

**Amanda**  
*Victorian Melodramas Book 2*

**By**

**Vanessa Brooks**

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# Chapter One

*Sydenham, London 1871*

The window creaked alarmingly as she lifted the sash, pushing the wooden support block beneath it to prevent it becoming an inadvertent guillotine as she clambered through. She held her breath, stilled, listening, relaxing again when she heard nothing. Taking her soft bodied carpet bag, she leaned out of the window then flung the bag into the dark shrubbery below. There was a muffled thud as it landed. Once again, head tilted, she listened intently. Satisfied that her family still slumbered unaware, she edged her way out onto the window sill, surprised at how easy this movement was when not hampered by skirts. Her nephew's clothing gave her a newfound freedom of movement, although she found the coarse woollen tweed incredibly itchy against her skin. Amanda was of the opinion her brothers had the easier option, clothed in trousers and britches as opposed to the cumbersome skirts and dresses she was forced to wear.

Perhaps if she should ever live in America, she would be able to wear male garments instead of gowns? She really knew very little about the country that her new American beau came from, other than that there had been a war to obtain independence from Britain. She knew that not long ago a civil war had been fought, and she was vaguely aware the war had something to do with abolishing slavery. Her governess had not taught her much Colonial history, so Amanda was hazy on the details. However, as a perennially positive person, she had high hopes of more freedom and less strictures in America, should she choose to marry her recently acquired suitor.

Amanda Beresford could never be mistaken for a blue stocking since she'd paid scant attention to her lessons, choosing instead to draw fashion plates upon her slate. She was also fond of sketching cats, which she adored. Although not a fan of her governesses' choice of reading material, she generally had a romantic novel tucked somewhere about her person, although she did not read to improve her mind; her hobbies kept her quietly occupied while her poor teacher tried to instil some semblance of education into her stubborn charge's head. However, odd facts had stuck. Amanda surprised herself sometimes with knowledge she'd managed to retain, but generally, she was considered by those who knew her best as a flibbertigibbet. Certainly, it was a view held strongly by her two elder brothers, Adam, and James.

She reflected briefly on her plan to rescue Grant, the cat belonging to the man she hoped to marry someday. Her stubborn determination and tunnel vision meant she disregarded the pitfalls of taking such action as she continued dogmatically with her ill-advised clandestine plan.

The solid brick built house was fronted by a peeling white trellis supporting a well established wisteria, substantial enough to absorb her descent. The rustling noise as she climbed down the gnarled trunk of the shrub concerned her. She halted periodically as the structure began to waver then creak alarmingly. Every downward move she made caused more noise. Finally, at about four feet from the ground, she decided it would be prudent to jump. She landed, immediately rolling onto the lawn. Coming to a halt on her back, she stilled for a moment to catch her breath, alert for signs of pursuit, although she need not have feared as there were none.

Hopping up, she retrieved her bag and then set off at a jaunty pace in the opposite direction of her family home, giving not so much as a backward glance as she savoured the unimpeded movement of her borrowed clothes and the exciting sense of adventure that the escapade afforded.

To the lamplighters beginning their morning rounds extinguishing the gas street lights as dawn fast approached, she was just another darkly clad lad, sporting an oversized cap, making his way to work. The only thing a truly observant person might notice, had they been interested, was that this particular boy carried a carpet bag. They might have been surprised to know that this lad was, in fact, a woman in disguise, on her way to rescue a condemned cat. And not just any old puss-cat, but a large Maine Coon who'd won the coveted best of rare breed prize at the Crystal Palace cat show in July. The large feline belonged to her beau, Mr. Abel Lawson, who was assistant to the American envoy, the current Minister to the United Kingdom, Mr. Robert Schenck. Amanda had met Mr. Lawson at the very same cat show, where Grant, so named after the incumbent President of the United States, had won his coveted rosette. Since then, the feline had become somewhat famous.

Queen Victoria had expressed such interest in the cat that an invitation had been issued to the American envoy asking him to bring Abel Lawson to present Grant to the Royal household at Windsor Castle. Unfortunately, during the visit, an over eager lady-in-waiting disregarded Abel's warning that the animal might bite. Choosing to ignore him, she'd pushed her wriggling fingers inside the metal grid of the cat's carry box. It was too much for the frightened, fretful feline who had lunged at the proffered digits, catching his prey with sharp claws, biting deep. The resulting mayhem had ended with a vengeful decree from Her Majesty, demanding that Grant be destroyed.

