

Red Alert by L.M. Connolly

When a dragon flies over Central Park, he jolts the world into awareness. Shape-shifters and vampires finally reveal their existence, and people show their fangs, wings and claws to their neighbors. But exposure doesn't deter old enemies.

Megan meets Sandro at the lowest time of her life - when she thinks her crazy nightmares are symptoms of the tumor that is killing her. But the sexy dragon shape-shifter tells her the dreams are telepathic messages from his missing brother Ricardo. More than telepathy flares between them. Megan and Sandro burn up the night with sizzling passion, but Sandro won't commit, and Megan wants more than a fling.

When Sandro rescues Megan from Ricardo's captors she gives him the key to locate his brother, but he wants far more from the sexy archivist. He wants her body, all ways, all day, all night.

But this is his last case for the STORM agency and he knows he can't promise Megan any kind of forever.

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Dedication

To Chris and Elspeth, with thanks for much laughter and support.

Chapter One

Tomorrow...

Megan stood when the nurse called her name, steeling herself for the ordeal ahead. The entrance doors to the unit opened with a click and cool air touched her cheek. She paused to look around, glad of any distraction.

A man entered the hospital ward. The breeze ruffled his dark hair and he turned back to close the door, unconsciously displaying the strength of his powerful body in the stacked muscle rippling the t-shirt under his worn leather jacket. Just how she liked her men, tall and strong.

Normally, that was. Today, all she could think about was sleep and getting some—soon. Even the results of today's test gave way to that desperate need. She hadn't slept the night through for weeks. She was about to hear that she was in for long bouts of painful treatment with a death sentence at the end—the fate she'd been dreading for weeks, but in her current state of exhaustion even that took second place to sleep. She dismissed the sexy stranger with a weary shrug and turned her attention to the nurse.

The nurse led her past a line of curtained cubicles into a private room. “The doctor will be with you in a moment,” she snapped before exiting briskly.

What was her problem? Megan couldn't help her busy day. For her information, Megan's day would be much worse and she hadn't snapped at anybody. Yet.

The quiet in the room assaulted her senses after the bustle of the ward. Humanity in all its shuffling, smelly reality lay out there but here Megan felt sequestered, almost as if the room was soundproofed. Anxiety tightened her throat and she looked around for a distraction. Worry wouldn't help her now. She'd taken the tests, and once she had her results, she'd know what would happen next.

But here, in a room with a steel hospital bed, reality hit with sickening impact. They must have brought her here because they wanted her to stay, not just give her the results and tell her to come back later. That meant whatever was wrong with her was urgent, needing immediate treatment.

She said the words “brain tumor” aloud a few times, trying to get used to the idea. It still sent a shudder through her every time.

Biting her lip, Megan glanced up at the TV bolted to the wall above her head. Pictures flashed across the screen, an internal hospital channel showing reminders to eat your five portions of vegetables a day, images of a well-manicured hand slicing carrots into sticks, then green peppers into appetizing slices. She watched the silent images then glanced away. Food was the last thing on her mind.

Usually a patient was stuck with the hospital information channel but not here. A remote lay on the windowsill. Megan picked it up, flicked off the mute and turned to the next channel. CNN News.

“Can New York take this new pressure on its infrastructure?” the commentator said. “How long will it be before there's a collision in the sky and a bloody mess in the street?”

The camera switched to a view of a dragon in full flight. The creature must have a twenty-foot wingspan. Its great blue-green body gleamed in the weak spring sunshine, the hue shining iridescently as it beat its wings against the wind currents. So beautiful. So impossible, until yesterday.

Damn but she wished she could see one. The existence of people calling themselves Talents had

blasted shock waves around the world. She'd seen the footage of the dragon in flight a dozen times since yesterday, when it was the central part of a documentary devoted to the subject. An amateur cameraman—if there was such a thing in New York where everybody seemed to be selling their private photos to one agency or another—shot the dragon in flight over Central Park. Other corroborative film and evidence followed, with the strong suggestion that these “creatures” were urban terrorists and spies.

