

Midnight Curse by Melissa F. Olson

Chapter 1

“What *is* that thing?” came a disgusted voice from across the table.

I smoothed the sweat-dampened hair off my forehead so I could lift my gaze to the speaker. It was nearly dinnertime, but the heat from the day seemed to linger in the air, making our table at the Downtown LA Art Walk almost unbearable. If that weren't uncomfortable enough, a ray of sunlight had managed to find a crack between skyscrapers and was rapidly intruding across my table like a three-foot melanoma laser. I knew from experience that in a few minutes it was gonna hit me right in the eyes.

Despite the heat, the woman standing in front of me was immaculate, a heroin-thin fortyish blonde with a Prada bag in the crook of her elbow. Her perfectly made-up eyes were fixed on Shadow, who was curled up on the sidewalk, her chin resting on my foot. I *think* the woman's features were trying to convey revulsion, but they were having a hard time fighting through all the Botox. Shadow, for her part, cracked open one eyelid, glanced at the woman, and went back to sleep. I was suddenly very jealous.

“This is my dog,” I said, trying to keep my voice pleasant. Well, okay, I tried a little. Shadow had started life as a dog, it was true, but a hundred-fifty-pound dog that was part hairless Peruvian, part wolf, and God knew what else. And that was *before* she was spelled to be ink-black and have superpowers.

“Well, that is the *ugliest* dog I have ever seen,” the woman sniffed, tossing her perfectly blown-out hair.

I hear this line at least once a day, and it's astounding how many ways there are to deliver it. Some people are shocked, and some are even sort of admiring. I don't really mind that because, well, Shadow's ugliness is so thorough that it really is impressive.

But this particular woman was using a tone that suggested I should really consider putting Shadow down to liberate the world from the blight of her hideousness. I put down the binder of notes I'd been studying. “That's so funny,” I said to the Prada woman. “I was just going to say the same thing about you.”

She gave me a blank look. “But I don't have a dog.”

I sighed. She was literally too stupid to insult. “Are you going to buy a sculpture?” I demanded, waving a hand at the beautiful handmade carvings spread across the table in front of me.

She turned her nose up. “No.”

“Then go away, or I shall taunt you a second time,” I said in my best French accent.

The woman gave me a bewildered look but had the sense to back away. “Your customer service is appalling,” she snapped as a parting shot.

“So are your shoes,” I called back. There. That was hitting her where she lived. The woman made a “humph” noise and flounced away on her Chanel espadrilles. Not for the first time, I wished Shadow and I could high-five.

I felt the buzz of a werewolf behind me a moment before I heard Eli’s amused voice say, “Making friends again, I see.”

Shadow lifted her head, and was halfway through a growl before she saw who it was. She settled back down, resigned to being near Eli again. As a null, I negate supernatural powers and abilities within a small area around myself. This works out nicely for my werewolf boyfriend, especially when it comes to getting along with my “dog,” who has been magically altered to hunt and kill werewolves. Yes, I know how all that sounds, but I wasn’t the one who turned Shadow into a barghest. I was just the one tasked with keeping her from murdering anyone. Well, anyone who didn’t deserve it.

Eli deposited a lemonade in front of me and sat down in the empty chair, taking a sip from a clear plastic cup of iced tea. “She’s not wrong about the customer service, you know,” he said mildly.

“Hey, I asked her if she was going to buy something *before* I insulted her shoes,” I protested. “That’s tremendous customer service.”

Eli grinned at me and shook his head. “I told you you’d be bored. This just isn’t your thing, Scarlett. I get that.”

I chewed on my lip, squinted against the sunshine, and said nothing. Eli created beautiful sculptures out of driftwood he found on the beach. Plenty of people sold carvings at these art events, but Eli’s were stunning: he had a gift for using the wood’s natural shape and grain to make it look like the subject—a mermaid, a sea star, a humpback whale—had formed organically out of the wood, or maybe vice versa. At my urging, he kept raising the prices, but he still sold at least three-quarters of what he brought to each event.

Between carving the sculptures, his bartending job, and his position in the werewolf pack, we were reaching a point where if I didn’t hang out at either the art walks or the bar I never saw him. And hanging out at a werewolf bar came with its own complications.

Still, if I scared the customers away, he was eventually going to stop inviting me to come along. “I’ll be good,” I promised him.

He leaned over and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Nah. You were right. Those shoes were totally last season.”

“Right?” I said happily. Neither of us knew anything about fashion.

He nodded at the unlabeled binder in front of me. “You studying for tomorrow night?” He’d made an effort to sound casual, but I knew him too well to miss the edge of anxiety in his voice. In his own way, Eli was as nervous as I was.

“Yeah.”

Eli squeezed my hand. “I’ll be right there in the audience, for every minute. And you’re gonna do great, babe. You know that, right?”

