

# Love, Lies, and Hocus Pocus

## Episode 1: Hell Hath No Fury

by Lydia Sherrer

### **CHAPTER 1: ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY BURGERS**

Lily Singer wished she could simply say her date was going badly and leave it at that. But such a gross understatement was against her nature. To be accurate, she would have to admit it was in the top five worst, if not in the top three. This wasn't totally unexpected. Most—actually, all—of her dates were men she'd met online who, inevitably, weren't as cute as their profile pictures suggested. Awkward and bookish, she found it much easier to start virtual, as opposed to real, conversations. Speed dating and blind dates were out of the question due to her abysmal social skills. Well, that, and the fact that she was a wizard.

No, not a witch. A wizard.

“Soo...when you said you had diet restrictions, what you meant was you could only eat burgers?” Lily asked, trying to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. Though she suspected the only

way her date would notice sarcasm was if it was dressed up like a cheeseburger.

“Huh?” Jerry Slate, a good hundred pounds larger and ten years older than his profile picture, looked up from his second burger to stare, confused, at her face.

“When we were setting up the date, you asked if you could pick the restaurant because you said you had diet restrictions,” Lily reminded him.

“Oh, yeah. I have a sensitive stomach. I can only eat 100% pure beef burgers, and they have to be grass-fed. Free-range, you know? None of that GMO stuff. This place uses the best ingredients out there.”

Lily resisted the urge to roll her eyes, consoling herself with the thought that it was better to be taken to a gourmet, environmentally friendly burger restaurant than, heaven forbid, a *normal* burger restaurant.

Looking to the side, she gazed longingly through the restaurant's front windows to the sunlit street, busy with lunchtime traffic. If only she knew how to teleport, she could escape this awkward situation with minimal embarrassment.

“So...” she tried again. “How’s your gaming campaign going?”

“Oh, it’s fantastic,” Jerry enthused past a mouthful of half-chewed but—let’s not forget—grass-fed burger. Not slowing his consumption of burger, fries, and a hand-made root-beer float, he launched into a detailed description of his gaming group’s latest campaign against...someone. Lily couldn’t remember who.

It was a topic she could safely rely on to keep him talking for a good while, though it bored her almost to tears. Boredom was preferable, however, to the awkward silence interspersed

with chewing sounds she'd suffered through for the first half of their date.

Funny, she'd thought that, in person, Jerry would be more inquisitive. That was before she'd been aware of his burger obsession. As she absentmindedly separated the carrot coins from the rest of her salad and stacked them into a tiny, walled fortress between her and her droning date, she realized he hadn't asked her a single question beyond the perfunctory "How are you?" since they'd met outside some twenty minutes before. From the time they'd entered the restaurant, his entire attention had been devoted to ordering and eating, though he had, at least, disengaged a few brain cells long enough to inform her of the best items on the menu.

Come to think of it, he hadn't been very inquisitive online either. But Lily was good at asking questions through virtual chat. It was like doing research in a search engine. Type in a question, then browse through the resultant dump of information to find your answer.

When asked a question, especially if said question had anything to do with himself, Jerry was obligingly verbose. He went into great detail, as long as that detail involved the hundred different titles in his grunge rock music collection, or his daring feats in the latest sneak attack against his group's unsuspecting, now-no-longer allies.

It wasn't as if she'd had soaring expectations. She'd just hoped for some intelligent conversation about, oh, say books. Or history. Or philosophy. Or anything that mattered, really.

Some people improved upon face-to-face acquaintance. Jerry was not one of them. Neither was she, come to think of it. But she, at least, didn't bore anyone with loving descriptions of each book in her expansive personal library unless she knew, for a fact, that the person was a bibliophile.

Hands nervously smoothing down the dark fabric of her pencil skirt, she cast about desperately for an excuse to prematurely end the date. She intended to block Jerry Slate from her dating profile as soon as she got home.

