



Love in the Time of Dragons: A Novel of the Light Dragons

By Katie Macalister

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When it comes to love, one woman is scaling back her expectations...

Tully Sullivan is just like any other suburban mom-except she's just woken up in a strange place surrounded by strange people who keep insisting that they're dragons-and that she's one too.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Katie MacAlister lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and dogs, and can often be found lurking around online game sites.

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Chapter One

“You’re going to be on your knees saying prayers for hours if Lady Alice finds you here.”

I jumped at the low, gravelly voice, but my heart stopped beating quite so rapidly when I saw who had discovered me. “By the rood, Ulric! You almost scared the humors right out of my belly!”

“Aye, I’ve no doubt I did,” the old man replied, leaning on a battered hoe. “Due to your guilty conscience, I’m thinking. Aren’t you supposed to be in the solar with the other women?”

I patted the earth around the early-blooming rose that I had cleared of weeds, and snorted in a delicate, ladylike way. “I was excused.”

“Oh, you were, were you? And for what? Not to leave off your sewing and leeching and all those other things Lady Alice tries to teach you.”

I got to my feet, dusting the dirt off my knees and hands, looking down my nose at the smaller man, doing my best to intimidate him even though I knew it wouldn’t do any good—Ulric had known me since I was a wee babe puling in her swaddling clothes. “And what business is it of yours, good sir?”

He grinned, his teeth black and broken. “You can come over the lady right enough, when you like. Now, what I’m wanting to know is whether you have your mother’s leave to be here in the garden, or if you’re supposed to be up learning the proper way to be a lady.”

I kicked at a molehill. “I *was* excused . . . to use the privy. You know how bad they are—I needed fresh air to recover from the experience.”

“You had enough, judging by the weeding you’ve done. Get yourself back to the solar with the other women before your mother has my hide for letting you stay out here.”

“I . . . er . . . can’t.”

“And why can’t you?” he asked, obviously suspicious.

I cleared my throat and tried to adopt an expression that did not contain one morsel of guilt. “There was an . . . incident.”

“Oh, aye?” The expression of suspicion deepened. “What sort of an incident?”

“Nothing serious. Nothing of importance.” I plucked a dead leaf from a rosebush. “Nothing of my doing, which you quite obviously believe, a fact that I find most insulting.”

“What sort of an incident?” he repeated, ignoring my protests of innocence and outrage.

I threw away the dried leaf and sighed. “It’s Lady Susan.”

“What have you done to your mother’s cousin now?”

“Nothing! I just happened to make up some spiderwort tea, and mayhap I did leave it in the solar next to her chair, along with a mug and a small pot of honey, but how was I to know she’d drink all of it? Besides, I thought everyone knew that spiderwort root tea unplugs your bowels something fierce.”

Ulric stared at me as if it were my bowels that had run free and wild before him.

“Her screams from the privy were so loud, Mother said I might be excused for a bit while she sought one of Papa’s guards to break down the privy door, because her ladies were worried that Lady Susan had fallen in and was stuck in the chute.”

The look turned to one of unadulterated horror.

“I just hope she looks on the positive side of the whole experience,” I added, tamping down the molehill with the toe of my shoe.

“God’s blood, you’re an unnatural child. What positive side is there to spewing out your guts while stuck in the privy?”

I gave him a lofty look. “Lady Susan always had horrible wind. It was worse than the smell from the jakes! The spiderwort tea should clear her out. By rights, she should thank me.”

Ulric cast his gaze skyward and muttered something under his breath.

“Besides, I can’t go inside now. Mother said for me to stay out of her way because she is too busy getting ready for whoever it is who’s visiting Father.”

That wasn’t entirely true—my mother had actually snapped at me to get out from underfoot and do something helpful other than offer suggestions on how to break down the privy door, and what could be more helpful than tending the garden? The whole keep was gearing up for a visit from some important guest, and I would not want the garden to shame her.

