopes. I knew a little about astronomy. However, he'd trained me to be a singer, and for the first time in my life I felt I'd achieved something significant. I'd mastered my voice. I saw how my singing moved audiences as they gazed at me, their eyes shining and mouths ajar. I loved it and, as William's interest shifted, couldn't ignore the pinch of resentment I felt about his abandoning music for astronomy. Yet, if I was to remain useful to my brother and stay in England, I'd have to attend him wherever he went and whatever he did.

Miss Hudson patted her coiffure as if it might've shifted. "I see why you want to stay with him. He's admirable. Talented. Interesting. A very fine gentleman." She sighed. "But if you stayed in Bath, he'd surely visit?"

"I wouldn't be much use to him here." I stood. "Thank you for the tea. I must go."

She followed me to the door and, as I turned to say goodbye, took my hands in hers. “If you do reconsider and stay, you can count on me to include you in as many social events as I can, Miss Herschel. If you go, I shall write to you and visit you in your new home. It would upset me greatly to lose our friendship, to have you and Mr. Herschel gone from my life.”

“Thank you,” I repeated, feeling myself redden at her intensity.

I drew my hands from hers and stepped onto the sidewalk. She sighed once more before closing the door.

The clouds had cleared, and the only evidence of the storm was my heavy skirt, clammy feet, and a few puddles lingering in the shade. I noticed a small, dark form on the other side of the street opposite Miss Hudson’s door. It was the dog.

I approached, stopping about two yards from him. “Hello, Comet,” I said.

He stared at me, motionless. I turned and walked away. When I got to the corner, I glanced back. He was following.