Ignoring the gaming babble coming from the other side of the table, Lily concentrated on the fork she held in her hand as an idea came to her. She whispered the words for a simple heat transference spell, her other hand wrapped around the power-anchor amulet she wore tied to her wrist like a bracelet. Her body heat began to seep into the piece of metal, making it grow warm as she grew cooler. When she judged it was sufficiently hot, she made a startled gesture, dropping it dramatically onto the table as she jerked back in her chair.

“Ouch!” she yelped.

“Huh?” Jerry said, stopping mid-sentence. It seemed to be his favorite word, along with *oh*.

“I wasn’t paying attention and tried to pick up my fork. It’s really hot. It burned my hand. They must have just washed it in one of those industrial washers.”

Jerry reached forward to touch the fork experimentally, hand stopping short as he felt the heat emanating from the offending utensil.

“Gosh, that *is* hot. Are you okay? You don’t look so good.” Jerry’s brow furrowed in confusion. Not even *he* was absentminded enough to miss the fact that their silverware had been sitting, quite cool and harmless, for a good fifteen minutes since they’d gotten there.

Lily made a show of feeling her forehead, hoping to redirect his attention. “I feel all clammy. I should probably go home. I could be getting sick. Thanks so much for the food!”

With a touch of guilt, she fled the restaurant, not looking back. If she had, she would have felt better. Jerry's momentarily stunned face quickly smoothed over as he noticed the untouched burger at her place and, not wanting to waste food, began demolishing it as well.

The warm summer air felt good on her face as Lily drove her Honda Civic down Ponce De Leon Avenue, heading back to Agnes Scott College campus. Her soft, chestnut brown hair frizzed in the humidity, despite being pulled back into a severe bun. At least it wasn't whipping around her face and getting stuck in her glasses, as it would've been had she worn it down.

Verdant foliage and colorful flowers crowded around the sidewalks, businesses, and houses lining the street. The abundant plant life was one of the things Lily loved most about Atlanta. It made the place feel less like a big city and more like a well-tended neighborhood. Plus, it reminded her of home in the Alabama backwaters.

Pulling into the college's employee parking lot, Lily gathered her things and headed across campus toward McCain Library. Though it was Saturday, she preferred to bury herself in paperwork rather than go home and risk the urge to mope about. The tall ceilings, Gothic architecture, and quiet atmosphere of the library would calm her in a way no amount of tea or chocolate could. And, of course, there was the comforting smell of books.

Lily passed a few groups of girls relaxing or studying on the green—it was a women's college, and non-employee males were discouraged from coming on campus. On this sunny day, the blue sky and warm grass lured most students outside to study, so she saw only a few scattered girls working quietly in the library's reading hall as she made her way to her office.

Her office was a spacious room on the ground floor, with a high ceiling and expansive windows that looked out onto the green. Tall bookshelves covered most of the other three walls, and a large, mahogany desk dominated the center of the room.

With a sigh, she dropped her purse onto one of the two visitor's chairs—both currently pushed up against her bookshelves as stepladders—and sat down at her desk. The desk's dark wood surface was polished to a shine, and each item on it was arranged neatly. Her computer, pencil holder, and file organizer were placed just so, cleaned spotless, and free of dust. Her shiny, brass nameplate was centered and aligned perfectly parallel to the edge of her desk. It read:

Lillian Singer: Administrative Coordinator/Archives Manager

It was a prestigious position for Lily's relatively young twenty-five years of age. But the fact that the previous Archives Manager, Madam Barrington, had taken Lily under her wing and personally groomed her for the job had made Lily the obvious choice when Madam Barrington retired a year ago. Beyond the Madam's endorsement, however, Lily had been well prepared for the job. With four years of undergraduate work-study in the stacks, not to mention two years as head librarian after graduation, her B.A. in History and minor in Classics were just icing on the cake.