“Get ye gone,” Ulric said, shooing me out of the garden. “Else I’ll tell your mother how you’ve spent the last few hours rather than tending to your proper chores. If you’re a good lass, perhaps I’ll help you with those roses later.”

I smiled, feeling as artless as a girl of seventeen could feel, and dashed out of the haven that was the garden and along the dark overhang that led into the upper bailey. It was a glorious almost-summer morning, and my father’s serfs were going about their daily tasks with less complaint than was normal. I stopped by the stable to check on the latest batch of kittens, picking out a pretty black-and-white one that I would beg my mother to let me keep, and was just on the way to the kitchen to see if I couldn’t wheedle some bread and cheese from the cooks when the dull thud of several horses’ hooves caught my attention.

I stood in the kitchen door and watched as a group of four men rode into the bailey, all armed for battle.

“Ysolde! What are you doing here? Why aren’t you up in the solar tending to Lady Susan? Mother was looking for you.” Margaret, my older sister, emerged from the depths of the kitchen to scold me.

“Did they get her out of the privy, then?” I asked in all innocence. Or what I hoped passed for it.

“Aye.” Her eyes narrowed on me. “It was odd, the door being stuck shut that way. Almost as if someone had done something to it.”

I made my eyes as round as they would go, and threw in a few blinks for good measure. “Poor, poor Lady Susan. Trapped in the privy with her bowels running amok. Think you she’s been cursed?”

“Aye, and I know by what. Or rather, who.” She was clearly about to shift into a lecture when movement in the bailey caught her eye. She glanced outside the doorway and quickly pulled me backwards, into the dimness of the kitchen. “You know better than to stand about when Father has visitors.”

“Who is it?” I asked, looking around her as she peered out at the visitors.

“An important mage.” She held a plucked goose to her chest as she watched the men. “That must be him, in the black.”

All of the men were armed, their swords and mail glinting brightly in the sun, but only one did not wear a helm. He dismounted, lifting his hand in greeting as my father hurried down the steps of the keep.

“He doesn’t look like any mage I’ve ever seen,” I told her, taking in the man’s easy movements under what must be at least fifty pounds of armor. “He looks more like a warlord. Look, he’s got braids in his hair, just like that Scot who came to see Father a few years ago. What do you think he wants?”

“Who knows? Father is renowned for his powers; no doubt this mage wants to consult him on arcane matters.”

“Hrmph. Arcane matters,” I said, aware I sounded grumpy.

Her mouth quirked on one side. “I thought you weren’t going to let it bother you anymore.”

“I’m not. It doesn’t,” I said defensively, watching as my father and the warlord greeted each other. “I don’t care in the least that I didn’t inherit any of Father’s abilities. You can have them all.”

“Whereas you, little changeling, would rather muck about in the garden than learn how to summon a ball of blue fire.” Margaret laughed, pulling a bit of grass from where it had been caught in the laces on my sleeve.

“I’m not a changeling. Mother says I was a gift from God, and that’s why my hair is blond when you and she and Papa are redheads. Why would a mage ride with three guards?”

Margaret pulled back from the door, nudging me aside. “Why shouldn’t he have guards?”

“If he’s as powerful a mage as Father, he shouldn’t need anyone to protect him.” I watched as my mother curtseyed to the stranger. “He just looks . . . wrong. For a mage.”

“It doesn’t matter what he looks like—you are to stay out of the way. If you’re not going to tend to your duties, you can help me. I’ve got a million things to do, what with two of the cooks down with some sort of a pox, and Mother busy with the guest. Ysolde? Ysolde!”

I slipped out of the kitchen, wanting a better look at the warlord as he strode after my parents into the tower that held our living quarters. There was something about the way the man moved, a sense of coiled power, like a boar before it charges. He walked with grace despite the heavy mail, and although I couldn’t see his

face, long, ebony hair shown glossy and bright as a raven's wing.

The other men followed after him, and although they, too, moved with the ease that bespoke power, they didn't have the same air of leadership.

