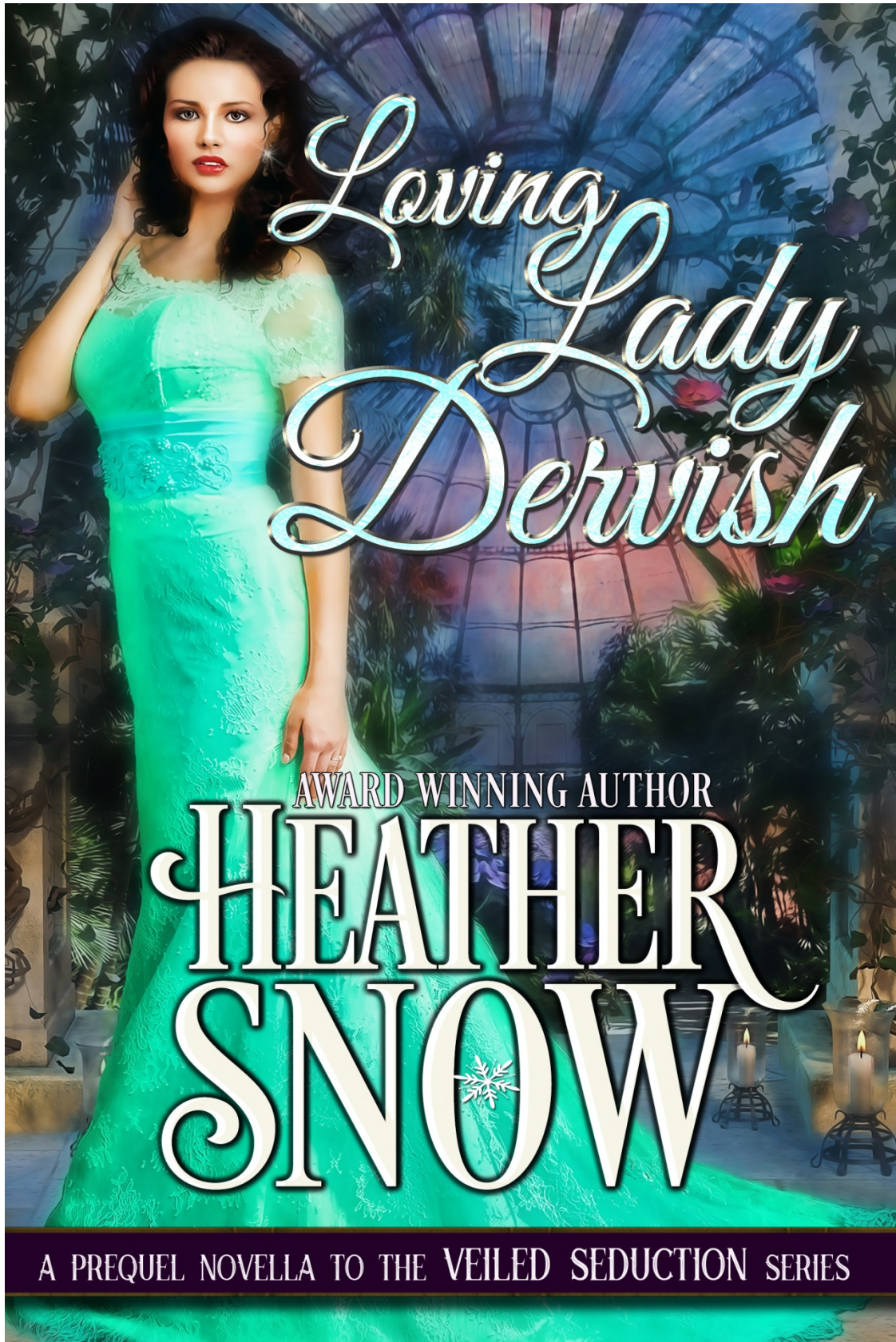


Loving Lady Dervish



Heather Snow



An Excerpt From:

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A Prequel Novella to the Veiled Seduction Series

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Chapter One



London, February 3, 1814

“This is madness,” Phoebe muttered as she stepped out onto the frozen surface of the Thames. And it was, for oh so many reasons. She could scarce afford to take time away from her illustrations right now. Lord Pickford’s symposium was only six days away. Every petal, pistil, anther and filament had to be properly drawn, colored, and labeled. Every brushstroke had to be perfect. Her very future was riding upon it.

And even if she had nothing else pressing, was it truly sane to tempt nature this way? Hundreds of Londoners were currently frolicking upon what had been—until only the past few days—a treacherous icy *sludge*. She wasn’t certain she wanted to lend her mass to such a foolish endeavor. With her luck, she’d be the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back, sending them all to a freezing watery death.

Curse Mr. Jones for driving her to flee Mayfair for this arctic deathtrap.

Still, even she had to admit that it was not her impromptu escape to the Frost Fair that called her sanity into question.