Of course, Lily's love of books, organized nature, and library work-study experience weren't the only reasons behind Madam Barrington's choice. The real reason was she'd needed someone to take over as curator of the "Basement"—a secret archive beneath the McCain Library containing a private collection of occult books on magic, wizardry, and arcane science. Being a wizard herself, Madam Barrington had recognized Lily's innate ability soon after she'd

begun her freshman year. The older woman had considered it her duty to keep the then-young and inexperienced girl's insatiable curiosity from getting her killed. Madam Barrington had always been frustratingly vague about exactly *who* owned the books. Her job, and now Lily's, was to care for them, study them, and act as gatekeeper to their knowledge. Only once had Lily seen Madam Barrington allow access, and that was to a very old gentleman who'd arrived late one night and whispered something in the Madam's ear. When Lily had asked how she would know to let someone in, Madam Barrington had simply smiled her mysterious smile and said, "You'll know."

Lily's worries had faded over time, as not a single person had ever appeared requesting access in the year since she'd taken over. Though the Madam was tight-lipped on the subject, Lily got the impression there weren't many wizards left in the world. Of those who did still exist, only a select few knew of the Basement's whereabouts. That was fine with Lily, as the Basement was her own, personal heaven. Knowledge was the next best thing to life itself, and knowledge of the unknown and mysterious was something she'd craved ever since she could remember, long before she had found out she was a wizard and started learning the craft under Madam Barrington's tutelage.

That thirst got her into trouble on some occasions. But, just as often, it resulted in exciting discoveries which added to her already encyclopedic mind. Having all of Agnes Scott's stacks, archives, and considerable online research capability at her fingertips was a dream come true, not even counting the Basement.

Now, having settled into her leather desk chair in the sunlit office, Lily relished a moment

of glowing satisfaction as she surveyed her domain. Taking a deep breath, she let the disappointment and frustration of an abysmal date fade away, refocusing instead on all the good things in life. Books. Tea. Chocolate. Cats. More books. Who cared about men and dating when you had all that at your fingertips?

Speaking of men...

There was a flourishing knock on her office door and, without waiting for an answer, a tall, lanky man with mussed black hair came swaggering through. His untucked shirt and worn pants gave him a disheveled look, though he walked as if he wore the finest Italian suit in all the world. On a leather thong around his neck hung a triangular stone with a hole in the middle. She'd always wondered what it was but wasn't one to ask personal questions.

His grand entrance was marred slightly by the absence of her visitor chairs in front of her desk, which interrupted the smooth transition from swaggering in to lounging handsomely across one of them. Instead, he had to reverse direction and pull a chair over from a bookshelf before settling his lanky form into it.

Lily hid a smile, trying to look stern instead.

"Sebastian, how many times do I have to tell you, you're not supposed to be on campus. This is a *women's* college, and private property."

"Pish." Sebastian waved a hand unconcernedly. "If you're so worried about it, call security." His eyes were bright with mischief. As if to emphasize his complete lack of worry, he reached into his pocket and drew out that silly coin he was always playing with. He liked to roll it over his knuckles and perform other slights of hand, knowing it annoyed her when he showed

off.

Lily rolled her eyes. She knew that he knew that she wouldn't call security. At least, not until he'd annoyed her to the point of losing her temper, which wasn't often.

"And to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" Chin propped in the palm of her hand, Lily raised a skeptical eyebrow in his direction and did her best to ignore the coin. Unlike most men, he picked up on sarcasm like a child picked up candy: every time, and with great glee.

"Oh, you know. Just paying a social visit. It's been *far* too long, don't you think? How's the ol' biddy doing these days?"

Lily's eyes narrowed. Sebastian practically oozed casual nonchalance, which meant he was up to something.

"I'd like to hear you call her that to her face. And your great-aunt is just fine. The last time I visited her, she was enjoying a day in the garden."

"Still kicking, eh?" Sebastian snorted, twirling a bit of his black bangs around one finger. "Far be it for the great Madam Barrington to grow old and die like the rest of us."

Lily frowned. "That's quite disrespectful. You know very well that wizards tend to live longer than everyone else. If you're going to insult my mentor, at least have the decency to do it behind my back."

Sebastian laughed, making a dismissive gesture. "Lighten up, Lily. It was just a joke. She *did* disown me, after all. I'd say that at least gives me the right to make jokes about her."