I trailed behind them, careful to stay well back lest my father see me, curious to know what this strange warrior-mage wanted. I had just reached the bottom step as all but the last of the mage's party entered the tower, when that guard suddenly spun around.

His nostrils flared, as if he'd smelled something, but it wasn't that which sent a ripple of goose bumps down my arms. His eyes were dark, and as I watched them, the pupil narrowed, like a cat's when brought from the dark stable out into the sun. I gasped and spun around, running in the other direction, the sound of the strange man's laughter following me, mocking me, echoing in my head until I thought I would scream.

"Ah, you're awake."

My eyelids, leaden weights that they were, finally managed to hoist themselves open. I stared directly into the dark brown eyes of a woman whose face was located less than an inch from mine, and screamed in surprise. "Aaagh!"

She leaped backwards as I sat up, my heart beating madly, a faint, lingering pain leaving me with the sensation that my brain itself was bruised.

"Who are you? Are you part of the dream? You are, aren't you? You're just a dream," I said, my voice a croak. I touched my lips. They were dry and cracked. "Except those people were in some sort of medieval clothing, and you're wearing pants. Still, it's incredibly vivid, this dream. It's not as interesting as the last one, but still interesting and vivid. Very vivid. Enough that I'm lying here babbling to myself during it."

"I'm not a dream, actually," the in-my-face dream woman said. "And you're not alone, so if you're babbling, it's to me."

I knew better than to leap off the bed, not with the sort of headache I had. Slowly, I slid my legs off the edge of the bed, and wondered if I stood up, if I'd stop dreaming and wake up to real life.

As I tried to stand, the dream lady seized my arm, holding on to me as I wobbled on my unsteady feet.

Her grip was anything but dreamlike. "You're real," I said with surprise.

"Yes."

"You're a real person, not part of the dream?"

"I think we've established that fact."

I felt an irritated expression crawl across my face—crawl because my brain hadn't yet woken up with the rest of me. "If you're real, would you mind me asking why you were bent over me, nose-to-nose, in the worst sort of Japanese horror movie way, one that guaranteed I'd just about wet myself the minute I woke up?"

"I was checking your breathing. You were moaning and making noises like you were going to wake up."

"I was dreaming," I said, as if that explained everything.

“So you’ve said. Repeatedly.” The woman, her skin the color of oiled mahogany, nodded. “It’s good. You are beginning to remember. I wondered if the dragon within would not speak to you in such a manner.”

Dim little warning bells went off in my mind, the sort that are set off when you’re trapped in a small room with someone who is obviously a few weenies short of a cookout. “Well, isn’t this just lovely. I feel like something a cat crapped, and I’m trapped in a room with a crazy lady.” I clapped a hand over my mouth, appalled that I spoke the words rather than just thought them. “Did you hear that?” I asked around my fingers.

She nodded.

I let my hand fall. “Sorry. I meant no offense. It’s just that . . . well . . . you know. Dragons? That’s kind of out there.”

A slight frown settled between her brows. “You look a bit confused.”

“You get the understatement of the year tiara. Would it be rude to ask who you are?” I gently rubbed my forehead, letting my gaze wander around the room.

“My name is Kaawa. My son is Gabriel Tauhou, the silver wyvern.”

“A silver what?”

She was silent, her eyes shrewd as they assessed me. “Do you really think that’s necessary?”

“That I ask questions or rub my head? It doesn’t matter—both are, yes. I always ask questions because I’m a naturally curious person. Ask anyone; they’ll tell you. And I rub my head when it feels like it’s been stomped on, which it does.”

Another silence followed that statement. “You are not what I expected.”

My eyebrows were working well enough to rise at that statement. “You scared the crap out of me by staring at me from an inch away, and I’m not what you expected? I don’t know what to say to that since I don’t have the slightest idea who you are, other than your name is Kaawa and you sound like you’re Australian, or where I am, or what I’m doing here beyond napping. How long have I been sleeping?”

She glanced at the clock. “Five weeks.”

