

Coming May 2018 ~ a new Code Breakers Series book

Regency Romantic Suspense from Jacki Delecki

Amelia's carriage pulled into the elaborate portico of Bonnington estate. She stared at the multiple gleaming windows, sparkling in anticipation of tomorrow's ball. The artist in her appreciated the perfect symmetry of the red brick Georgian estate, with its central entrance and elegant portico.

As a young girl, she'd always imagined her ancestors' guests arriving for a ball in elaborate panniers, piled hairstyles replete with birds, and secretive masks covered in feathers and jewels. She always felt she should have been born in that era of romantic intrigue and drama, but after the past few days, she had learned she preferred the era she was part of, part of the fight against the French.

She no longer cared about her ball gown or the flowers. Instead, she wanted to help Cord and Ash prevent baby Charles's kidnapping. How her expectations of a perfect wedding had shriveled and wafted away.

She climbed out of the carriage, steeling herself to greet family and guests who had already arrived for tomorrow's wedding. What she really wanted was to sneak past the drawing room and collapse on her bed. After Hen's labor and the search for Edward, she was exhausted, but also edgy and nervous about the newest threat. She needed a hot bath and a nap before her appearance at tonight's dinner party, hosted by her father in her and Derrick's honor.

She had envisioned this day for months—the overflowing, fragrant flowers, the unique and delicious menu, the guestrooms planned to the last detail for luxury and comfort, playing the role of a sparkling hostess for the arriving guests.

All that mattered now was keeping Hen's baby safe. And despite the men's reassurance that they would apprehend the wicked monster, she wanted to help in tonight's capture.

She had stayed with Edward for hours, hours when she was supposed to be entertaining the guests. But even then he hadn't wanted her to leave, so she remained with him until he fell asleep.

Her absence from her home was conspicuous. She'd planned to spend the day enjoying her large family and friends who traveled a great distance to attend the wedding.

Derrick had no family since he was estranged from his brother and always spoke of Amelia and Aunt Mabel as his only family. He sacrificed his good name in society to spare Lauren, the woman he saved from marriage to his abusive brother, the Marquess of Falconbridge.

Jarvis opened the door. "Miss Amelia, I'm grateful you've arrived. You're needed in the library at once. Master Jack is shouting at one of the guests."

Amelia stared at Jarvis as if he were Medusa holding up a butchered head. Arguments were nothing new at the Bonnington household, as Jarvis was well aware. Growing up with men, Amelia was accustomed to angry bouts of shouting which were usually followed by a round of fisticuffs and broken furniture.

"At a guest?" Amelia shook her head. She didn't have time for her pig-headed brother's fights. "I'm not going to intervene between Jack and one of his friends, most likely arguing over a horse."

"Miss Amelia, he was shouting at a lady, Lady MacAllister's sister, Miss Abigail."

For the first time in two days, Amelia burst out in laughter. Jack, the epitome of male confidence and control, was actually shouting at a lady, a guest in their home. This she had to witness. Suddenly not feeling the least bit tired, she followed Jarvis to the library.

Miss Abigail Lyon, upon meeting her ruggedly handsome and rakish brother last year, hadn't been charmed and hadn't swooned over his good looks. Possibly the first woman ever to remain so unaffected by said charm and looks.

Miss Abigail, her wild curls held back with a bright blue bandeau and dressed in a simple muslin dress, stood near the wall of books, her arms folded across her chest. "My point exactly. And if you read Elizabeth Montague, you would understand from a woman's point of view that marriage is an expedient convention with very little advantage for the woman."

"Miss Abigail, how lovely to see you've arrived," Amelia greeted her guest. "Jack, I had hoped to find you in the drawing room, entertaining our guests."

Jack, spared Amelia's carrot-top hair color, had hair the color of rich mahogany. But he was plagued with fair skin that betrayed emotions and which, at this moment, was a fiery red.

"Brinsley's Aunt Mabel is in charge. She has taken over the tasks of hostess and directed me to fetch Miss Lyon for afternoon tea before the ladies retire to prepare for tonight's dinner."

Amelia had been too distracted with the events of the day to consider asking the socially powerful and connected dowager to step into the role of hostess. Of course, Aunt Mabel could easily manage Amelia's rambunctious brothers and the Society ladies. Aunt Mabel could wage her own war against Napoleon if need be. And, of course, Aunt Mabel was matchmaking when she sent Jack to find Miss Abigail.