Unlike his great-aunt, Sebastian Blackwell was a witch. No, not a wizard. A witch. The difference came from the source of their power: a wizard's was innate, cultivated through

discipline and study, channeled and shaped by will and word, often supplemented by the collection of arcane objects; a witch's was entirely acquired through the delicate art of give and take. Many beings—spirits, demons, and magical creatures—were happy to give aid or favors to the right person in exchange for the right thing. Others could be tricked, a few could be forced, and some were to be avoided altogether.

So, to drastically oversimplify, wizards were born, witches were made. Though Madam Barrington was always vague when it came to wizard culture, Lily at least knew that not all children of wizards were wizards themselves. It was genetic, like eye or hair color. The stronger the wizard and purer the blood, the better chance of passing on the gene, or whatever it was that enabled wizards to manipulate magic. So, being old, proper, and a traditionalist, Madam Barrington viewed witchcraft as disgraceful and lowly, not to mention dangerous. Only shameless fools with no true ability engaged in such activities. Sebastian's view was, since he couldn't be a wizard, he might as well be something. And anyway, he made a very good witch.

Lily happened to agree with Sebastian but never said so to her mentor. It took adept social skills, a clever nature, charisma, and force of will to live such a life and come out on top. She would make a dreadful witch, as evidenced by how terrible she was at interacting with anyone except the few friends—or annoying acquaintances in the case of Sebastian—with whom she was comfortable. The ease with which Sebastian glided around social situations made her quite jealous. He was everything she wasn't: handsome, confident, popular, and good at whatever he put his mind to, though he rarely put his mind to anything unless absolutely necessary. For, as it turned out, he was also lazy, untidy, undisciplined, and impatient. He would

have made a terrible wizard.

Putting a note of briskness in her voice—she *did* have paperwork to go through, after all—Lily fixed Sebastian with a stare and asked more firmly, “What do you want, Sebastian? I know you’re up to something.”

“Well it sounds terrible when you put it like that,” he said, grinning.

“Sebastian,” Lily said in a warning tone.

“Okay, okay. I’ll get to the point. You’re no fun.” Sebastian raised in his hands in surrender, muttering the last part, disgruntled.

“I have plenty of fun. It’s called reading books.”

“Uh-huh. Right.” Now it was Sebastian’s turn to roll his eyes. “Anyway, I need your... consulting services.”

“You mean you need my help?” Lily asked sweetly, the start of a smug grin pulling at her lips.

“No, I need you as a consultant, one professional to another.” Putting his coin away that he’d been playing with, he straightened in the chair, smiling and spreading his hands wide in a disarming gesture. It was obviously meant to reassure her, but she was not impressed.

“Wow. Professional? Since when are you a ‘professional’ witch?”

Sebastian adopted an indignant look. “Since a while. Can’t you just see it? Sebastian Blackwell: Professional Witch!” he said dramatically, lifting his arm to paint an imaginary sign in the air. “I have business cards and everything.” His hand dove into the back pocket of his jeans and produced a rather bent card, which he flipped onto her desk with a flick of his wrist.

“Fascinating,” Lily commented, voice fairly dripping with amused sarcasm as she examined the card. The front showed a headshot of Sebastian—handsome without trying, as usual—beside his name and contact details printed in an overly curly font. The back had a stylized monogram in purple and gold.

“And what services do you offer as a ‘professional’ witch?” she asked, fighting the urge to laugh.

“Oh, casting out evil spirits, contacting loved ones who’ve passed on, consulting the fates, various potions. You know, the normal stuff superstitious rich people believe in.”

“Charlatanry, you mean?” Lily asked, eyebrow raised again.

“Hey! I *can* actually do most of the stuff people ask for. When they want something impossible, like talking to dead people or getting love potions, I make something up to keep them happy. Ignorance is bliss and all that. No harm done.”