I gave her a look that told her she should know better than to try to fool me. “Do I look like I just rolled off the gullible wagon? Wait—Gareth put you up to this, didn’t he? He’s trying to pull my leg.”

“I don’t know a Gareth,” she said, moving toward the end of the bed.

“No . . .” I frowned as my mind, still groggy from the aftereffects of a long sleep, slowly chugged to life. “You’re right. Gareth wouldn’t do that—he has absolutely no sense of humor.”

“You fell into a stupor five weeks and two days ago. You have been asleep ever since.”

A chill rolled down my spine as I read the truth in her eyes. “That can’t be.”

“But it is.”

“No.” Carefully, very carefully, I shook my head. “It’s not time for one; I shouldn’t have one for another six months. Oh god, you’re not a deranged madwoman from Australia who lies to innocent people, are you? You’re telling me the truth! Brom! Where’s Brom?”

“Who is Brom?”

Panic had me leaping to my feet when my body knew better. Immediately, I collapsed onto the floor with a loud thud. My legs felt like they were made of rubber, the muscles trembling with strain. I ignored the pain of the fall and clawed at the bed to get back to my feet. “A phone. Is there a phone? I must have a phone.”

The door opened as I stood up, still wobbling, the floor tilting and heaving under my feet.

“I heard a—oh. I see she’s up. Hello, Ysolde.”

“Hello.” My stomach lurched along with the floor. I clung to the frame of the bed for a few seconds until the world settled down the way it should be. “Who are you?”

She shot a puzzled look to the other woman. “I’m May. We met before, don’t you remember?”

“Not at all. Do you have a phone, May?”

If she was surprised by that question, she didn’t let on. She simply pulled a cell phone out of the pocket of her jeans and handed it to me. I took it, staring at her for a moment. There was something about her, something that seemed familiar . . . and yet, I was sure I’d never seen her before.

Mentally, I shook away the fancies and began to punch in a phone number, but paused when I realized I had no idea where I was. “What country is this?”

May and Kaawa exchanged glances. May answered. “England. We’re in London. We thought it was better not to move you very far, although we did take you out of Drake’s house since he was a bit crazy, what with the twins being born and all.”

“London,” I said, struggling to peer into the black abyss that was my memory. There was nothing there, but that wasn’t uncommon after an episode. Luckily, a few wits remained to me, including the ability to remember my phone number.

The phone buzzed gently against my ear. I held my breath, counting the rings before it was answered.

“Yeah?”

“Brom,” I said, wanting to weep with relief at the sound of his placid, unruffled voice. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Where are you?”

“London.” I slid a glance toward the small, dark-haired woman who looked like she could have stepped straight out of some silent movie. “With . . . uh . . . some people.” Crazy people, or sane . . . that was yet to be determined.

“You’re still in London? I thought you were only going to be there for three days. You said three days, Sullivan. It’s been over a month.”

I heard the note of hurt in his voice. I hated that. “I know. I’m sorry. I . . . something happened. Something

big.”

“What kind of big?” he asked, curious now.

“I don’t know. I can’t think,” I said, being quite literal. My brain felt like it was soaking in molasses. “The people I’m with took care of me while I was sleeping.”

“Oh, that kind of big. I figured it was something like that. Gareth was pissed when you didn’t come back. He called your boss and chewed him out for keeping you so long.”

“Oh, no,” I said, my shoulders slumping as I thought of the powerful archimage to whom I was an apprentice.

“It was really cool! You should have heard it. Dr. Kostich yelled at Gareth, and told him to stop calling, and that you were all right, but he wouldn’t say where you were because Gareth was always using you. And then Gareth said he’d better watch out because he wasn’t the only one who could make things happen, and then Kostich said oh yeah, and Gareth said yeah, his sister-in-law was a necromancer, and then Ruth punched him in the arm and bit his ear so hard it bled, and after that, I found a dead fox. Can I have fifty dollars to buy some natron?”