An older couple covered in wrinkly tattoos came up to exclaim over Eli's sculptures, which saved me from having to answer. Beginning the following night, the Los Angeles Old World would be staging the dramatically named Vampire Trials, which was sort of our answer to *The People's Court*. It's supposed to happen every three years, but it had been more than six since the last one, for the simple reason that there hadn't been very many interspecies disputes.

Overall, of course, this was a good thing, proving that our odd way of doing things in the Los Angeles supernatural community was more or less working. Eventually, though, enough minor problems had stacked up that the powers that be in LA—Dashiell, the cardinal vampire, Kirsten, leader of the witches, and Eli's alpha Will, plus myself—had decided to put on the Trials, if for no other reason than to clear the air.

The name makes it sound huge and ominous, but the event itself is fairly straightforward. The three heads of the supernatural communities listen to complaints and make judgments on various conflicts; it's more "holding court" than "legal court."

But the pressure on us was still huge. Los Angeles is the only city in America where all three supernatural powers share power and live more or less in peace. If we fucked that up, there would be a lot of repercussions, which could include anything from snide "I told you so"s to violent attempts to take over our city.

I'd attended the last Vampire Trials, but two huge things had changed in the last six years. First, back then my psychotic ex-mentor Olivia had been the null on the scene, and I had attended as more of an unpaid intern than anything else. Now I would be the one sitting at the "defendant" table, making sure the vampire, werewolf, or witch sitting with me didn't try anything.

Second, three years earlier I'd fought for and earned my own place among the little group that made decisions for the supernatural world in my city. I'd gone from janitor to partner, and this would be my first Trial carrying the weight of that responsibility. I was nervous as hell, which was why I had been reading the binders of handwritten notes from all the previous Trials. When the couple wandered off with a wrapped sculpture in tow, Eli turned back to me. "Hey, I forgot to mention, I'm taking the pups out for brunch tomorrow morning, kind of a chill-before-the-Trials thing," he said, looking hopeful. "Do you want to come?"

"Uh, maybe," I said. The "pups" were the three newest members of the LA pack: Lizzy, Troy, and Yola. Part of Eli's job as the pack beta was to look after them and make sure they were acclimating. "Did they ask for me to come?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, avoiding my eyes.

"Eli . . ."

"What?" he said stubbornly.

I raised an eyebrow, but didn't bother responding. Eli knew damn well that my relationship with the werewolf pack was complicated. Whenever they got close to me, werewolves became human again, which meant that they were free of the uncomfortable, relentless magic that was always scratching at the back of their brains, urging them to do wolfish things. A few of them really did hate me, because they were proud of what they were and didn't

want it taken from them. A few of them were indifferent, and plenty of them, including the pups, adored being near me. To them, proximity to me was like being on a truly spectacular painkiller. And I hated it.

Being a null didn't exhaust me or hurt or anything—that wasn't the problem. Whenever I got close to those werewolves, though, it was like being the most popular girl in high school, suddenly forced to sit at the loser table. They would alternately kiss my ass, go into stunned silence, or jostle to bring me small treats or do little favors, like fetch me extra napkins or pick up Shadow's poop. Seriously. They competed for who got to pick up bargest poop. Some people might enjoy the attention and solicitation, but I didn't love being around people—Eli excepted—at the best of times. Unfortunately for me, wolves are extremely social creatures, and Eli needed to be with them. He also didn't really understand why I would dislike people being nice to me.

It was, as I said, complicated.

“I don't want to have to deal with Shadow scaring the pups,” I said finally. Shadow heard her name—or perhaps picked up on the tension—and lifted her head to look between the two of us. If she got more than fifteen feet away from me, Shadow's instincts about werewolves returned, and although she wouldn't *kill* anyone without a command from me, she became fairly terrifying. This was one of the reasons she went everywhere I did. It had taken nearly two years before she could remain alone with Eli long enough for me to go to the bathroom.

“So we'll leave her at the house,” Eli persisted.

“You know I don't like doing that.” We had a special room—okay, it was a cell—for Shadow when she absolutely needed to stay at home, like on some of my messier jobs. She hated it, though, and every time she was put in there she found a way to punish me later—pee on the carpet, shredded furniture, that kind of thing.

“Scarlett . . .” he sighed. “They'd really like to be your friends. Give them a chance.”

“I don't need any more friends,” I muttered.

Eli raised his eyebrows, but didn't comment on the fact that *he* was my only real friend. In my defense, regular friendships are tough in the Old World, where supernatural politics or danger tend to ruin things. I'd lost one friend, a werewolf named Caroline, because she'd been poisoned and the alpha werewolf had needed to put her down before she could kill any humans. Then my former roommate, a vampire named Molly, had evicted me because I'd repeatedly brought danger home with me. We'd initially promised to keep in touch, but it was awkward and uncomfortable, and I hadn't spoken to her in years. I'd also sort of been friends with a human cop named Jesse Cruz, but he'd wanted more and I had chosen Eli.