So far, Talents hadn't spoken, although a spokesman said they would break their long silence later today. That kind of confirmed it. One solitary documentary couldn't persuade the world but when they came out and said they existed and they'd prove it, that would send the networks into orgasms of delight.

If Megan hadn't been dreaming about a particular dragon for the past couple of months, it might have come as more of a shock to her but she had her own concerns now, and they overshadowed everything else. The commentator continued. “A representative from STORM will be speaking to the public later today. The Society of Talented Officers Resisting Mistreatment has been with us for some time but until recently nobody knew the specific definition of Talents. It means dragons, vampires and other creatures who have lived among us for centuries. Little is yet known of these Talented beings although they have promised to reveal more in the interest of public awareness.”

Megan slumped bonelessly to the bed, remote in hand.

She blinked and sat up when the door opened and a short, bespectacled doctor strode in, followed closely by two assistants, or maybe they were students. One big, red-haired man whose muscles bulged in a white jacket two sizes too small for him and an even bigger African-American, his head shaved.

My, they make students big these days. A note of alarm sounded in her head. Something was wrong here, though in her current state she couldn't begin to imagine what it was.

The doctor carried a brown folder that he handed off to one of his assistants without taking his attention away from her. “Miss Armstrong,” he said, his professional smile revealing gleaming white teeth. “I'm Dr. Jones.”

She didn't like his smile. Unctuous, she'd call it. Smarmy described it even better. His hair looked as if he hadn't spared the wet-look gel and his chiseled, handsome face didn't dispel her initial repulsion. “I understand you've been having bad dreams, Miss Armstrong.”

“A bit more than that.” She glanced up at the TV and remembered she held the remote in her hand. She muted it. “Sorry.”

The doctor glanced at the screen. “Seeing if any more dragons have appeared?”

“I guess so.” She shrugged. “Seen any in the ER?”

“Not that I know about.” The doctor flashed her another smile, a wintry one this time. He placed his cool fingers on her temples. “Hmm. You feel a little warm.” He reached over her head for the in-ear thermometer. “We've had the results of your CT scan and we're concerned about some abnormalities.”

Here it came. Megan braced herself.

“You have a shadow at the back of your brain, Miss Armstrong.” That explained the presence of the students. *An interesting case*, he would tell them. *Very unusual, worth studying*. They could cut her up afterward to examine what killed her. At least she wouldn't be there to see the blood. She'd never liked blood.

Shock flooded her body, tightening her throat and limbs. She fought it down. She needed information, a clear picture of what was happening inside her body. She fought out the word

while she still could. “C-cancer?”

The doctor gave her a smile. God, she hated his smiles. She wanted to slap that smug grin off his face. “Not necessarily. Many of these abnormalities are benign. But it’s pressing against your brain and probably causing the sleep difficulties. You’re having nightmares, aren’t you?”

“Vivid ones. Always the same.”

“Tell me. There might be some clues there.”

Megan opened her mind to the memories, allowed herself to see the picture that haunted her every night. “Tell me about your dreams.”

“More dragons, I’m afraid.” She flashed him an uncertain smile. “My dreams are always the same. A dragon shape-shifter, or that’s what he says he is. He’s restrained, tied down to a bed in a room with no windows. It’s full of instruments. He’s been tortured. Once I saw him with his arm laid open, the blood throbbing through his veins. He told me not to worry, he’d mend. But they did horrible things to him. He said for me to get in touch with his brother but it’s a dream, so I knew that must be wrong.”

“What was his brother’s name?”

She hesitated, a warning note sounding in her head. *Don’t tell them.* The voice sounded velvety, rough. Her imagination. It had to be. Sleep deprivation did some weird things. “You think it could be a reflection of my life? Wishful thinking? Only it isn’t, is it?” She waved a hand at the TV screen. “I’ve been having these dreams for a long time, long before the news of STORM and the shape-shifters broke. Now I’m beginning to wonder. Is it real, or is it me? They’re normal except for one thing, so this Ricardo could be telling the truth.”

Dr. Jones’ eyes opened wide and glanced at the African-American student. “Ricardo. That’s his name?”