I blinked at the stream of information pouring into my ear, sorting out what must have been a horrible scene with Dr. Kostich, finally ending up on the odd request. “Why do you need natron?”

Brom sighed. “Cause I found the dead fox. It’s going to need a lot of natron to mummify.”

“I really don’t think we need the mummy of a fox, Brom.”

“It’s my hobby,” he said, his tone weary. “You said I needed a hobby. I got one.”

“When you said you were interested in mummies, I thought you meant the Egyptian ones. I didn’t realize you meant you wanted to make your own.”

“You didn’t ask,” he pointed out, and with that, I could not dispute.

“We’ll talk about it when I get back. I suppose I should talk to Gareth,” I said, not wanting to do any such thing.

“Can’t. He’s in Barcelona.”

“Oh. Is Ruth there?”

“No, she went with him.”

Panic gripped me. “You’re not alone, are you?”

“Sullivan, I’m not a child,” he answered, sounding indignant that I would question the wisdom gained during his lifetime, all nine years of it. “I can stay by myself.”

“Not for five weeks you can’t—”

“It’s OK. When Ruth and Gareth left, and you didn’t come back, Penny said I could stay with her until you came home.”

I sagged against the bed, unmindful of the two women watching me so closely. “Thank the stars for Penny. I’ll be home just as soon as I can get on a plane. Do you have a pen?”

“Sec.”

I covered the phone and looked at the woman named May. “Is there a phone number I can give my son in case of an emergency?”

“Your son?” she asked, her eyes widening. “Yes. Here.”

I took the card she pulled from her pocket, reading the number off it to Brom. “You stay with Penny until I can get you, all right?”

“Geez, Sullivan, I’m not a ‘tard.”

“A what?” I asked.

“A tard. You know, a retard.”

“I’ve asked you not to use those sorts of . . . oh, never mind. We’ll discuss words that are hurtful and should not be used another time. Just stay with Penny, and if you need me, call me at the number I gave you. Oh, and Brom?”

“What?” he asked in that put-upon voice that nine-year-old boys the world over can assume with such ease.

I turned my back on the two women. “I love you bunches. You remember that, OK?”

“K.” I could almost hear his eyes rolling. “Hey, Sullivan, how come you had your thing now? I thought it wasn’t supposed to happen until around Halloween.”

“It isn’t, and I don’t know why it happened now.”

“Gareth’s going to be pissed he missed it. Did you . . . you know . . . manifest the good stuff?”

My gaze moved slowly around the room. It seemed like a pretty normal bedroom, containing a large bureau, a bed, a couple of chairs and a small table with a ruffly cloth on it, and a white stone fireplace. “I don’t know. I’ll call you later when I have some information about when I’ll be landing in Madrid, all right?”

“Later, French mustachioed waiter,” he said, using his favorite childhood rhyme.

I smiled at the sound of it, missing him, wishing there was a way to magically transport myself to the small, overcrowded, noisy apartment where we lived so I could hug him and ruffle his hair, and marvel yet again that such an intelligent, wonderful child was mine.

“Thank you,” I said, handing the cell phone back to May. “My son is only nine. I knew he would be worried about what happened to me.”

“Nine.” May and Kaawa exchanged another glance. “Nine . . . years?”

“Yes, of course.” I sidled away, just in case one or both of the women turned out to be crazy after all. “This is very awkward, but I’m afraid I have no memory of either of you. Have we met?”

“Yes,” Kaawa said. She wore a pair of loose-fitting black palazzo pants and a beautiful black top embroidered in silver with all sorts of Aboriginal animal designs. Her hair was twisted into several braids, pulled back into a short ponytail. “I met you once before, in Cairo.”

“Cairo?” I prodded the solid black mass that was my memory. Nothing moved. “I don’t believe I’ve ever been in Cairo. I live in Spain, not Egypt.”

“This was some time ago,” the woman said carefully.

Perhaps she was someone I had met while travelling with Dr. Kostich. “Oh? How long ago?”

She looked at me silently for a moment, then said, “About three hundred years.”

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