No. Once her little scandal broke, she would be hard pressed to find a person in all of Christendom who wouldn’t think her mad.

She might even have to agree with them.

Phoebe pulled her mantle tighter around her shoulders and joined the throng making their way eagerly toward the carnivalesque “city” that had sprung up overnight on the ice.

Perhaps she'd be able to find Juliette and Georgiana in the crowd and join them yet. Though she'd declined their invitation, it had been a lifeline when she'd arrived home to find Mr. Jones' carriage in the mews. She'd sent her lady's maid inside with her precious portfolio and a hastily scrawled note to her father claiming she'd gone along with Lady Juliette's party.

Then she'd bolted.

And now, here she was, adrift in a frozen sea of colorful flags, tents, and booths with people of all classes—mingling, playing games, and in general making merry.

“Whoa, whoa, whoooooaaa—”

Phoebe whipped around to see a man flailing his arms like the vanes of a windmill as his feet scabbled for purchase on the ice. He went down quickly, landing on his bottom with a rather painful-sounding *thwack*. The metal cup he'd been holding skittered across the slippery surface with a series of *tings* before her boot stopped it.

“Oh...” Phoebe winced in sympathy, but the man rolled onto his back, chortling with laughter and...*hiccupping*? She looked down at the cup at her feet. The sharp sting of spirits wafted up from the clear liquid seeping out onto the ice.

Phoebe wrinkled her nose. “Some making merrier than others,” she said to no one in particular, picking up the cup and returning it to its inebriated owner. The red-nosed gentleman hiccupped his thanks before casting an appreciative leer up and down her person.

She sighed. Perhaps coming to the Frost Fair alone had not been the most prudent choice, but that was ice under the bridge. She'd just have to occupy herself for an hour—or better yet, two—to give her father time to finish up his business with Mr. Jones. The wealthy merchant tended to *linger* in hopes of pressing his suit.

Phoebe's sudden shudder had very little to do with the cold. As Mrs. Jones, she would be on display—a noble wife used by her tradesman husband to curry favors. He'd made it quite clear she'd have no time for playing around in the dirt, as he called her interest in botany. *His* wife would be every inch the lady.

She shuddered again. It wouldn't come to that. If all went well, next week she'd be gainfully employed as an illustrator and by Easter she'd be long gone from London on a quest to document England's rare wildflowers with the renowned botanist, J. P. Updike.

Phoebe pulled her hood low over her forehead as she moved further into the crowd. Should her father find out she'd come here without a proper chaperone, there'd be the devil to pay. But after only a few moments, she began to relax. No one paid her the least bit of mind. Everyone seemed caught up in the colorful spectacle swirling around them.

Finely-dressed ladies flitted about the booths in groups of three or four while well-turned-out gentlemen played games of chance in makeshift gaming dens. The crisp air smelled of the cinnamon baked apples that peddler women sold from baskets atop their heads, and of the roasting meat on offer by hawkers to anyone passing by with coin to spare. A lively fiddle tune floated to her ears as men, women, and children danced gaily upon the decks of ice-locked barges.

Phoebe marveled at all of the *life* being lived, right before her very eyes.

Is this what it will be like to be free?

Her stomach fluttered nervously, threatening to unravel all of her tightly wound fear and excitement. Following her mother's death, she'd spent the months of mourning carefully planning her escape. She'd researched how she'd survive, she'd hoarded her pin money like the stingiest of misers, and she'd all but convinced Mr. Updike, via correspondence, to hire her as his illustrator for his upcoming expedition.



Because she'd promised Mama that she would live the life *she* wanted to live.

Phoebe took in a deep breath, letting it out in a slow exhale of white steam that curled in the frigid air. Well, her time for mourning was through. It was past time to start keeping that promise. She decided from this moment on, she'd follow no one's rules but her own.

So, when she finally came across Juliette and Georgiana, Phoebe simply winked at her friends and let them pass. Instead, she joined the queue to receive a personalized souvenir from one of the industrious printers who'd dragged their machines out onto the ice. Alone.

"Your name, miss?" the harried printer asked as she gained the front of the line. She gave him the correct spelling as she watched him place the cast iron letters onto the block. The slight man grunted as he lowered the huge hand press and held it down for a few moments. He lifted the press and gave her the sheet, looking past her to the man behind. "Next."

Phoebe murmured her thanks as she moved away. When she got clear of the crowd, she held the paper out in front of her, marveling at the printed curve of a P, the sharp point of an A, pressed into the sheet in ink forever.

P. A. Ellison

She ran her finger over the indentation, enjoying the uneven bump of the letters.

Her new name in print for the very first time.

Hopefully the first time of many, as she planned to move quickly from illustrating others' books to authoring botany tomes of her own—even if she had to hide her true identity by using a false name. Most women writers did. *She'd* know the P.A. stood for Phoebe Anson, at least.