Amanda was utterly incensed by the injustice of the edict. She was made even more irate by what she perceived to be her gentleman caller's easy capitulation, relinquishing his cat to the police. She was unaware of the background diplomacy being deployed by both countries' politicians. She determined to rescue the cat herself and hide it safely away until the furore blew over. Amanda ignored Abel's reassurance that he would save his pet through diplomatic channels. Amanda simply laid her plans, taking matters into her own hands. Her sister-in-law Elspeth's adopted uncle had recently moved into a small house with a garden that backed directly onto Dulwich Park, an ideal location for a pet. Arthur Brown liked cats and was only too happy to home a stray, readily agreeing to foster the animal. He might have changed his mind had he known that this wasn't simply any old homeless cat that he was opening his door to but a political hot potato. Amanda and Elspeth carefully withheld this rather important element of information from the unsuspecting Arthur.

Arthur had a lodger, a lad known to one and all as Scrounger. A name bestowed upon him on account of his mudlarking activities digging along the shore of the River Thames. He searched for treasure cast from ships, carried inland by the tide, to lodge in the mud along the shoreline.

The plan was that Scrounger would meet Amanda outside the police station where the unfortunate Grant was being held, whilst the political wrangle over sovereignty of the animal raged. The Americans claimed diplomatic immunity for the feline, while the Crown decreed that exemption could only be applied to humans. Scrounger's plan was simple, one of distraction and kidnap or, as Scrounger so aptly described it, catnap.

Amanda knew that she risked the wrath of both her elder brothers, James and Adam, should she be caught. However, she had never been punished beyond a scolding by either of them and had no fear of their retribution should she be caught. Amanda had lost her parents in a terrible railway accident some years before. She lived with her eldest brother James, his wife, Felicity, and their two children, George aged nine and Madeline, known to her family as Maddie, aged six.

As Amanda approached her destination, she saw the dull blue gas light that marked the public entrance to the police station. She halted and looked about for her partner in crime. Suddenly hands covered her eyes. She jumped, startled, swallowing her squeal. "Scrounger!" she scolded, guessing her assailant's identity correctly. Sure enough, the tousle haired lad stepped forward, wearing an engaging grin.

"Gotcha," he chuckled delightedly.

"Stop larking about, foolish boy, this is a serious undertaking! A life is at stake!" Amanda berated crossly.

"I can always leave you to it an' go on 'ome," he offered.

Amanda flashed him a look of panic. "No, I need your help!"

He tweaked her nose. "Blinkin'-well show some respect then." Amanda swallowed her sharp retort, nodding meekly. He was right, she really did need his help.

"Ready?" he asked. She nodded, handing him the carpet bag before sucking in a deep breath, ripping off her cap, her dark blonde hair flowed freely as she rushed inside the Police station giving vent to an ear splitting shriek. Her scream brought forth three panicked, uniformed constables who rushed toward her as she flung herself into their midst, tilting into a fake swoon, forcing those closest to catch her. Meanwhile, Scrounger took the opportunity to slip past the unfolding drama. He disappeared into the recess of the building, clutching Amanda's carpet bag.

The inspector ran his hands through his receding hair and sighed heavily. "Let us begin again shall we, Miss Beresford? I have to say this story of yours just don't add up. Now, let me get this straight. You say that you accepted a dare from a friend to go mudlarkin' and dressed yourself in your nephew's clothes then snuck out the house at dawn. You allege that a man grabbed you from behind as you were walking. He then dragged you down an alley way, where he pulls off your cap, reveals you're a woman and threatens to kill you. Now, this is where I am not convinced. I am wondering why he would do that? I can see him robbing you, even raping you, but what I cannot understand is why. If he wanted to kill you, why he didn't just go ahead and do it?" Privately, he rather wished her assailant *had* murdered the blasted woman.

Amanda glared at the inspector. Drat the fellow; he had a point. She should have told him she'd been robbed instead. Ah well, it was no good changing her story now. She had to stick to her original tale or the whole of her story would sound weaker than it already did. She decided to take refuge in righteous indignation. "How dare you! I have explained everything to you ad-nauseam. It is not my fault that you are too stupid to understand me! I have had quite enough of your slurs, sir! I demand that you take me home. In fact, I want to go home right now!"

The inspector turned puce. "Now see here girly, you don't get to talk to me like that, an' what's more—"

"Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I have to report that the American cat's gawn!" The timely interruption came from a constable who'd been dispatched earlier to make tea for the beleaguered inspector. He leapt to his feet.

"What the heck? Search the whole blooming building!" He glared at Amanda. "You," he jabbed a finger at her, "get off home. I'll send a constable to your address tomorrow to take a statement about this alleged attack. I have bigger problems to fry right now!" He turned and strode from the room, spitting orders right and left.