Eli knew all of that, but he was too kind to bring it up. Lucky for me, an older hippie couple wandered up to the booth, holding hands, and Eli got sucked into another conversation. I sipped my lemonade and held my tongue.

A few hours later the sun had dipped all the way behind the downtown skyscrapers, and we began packing up the few remaining sculptures. The art walk ran until ten, but Eli was bartending tonight, so we would throw in the towel early. I added up the day's figures while Eli dismantled the booth. "Nice haul," I said appreciatively. We were only boxing up three pieces, having sold nearly a dozen.

Box in hand, I walked back to my van, the White Whale, with Shadow, while Eli lagged a dozen feet behind, making a great show of heaving the folded table and chairs. He was far enough behind me to have his werewolf strength back, but it was important not to look too powerful in front of the humans. He was maybe having a good time with the farce.

As Eli loaded the table into the back of my van—we had driven separately so he could go straight to work—I let Shadow into the van's passenger seat, rolling the windows down so she could sniff the air and eyeball the passing strangers who stared at her. I found myself staring right back and realized my antisocial tendencies were threatening to surface. I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold up the Supportive Girlfriend exterior without snapping at someone.

Well, someone *else*, if you counted the Botox lady. I sure didn't.

Eli had just loaded the gear when a gay couple he'd waited on earlier approached him and began to chat. They seemed like they were settling in to a long discussion of art, and after hours of dealing with people, I didn't have it in me to join them. There was just too much of a risk that I might have to smile at someone. I reached forward to turn the ignition, planning to wave at Eli as I backed up, but then I realized the van's rear doors were still open. So I sighed and waited.

I was mentally reviewing my DVR list, trying to decide what to binge on while Eli was at work, when I noticed a young woman moving down the street toward me. She had a strange, mechanical walk: arms jammed against her sides, head locked in the "forward" position, not bothering to account for anything in her peripheral vision. Next to me, Shadow tensed, her eyes fixed on the girl.

I leaned forward, reaching under my seat for my handheld Taser. Don't leave home without it, that was my motto, although the girl didn't exactly look like a threat: she was younger than me, dressed in a Cal State Long Beach T-shirt and jeans that had been artistically shredded at the knees. As she approached me I could see that her expression was unnaturally blank, her eyes empty and unfocused. And that one of her hands was clenched in a fist.

With a little effort I extended my normal radius, the sphere of nonmagical space that emits from me, an extra ten feet so it would encompass the girl. I could feel Eli and Shadow, but the girl wasn't registering any kind of signal, which meant she was human. Shadow must have smelled this at the same time, because her body seemed to relax, her clubbed tail giving me a reassuring thump.

Human or not, I did feel the tiniest little zing, like when a witch tries to use a spell against me. Witch spells usually flare out in my radius, sort of like a June bug hitting one of those bug zappers. This felt more like a mosquito. I'd known enough vampires to recognize the sensation: this girl had had her mind pressed, which was our term for when a vampire compels someone magically. And I'd just undone it.

The girl's vacant expression cleared, and she looked around with confusion. Her forward momentum propelled her the rest of the way to my van door.

"What was I . . ." she mumbled, her brows furrowing.

I needed to help this along. "What do you have there?" I asked, pointing to her hand.

The young woman followed my gaze and raised the hand with the fist, looking at it curiously. She uncurled her fingers and revealed a folded scrap of paper. Shadow let out a sudden growl, trying to climb into my lap to protect me. It confused me for a second, until I registered that the folded paper was splotted with red, as though paint had been sponged on it. Or as though a bloodstained hand had written the note.

"Shadow, sit," I ordered, pointing at the passenger seat. She didn't like it, but she lowered her haunches until they *almost* touched the car's seat. "You must have brushed against that painting back there," I told the wide-eyed girl, nodding over her shoulder at an imaginary artist. "I thought it looked like it might still be wet."

It was flimsy as hell, but the girl's shoulders relaxed a little. Human brains just love having "rational" explanations to cling to, even if they border on ridiculous. Without turning away from her I leaned my body to dig into the small packet of baby wipes I keep between the seats of my van.

She read the name on the outside of the folded note. "Scarlett Bernard." She looked up at me, her face a mask of bewilderment. "Are you Scarlett Bernard?"

"I hope so; I'm wearing her underwear," I replied. The girl's expression didn't change. Tough crowd. "That's me," I confirmed. She held out the note, and I held out a wipe. "For your hands."

We traded, and I unfolded the note quickly, knowing she was about to ask a lot of questions. There was an address scrawled at the top, 2310 Scarff. In block letters below it, the writer had added, DON'T TELL ANYONE. EVEN ELI.

I had already opened my mouth to ask where the note came from when I saw the extra scribble at the very bottom of the paper, done in desperate, hurried cursive: *please Scar*. I snapped my mouth shut. I knew that handwriting.

Molly.