"How interesting that you and Jack are discussing the merits of marriage. And how fitting, the day before my wedding."

Miss Lyon curtsied. "My deepest apologies, I don't mean that your marriage..."

Jack glowered at Amelia, as if she could be intimidated by a clash between their matching violet eyes. If their positions were reversed, he would not have been able to resist baiting her, either.

"Your brother—" Miss Abigail stopped suddenly. "I shall return to the drawing room."

"Coward," Jack muttered under his breath but loud enough to be heard.

"Of all the nerve." Miss Abigail's chest puffed out in indignation.

Jack's focus on Miss Abigail's face was diverted to her expanding cleavage. "Don't spare my sister." He stalked Miss Abigail against the wall of books. "She is not missish. Tell her the opinion that you were so willing to share but moments ago."

Miss Lyon looked sheepishly at Amelia. "I have apologized to your brother for my lack of refinement. I'm not sure what came over me."

"Jack came over you. He has that effect on many people."

"You're not helping, Amelia," Jack warned.

Amelia moved closer to Miss Abigail. "What did Jack do this time to vex you so?"

Amelia tried not to sound like she was gloating but knew she failed from the way Jack's eyes narrowed.

"Your brother's refusal to open his mind to the possibility of women attending university and not marrying is exasperating and illogical."

Miss Abigail shook her blond curls, clearly having no idea what an enticing picture she presented to Jack. Amelia knew by the way Jack watched the fiery woman's every move that he was captivated.

“And you consider yourself an intelligent man...” Miss Abigail shrugged in defeat, turning to Amelia. “Your brother’s inability to comprehend that there are women who might not wish to spend their futures with a husband is pitiful.”

Amelia really needed to tidy herself and attend to her guests, but the arcing sensual tension between these two kept her too engaged to leave. She had been waiting for the right woman to give Jack his comeuppance.

Miss Abigail stepped around Jack. “I beg your pardon, Miss Amelia. I will return to the guests. I’ve taken enough of your time. I hope your friend, Lady Rathbourne, is feeling well.”

“Lady Henrietta regrets she won’t be able to attend the wedding ball. But I believe you would enjoy discussing your views with her. She is an inestimable scholar, who reads and writes many languages, including ancient Greek and Latin. And I believe she would have attended university, if she had the opportunity.”

“I look forward to meeting Lady Rathbourne when her confinement is finished. I’m here for the Season at my father’s insistence, but I’ve been making the acquaintances of like-minded women who are more interested in serious study than the frivolities of Society.”

“I believe you offended my sister, who is known throughout society as an arbiter of fashion, one of the frivolities you speak of so scornfully,” Jack challenged.

Amelia had to suppress the laughter boiling up inside her. Jack, every lady’s favorite, was behaving very ill-mannered.

Miss Abigail tilted her head toward Amelia, ignoring Jack. “I beg to differ. You are a talented artist. Your father has taken the time to show me your paintings in the family gallery. But, because you are a woman, you are not able to study with the masters or contemplate expressing your talent in ways considered beyond of a woman’s purview. No, I respect women who find ways to express their creative abilities despite society’s constraints.”

Amelia laced her arm through the young woman’s and led her to the doors. “Thank you, Miss Abigail. I appreciate your insight. We must discuss this further at another time.”

Amelia looked over her shoulder at Jack’s thundering glare. “Jack, will you accompany Miss Abigail back to the drawing room? I must tidy myself before seeing the guests.”

Jack offered his arm, and the gleam in his eyes was very familiar to Amelia. Poor Miss Abigail had no clue that she had just thrown down a gauntlet. And none of her brothers ever stepped away from a challenge, especially Jack.

“Thank you, Mr. Bonnington, but I am capable of returning to the drawing room without your escort.”

Yes, Miss Abigail had no clue what a tempting dare she presented.

“Of all the stubborn women.” He bowed as if in the presence of the King. “Miss Lyon, it would give me pleasure to accompany you to the drawing room.”

Miss Abigail rolled her eyes before placing her hand on Jack’s arm as if touching a snake. She batted her eyes at Jack and said in a sweet voice, “Thank you, sir. You are too kind.”

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