Amanda slumped in her chair with relief. She hadn't expected such a grilling about her silly story. She knew she'd fluffed it, changing details with each new narration. Quickly, she slipped out of the building and out into the street. Without taking the time to glance right or left, she ran straight across the thoroughfare. There was a sudden shout, a shriek, loud whinnying, followed by a sudden blindingly painful blow to her left haunch.

“Young woman... young woman? Come, wake up I have examined you, and I find you to be quite unharmed.” Amanda stirred and groaned. Her hip bone hurt. “Come along, girl, open your eyes!” She made an effort to lift her heavy lids. Blinking, she looked into the face of a strange young man, fair-haired, even featured. A boyish looking man who would be handsome if his face were not contorted by a scowl. At this precise moment, he looked positively vexed.

“Where am I?” she croaked.

“You are inside my coach. What the devil d’you mean, dashing out into the road in that harebrained way? You might have been killed! As it is, you have thoroughly spooked my horses!”

Amanda bristled. “Well excuse me! Perhaps your coachman needs to slow down whilst driving through town. He’d be less likely to run down innocent young ladies!” she retorted crossly. The man gave an unpleasant snort.

“Lady... my foot. You are dressed as a boy! No *lady* ventures out so scandalously clad, you brazen baggage. What you need is a jolly good taste of my crop!” Amanda, incensed, leaned forward and slapped his face. The man coloured up a rather unpleasant puce. “Why you little guttersnipe,” he snarled, malice in his eyes. A slashing blow fell across her thigh. She shrieked with shock as his vicious crop left a searing line of fire in its wake.

Amanda, never a shrinking violet, drew her diminutive self together at once. “How dare you! You, you... degenerate oaf! I am Amanda Beresford, sister to James Beresford Esq. of Sydenham. I am dressed this way for a-a dare which went horribly wrong. I-I was attacked, knocked down by your carriage, and all I wish to do is return home!” She thought it would be provident to stick to the same tale that she had told the police. Amanda had learned young that the ability to squeeze out a few tears in certain situations achieved her desired outcome readily, and so she allowed her eyes to fill with tears accordingly, the stinging line of fiery pain across her thigh aiding her accomplishment.

The man’s eyes narrowed. He scanned her sorrowful face for signs of deceit. Obviously detecting none in her guileless eyes, his gaze softened toward her. “Miss Beresford, do allow me to apologise for my assumption. Let me introduce myself, Doctor Eugene Barker at your service. I shall deliver you home and hand you safely over into the bosom of your family. I am not impressed by their lack of diligence in caring for you, not if this is an example of how you comport yourself. I should apologise for the chastising swipe I dealt you, but I feel it was justly deserved. Your address if you please.” Amanda considered telling him where he could go boil his head, but having seen his fury when she’d slapped him, she thought better of it, meekly stating her home address.

The doctor reached for a folded blanket on the seat beside him and threw the rug across her knees. He ordered her to stay put before leaping out from the carriage. Amanda could hear him talking with his driver, who’d presumably managed to calm the shocked horses. Once he was settled back inside the carriage, he stroked his chin, frowning thoughtfully. “Young woman, do you perchance bear any relation to Professor Adam Beresford?” Amanda nodded.

“Yes indeed, he is the younger of my elder brothers. Why do you ask?”

“I believe we were up Oxford together. I am slightly acquainted with him. I seem to recall that your parents lost their lives in that train disaster out in Kent, the one that Charles Dickens was involved in a few years back. Am I correct?” Amanda nodded; she had no need to feign the tears that filled her eyes. Being reminded of that terrible, fateful day always upset her. The doctor patted her knee sympathetically and apologised for bringing the subject up. He explained that he, too, had lost his parents young. After that, they travelled in uneasy silence for the rest of the journey out to Sydenham.

On arrival, he irritatingly insisted on accompanying her to the front door. Mrs. Kettle, their housekeeper, insisted that Doctor Barker wait in the drawing room. Amanda gave him her

thanks, bobbed a curtsy and escaped to her bedchamber in order to change out of her outlandish garb. She'd just stripped off her nephew's clothes when her maid Hattie arrived to help her dress. After a moment of still contemplation, she stepped forward and quietly helped her mistress into her bustle and sprigged day gown. Amanda could bear the tension between them no longer. "All right, Hattie, you may as well tell me what you have to say about my adventures today."