She couldn't resist. She raised the paper to her lips and kissed the words. As she folded the paper and pressed it into her pocket, a grin bubbled up from inside and burst to life on her face.

Soon. Very soon.

That reality filled her with joy so fully that she simply couldn't contain it a second longer. She tipped her face up to the sun and did something she hadn't done since she'd been a young miss—long before the realities of life amongst the ton and her mother's death had tried their best to quash her spirit.

She closed her eyes, threw out her arms, and twirled.

Malcolm Gray, Viscount Coverdale, had been admiring the impressive silhouette the great dome of St. Paul's made against the afternoon sky when quite another sight captured his attention. A young lady held a scrap of paper out before her, brought it to her lips for a kiss, and then smiled with such beatific joy he couldn't help but be caught in it, his lips lifting of their own volition.

He *felt* that joy from several steps away, almost like an energy that traveled across the frozen landscape to warm him. The woman seemed to brim with it, and for a brief second, Malcolm knew such a moment of pure jealousy it stole his breath. Had he ever been that happy?

When she tossed her head back and started *spinning* in abandon, his breath caught for a completely different reason altogether. Her cloak fanned out at the bottom, flowing around her lithe form in a twirling cloud of blue. The counter-twist pulled the fabric tight across her chest, emphasizing lovely curves. He stood riveted, watching her.

He'd known another girl who'd loved to twirl like that, once upon a time. Had even

been known to twirl with her on occasion, before he'd realized young lads didn't twirl, of course.

The woman's fur-trimmed hood fell away. As the sunlight limned her profile, a flash of recognition jolted him.

Phoebe.

Though he'd caught just a glimpse of her upturned nose and prominent chin, he knew it was she. It had been years since he'd seen her...too long. His smile widened as he closed the distance between them, stopping just beside her.

"Still a whirling dervish, I see."

Phoebe's head jerked up as a gasp escaped her. The sudden movement must have thrown her off balance for her eyes flew wide and her outstretched arms started circling frantically. "Oh!" she cried as her feet slipped from beneath her.

Alarm shot through him. Malcolm lunged to catch her, but his own boots slid just enough that he knew he wouldn't be able to reach her in time and keep them both upright. He threw his shoulder into a twist of his own and his back slammed hard onto the ice. He jammed both heels down and pushed, propelling himself into place to cushion her fall.

"Ooomph!" Phoebe landed full atop him, the force of her body jarring him from the front as well. Her grunt echoed inside his chest, but as their fall had knocked the wind from his sails, he had no air with which to answer it. He closed his eyes with a grimace.

He lay there for a moment, trying to collect himself. Too many sensations pulled at him. Cold seeped into his back from nape to calf, sending a shiver racing up his spine. Pain radiated from his shoulder, also, where he'd taken most of the impact from their fall.

And yet...heat blanketed his front, a softness that both covered and warmed him. He must have wrapped his arms around Phoebe to protect her because he now held her tightly



against him. Front to front. Chest to chest. Hip to hip.

Malcolm opened his eyes. Indeed, he was clutching Phoebe to him. Her legs and arms had naturally spread in an effort to catch herself, which left her draped over and around him in the most delectable way. All pain vanished and another shiver drove out the cold—a hot one. Near blazing.

Malcolm forced himself to ease his death grip, but could not seem to remove his hands from Phoebe altogether. He allowed them to rest on either side of her ribcage before sliding over her slim waist to settle on her hips.

His movement seemed to startle her out of her shock. Her head jerked back from where it had rested against the hollow of his neck and then she pushed upward, hard. He groaned as the heels of her hands dug into his chest just below his collarbone.

“I’m so sorry!” she cried, frantically trying to lift her torso from his. With another forceful shove, she succeeded. The second she was upright, she yanked her hands back.

Malcolm took a deep breath as the pain receded. Of course now, instead of being draped over him, Phoebe was straddling him, all of her weight and heat resting squarely where an innocent young miss should certainly not be. Not that he was complaining.

His hands tightened on her hips instinctively, the need to pull her tighter against him nearly overwhelming. For a moment all he could see was a beautiful girl, her cheeks pink and flushed, her chest rising and falling with quickened breath, her long brown hair slipped from its moorings and tumbling in seductive disarray. All he could feel was her thighs gripping his hips, the curve of her bottom pressed against him, the flash of desire burning through him—

“Malcolm?” Her breathy voice floated through the haze.

The fog in his mind evaporated, bringing sudden clarity. This was *Phoebe*. He was



having lustful imaginings—lying on the ice amongst hundreds of strangers in broad daylight, no less—about *Phoebe*. His childhood friend. The girl next door. The bane of his younger self's existence.

“Phoebe,” he uttered, surprised at how strangled his voice sounded. He cleared his throat. “Forgive me—” he tried again, but his words died a rather painful death when Phoebe fisted her hand and *belted* him one right in the fleshy part of his arm.

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