She mentally chastised herself for letting it slip. “Yes. He says he’s a dragon but I never saw him change or shape-shift or whatever they call it. He says he can’t.”

Dr. Jones tsked. “They appear perfectly human until they change, then they become perfectly dragon, or whatever shape they have. It’s disgusting when you see them shape-shift.” He paused and glanced at one of the students, who moved a little farther away from him to stand in front of the door. “Mutants, you could call them.”

She wouldn’t call them “mutants”. Different, yes but “mutant” made them sound perverted and she didn’t think they were. A new minority, sure, but no more “mutant” than any other minority. Didn’t this doctor know a little too much about creatures who’d only revealed themselves in public yesterday? Her spine prickled in warning. There was definitely something wrong here. She wanted out of this quiet little room. She blinked and glanced at the door, past the beefy student who blocked her way.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing. I just got a weird feeling—you know, like somebody’s walked over my grave.”

Dr. Jones shot a glance over his shoulder and the student nearest the door, the red-haired one, left the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

Something crawled over her senses, making the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. This whole situation didn’t feel right. “Why is it so important? If there’s something in my brain causing these dreams, Ricardo doesn’t exist, does he?” She should be glad. If the swelling in her brain caused the dreams, a shape-shifting dragon called Ricardo Gianetti wasn’t lying on a table somewhere, tortured and suffering.

He exists.

She looked around for the source of the deep, night-dark voice, sure she didn’t imagine it this

time. "I'm sorry, did you say something?"

"No." Dr. Jones fixed her with a bland stare. "But I will now. We need you to stay in the hospital for a while. We'll do another scan and operate as soon as possible, then we'll know more."

"What will you do?"

"We'll schedule you for exploratory surgery, probably tomorrow." He checked his watch. "It's eleven a.m. now, which means we can operate any time from eleven tonight onward, after we've starved you and done the blood tests. I'll make sure you're on the list as a priority." He looked back up at her, blue eyes assessing, professional smile firmly in place. "It's too early to jump to conclusions, so try not to worry."

"Like you try not to think about elephants, once somebody's put the idea in your head?" What a stupid thing to say. Of course she'd worry. "And although I'm British, my work permits and health insurance are in order. In case you were wondering." Most medics would, once they realized she wasn't an American citizen but Dr. Jones hadn't even asked. Nor had the nurse who'd brought her here.

The doctor's smile didn't waver, neither did it broaden or become more natural. That was about as fake a smile as she'd ever seen. "Get some rest and take your mind off things. Think about dragons." With a jerk of his head he indicated the TV screen. It still flashed out pictures of that damn dragon flying across the screen.

"Would it be possible for me to make a phone call?" She'd switched her cell phone off, as instructed on her visit to the CT room. "Just to a friend to say where I am and ask him to bring some things in for me."

For the first time since he'd entered the room, the African-American spoke. "We'd rather you didn't use a cell phone. We'll arrange for a phone to be brought to you."

Her hackles rose a little more. Something was wrong here. All her instincts told her so. The doctor had been interested in her dream, which should be a symptom, a figment of her tumor-induced imagination, and he knew more about shape-shifters than he could have picked up from one sensation-seeking documentary.

You want out?

That voice again, in her head. No one could hear it but her. She was looking right at Dr. Jones and no trace of awareness crossed his face. *Who are you?*

A Talent. I know Ricardo. Don't listen to them. I can get you out of here.

He knew Ricardo? Ricardo wasn't a figment of her tortured imagination? *I don't understand.*

Choose. Now. Them or me?

Her skin, now prickling in goose bumps despite the stuffy heat in this room, told her the danger lay here, not with him. *You.*

Get out of the room. I'm just outside.

She slid off the bed, measuring the distance between her and the door. "Listen, the sleep clinic at the university only sent me here for a CT scan. How about I go back and show them the results and see what *they* think?"

"There's no need for that. Time is of the essence here, Miss Armstrong. You should rest."

The med student took a step toward her and she saw the syringe in his hand, its tip glinting wickedly in the weak sunlight filtering through the blinds.

Her goose bumps and prickling hairs became all-out terror. The two men who came in with Dr. Jones weren't students at all. They were muscle.