Hattie pursed her lips disapprovingly. "I'm sure it's none of my business what you get up to, Miss Beresford; however, I am to tell you to go directly to the drawing room when you are dressed. Both of your brothers are waiting for you."

Amanda frowned, both her brothers? "Adam is here?" she queried. The maid nodded. "Oh Lord, when did *he* arrive?" she groaned.

"The household has been in uproar ever since I discovered that you'd vanished from your bed this morning. Where on earth have you been, miss?" Amanda sat down at her dressing table and allowed her maid to pin up her hair. Hattie efficiently scooped her mistress' thick hair into a simple chignon.

"You'll hear all about it soon enough, Hattie, but suffice to say it was a matter of life and death."

"Oh, seems the professor was right enough then," the maid replied smugly.

"Whatever d' you mean?" Amanda asked, twisting her head so she could look up at her maid.

"Please keep still, miss. Drat it all, I'll have to start over again now! The professor said he wouldn't be at all surprised to find that you'd gone to rescue that condemned cat, the one that all the newspapers are talking about."

"Adam said that?" For the first time, Amanda worried that, on this occasion, she may have gone too far down the road of impropriety. Her brothers were generally tolerant of her hoydenish ways. On reflection, she realised that they were not quite as lenient with their wives as they had been with their sister. She'd never really considered the difference in attitude before, but now she thought about it, Amanda realised that her brothers allowed her leeway in behaviour that they never allowed their wives. Perhaps this time she'd overstepped the mark? What if she'd pushed them a tad too far? She wondered what kind of reaction she could expect from her siblings on this occasion. Well, one thing was certain; it wouldn't be long before she found out.

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Downstairs, Amanda's two brothers stared at one another in consternation. Doctor Barker had left the house but not before imparting verbose disapproval at them for allowing Amanda to run wild. He'd also requested their permission to call upon Amanda.

"She's gone too far this time," Adam stated gloomily.

"I agree, but I balk at punishing her. After all, she is our sister. It just doesn't sit right with me. If only father were still alive, I'm sure she'd be far more composed and less likely to get into silly scrapes like this latest one," James grumbled.

"He'd have turned her over his knee for sure, disappearing from the house like that. I could wring her bloody neck!" Adam warned to his theme, "She ought to be soundly whipped, James, especially if she is involved with the disappearance of that wretched cat."

James glanced assessingly at his brother, "You are willing to whip her?" Adam shook his head in response. "Hmm, thought not, me neither. D'you really think she's involved with taking the American's cat?" James asked, aghast by the idea. Adam nodded. "Kidnapping is a criminal offence. Surely she couldn't be so utterly stupid?" James didn't sound as if he believed his own words.

“Mr. Lawson obviously thought she was capable of the act, otherwise why did he come chasing over here demanding to see Amanda as soon as the police had notified him of his pet’s disappearance?” Adam asked.

James took a sip of his tea. “I am beginning to think we need to concentrate on finding Amanda a husband as soon as may be. Actually, I am not as averse to the American, as you seem to be. He’s young, well-educated and obviously a determined sort of man. He appears perfectly capable of taming our wayward sister.”

Adam shook his head, adamantly opposed to the suggestion. “She’s far too young to marry; she’s still a child at barely sixteen!”

James shook his head, giving a long suffering sigh. “Adam, she’s nineteen! You’ve been telling folk she’s sixteen for two years now. You told Elspeth the very same thing but Amanda is twenty in September.”

“I worry that should she choose to marry Abel Lawson, she will end up living thousands of miles away on the American continent.” James looked alarmed by the suggestion. “She will be so far removed from our support. No, James, after all, what do we really know about this American chappy?”

Their conversation was interrupted by a soft rap at the door, immediately followed by the appearance of their sister. She sashayed over to Adam, proffered him her cheek to kiss, he obliged her. She turned to James, intent on kissing him as well, but he surprised her by grasping her elbows and shaking her.

“I want to know exactly what you’ve been up to, miss. I’ll have no prevarication, mind. I want an honest answer!”

Her eyes widened as she attempted to pull free of her brother’s grip. Realising how incensed both her siblings were, she allowed her large cerulean eyes to flood with tears. “If you must know, I was attacked, so I went to the police station to ask for their assistance!” She then executed the perfect swoon, gratified to hear her brother’s gasps of concern. Honestly, men were so easily duped; they could be so stupid. Why had she been concerned about their reaction? Hadn’t she always commanded the ability to manipulate the pair of them? As they fussed over her, lifting her legs up onto the couch, patting her hands, yelling for smelling salts, she settled, comfortably complacent, knowing that everything had turned out to her advantage.