Lily gave him a hard stare over her glasses. She hated that saying. Ignorance was one of the least blissful things in the world, in her opinion. But she reminded herself that Sebastian wasn’t her problem, and got back to the point. “So, what do you need my ‘consulting services’ for?”

“Well, I got hired for this job, see, and I’ve run across something more up your alley than mine.”

“Is that so?” Her tone remained disinterested. She’d been pulled into too many of his wild schemes not to be hesitant. Though, to be fair, she’d egged him on in many of those schemes, whenever there was knowledge to be had or a new spell to try. Curiosity often got the

better of her, and Sebastian knew it.

“Yes, it is so.”

“Explain.”

“I was hired to cast out this evil spirit, and it turns out the spirit isn’t evil. He’s actually a pretty nice guy. The real culprit is a spell put on the house almost a hundred years ago because of some jilted lover. The spirit has stayed behind to warn people away from the house ever since. So, even though he has, technically, been haunting the house, even if I get him to go away, that doesn’t fix the problem, and I won’t get my money.”

“Let me guess: you need me to come figure out what the spell is and get rid of it, right?”

“A very astute conclusion! I’ll give you an award later.” Sebastian gave her a lazy smile and a wink.

Lily was not amused. “You know, you really shouldn’t insult the person you’re asking help from,” she said, giving him a level stare. “And I still haven’t heard any compelling reason why I should help you.”

“Ah, yes, well.” Sebastian backpedaled a bit. Lily knew his good looks and charming ways usually got him what he needed, so she took delight in giving him as much trouble as possible. A very small part of her liked to watch him squirm. Well, maybe not so small a part. “Besides helpi—I mean consulting for the sake of our professional friendship, there’s a collection of occult books in the house, which the owner has agreed to give me as part of the payment. I would, of course, hand them over to you, should you provide the aforementioned consultation...thingy.”

Despite her better judgment, Lily's interest was piqued. New books did that to her. She could never resist learning new things. And if these were genuine books on magic, not silly mumbo jumbo written by someone who *thought* they were a wizard, they could be valuable indeed. She was always looking to add to the Basement's collection, not to mention expand her personal library.

Still mulling over the possibility of new books, she caught sight of Sebastian's smug smile. She frowned. It annoyed her to be so predictable, but sometimes it couldn't be helped. Sebastian knew her well enough to guess what was going on in her head. He knew that as soon as he mentioned books, he'd already won.

After a few more moments of silence, just to make him sweat, Lily finally nodded. "Alright, I'll help. And wipe that smug grin off your face, Mr. Blackwell. Those books had better be the real thing, or I'll have a word with your great-aunt about all this 'Professional Witch' nonsense."

Sebastian paled slightly at her threat but tried to cover it with a shrug and a laugh. "As if the old bat could disdain my existence any more than she already does."

"If I were you, I'd be more worried about what *else* she might do besides disdain it. Now, when can we look at this house? I'm not going to shuffle around my work schedule for you."

"Why not now?" Sebastian asked, rising and bowing smoothly, arm outstretched towards the door.

"Hmm...where is it?" Lily asked, considering.

"South of here, past Fort Benning. It's on the Chattahoochee River, a bit north of Eufaula,

Alabama, before the river runs into the reservoir. About a two-and-a-half hour drive. If we leave now, we can spend a few hours poking around the house and have you back home by dinnertime.”

Lily glanced at her watch. It was one o’clock. Her failed date with Jerry felt like years ago already, though it had only been an hour. Despite herself, the prospect of an unknown, malignant spell—and new books to explore—was too tempting to delay.

“Alright, let’s do it,” she said, standing up from her desk and moving to collect her purse. “You’ll have to meet me at my apartment first, though. I need to change and get a few supplies.” She was still wearing the pretty blue blouse, dark pencil skirt, and high heels she’d donned for her date.

“Sure thing, Lil.” Sebastian tipped an imaginary hat and started for the door.

“How many times do I have to tell you—” Lily began, exasperated. But he was already out the door and down the hall. “—don’t call me that,” she finished in a subdued tone. Sighing, she gathered her things and followed him out, locking her office behind her.