A scuffle outside the door made Dr. Jones turn his head toward the sound. Megan took the opportunity and lashed out with her foot. It struck with a satisfyingly solid *whump*, right in his

solar plexus.

Dr. Jones doubled up, gasping for air. Well, the first step to getting out had been easy. But facing the “student” standing between her and the door, Megan knew he wouldn’t be such a pushover. He stood, feet planted wide apart, knees slightly bent in a position she recognized from her weekly karate class.

Fuck.

She had to hurry, before Jones regained his breath. When she kicked up toward the guy’s balls, intending the kick to be a feint for an upward hand jab, the bastard grabbed her ankle and threw her to the hard floor. The *very* hard floor. Her head hit the ground with a solidity Megan felt in every bone of her body, intensifying her ever-present headache, and she kicked back with her free foot, only to find it caught in the same meaty fist.

Pressure on the side of her pants alerted her to the syringe pressing into her flesh.

The door burst open, propelled by the heavy body of the red-haired “student”. He fell next to her, already unconscious, his big body completely relaxed. One massive arm dropped over her body, dislodging the needle’s trajectory.

A whirlwind followed the student, or what seemed like one to Megan. Dark, unruly hair was the only feature she was absolutely sure of topping a tall, powerful body with excellent reactions, because the intruder spun around on his heel, his arm already whipping out to take her attacker full across his face.

The open-handed slap knocked the African-American aside but he came back, one blow too superficial to cause any real damage. Just in time to receive the jackhammer punch under his chin that knocked his head back with a crunch that sounded fatal.

The student fell back against the room’s only chair, collapsing it with the sound of breaking wood and the fleshier crunch of breaking bone.

It was the man she’d glimpsed earlier entering the main ward. Closer up he was even more lethally sexy. Arousal, totally unexpected, purred through her veins. “There are more outside, so the only way we’re going to get out of here is through that window.” He swept the room with an appraising glance and picked up the metal bedside table as if it weighed nothing at all, ignoring the clatter as the drawer fell out. “Close your eyes if you’re scared of heights and hold on tight.” Lifting the table over his head, he swung it at the window. The sound of shattering glass rewarded him and he stepped forward to knock out the remaining jagged shards and drag the wrecked blind aside.

Was that a hand or a claw? A claw, she realized, as fingernails lengthened into talons and blue-green scales clustered over his hand and arm.

She gasped in shock. “Holy fuck!” She didn’t curse a whole lot, but nothing else would do.

He turned to face her, scales gathering on his neck, his voice throaty and raw. “Climb up and hold on. Or stay here and face them.”

Feet pounded up the hallway outside and at the same time, her rescuer completed his transformation into a man-sized dragon. Clothes ripped and tore, falling from his body, and she felt a sense of irritation in her mind that came from him. Irritation?

Yeah, I liked that jacket. Grab the pieces and let’s go. Pick up your stuff too. Then put your arms around my neck. Or stay here and let them kill you.

His neck was much longer and greener than it had been a minute ago. When she heard the shout “In here!” from outside the room she knew this was decision time.

She grabbed her purse, pausing to sling it over her head so the strap crossed her body, and picked up the remains of the leather jacket, only remembering the folder containing her scan results at

the last minute, then she obeyed him—it—and put her arms around his—its—neck.

When we're through the window, I'm going full size. Be prepared to hang on 'cuz we ain't coming down for a while.

I must be mad.

If you are, I am too. Ready?

As I'll ever be.

Her feet lifted off the ground just as she was beginning to wonder how the hell she could talk to somebody mind to mind. She closed her eyes and hung on.

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About L.M. Connolly

Lynne grew up in a haunted house in Leicester, England, and got used to telling the ghosts to shut up! She has lived a variety of lives, moving from the rock music world to the business world, and then to writing.

She has won awards and written best-selling books, although the writing is always her greatest reward. As Lynne Connolly she writes historical romance, and as L.M. Connolly spicy contemporary and paranormal romance.

Reviews are like gold to authors, so she'd really appreciate a short review and/ or a rating for this book.

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