

Love, Lies, and Hocus Pocus

Episode 1: Hell Hath No Fury

by Lydia Sherrer

CHAPTER 2: A CRAZY RED-HEAD

The house was gorgeous. Set back in the woods away from the road, its long gravel drive was lined by old, gnarled southern live oaks, some drooping with spanish moss. Beams of sunlight broke through the foliage here and there, making patterns of gold on the cool, green ground.

Sebastian pulled his car up around the gravel circle in front of the house, stopping in front of the porch steps and turning off the engine. Lily didn't get out right away, but sat for a moment, taking in the scene and listening to the engine tick quietly as it cooled.

With two stories and a full attic, the house itself was large. An impressively columned portico spanned the front and sides. In front, the columns rose, uninterrupted, all the way to the roof, while the floor-to-ceiling, second story windows opened out like doors onto a small

balcony set back under the porch overhang. This little walkway ran the width of the front and joined a full balcony lining either side of the house. Lily could almost picture young ladies in antebellum dresses standing on that balcony, waving goodbye to their sweethearts as the men were leaving a late-night ball.

She was surprised at how neglected everything looked. The house wasn't falling down by any means, but clearly no one had lived there for years. The paint was faded and chipped in places. Odd bits of wooden railing surrounding the second story porch had broken off or were sagging. The grounds were overgrown and wild; grass grew up through the gravel of the driveway, showing how rarely anyone drove over it. The windows were cloudy with years of dust, and dead leaves dotted the front porch and steps.

To Lily, the neglect added to the house's air of mystery. She couldn't wait to explore. What secrets might be hidden inside?

"Come on, let's take a look," she said, unbuckling her seatbelt and opening the car door.

Sebastian joined her on the overgrown gravel, and they both stared up at the house: Lily with bright-eyed curiosity, Sebastian with a bored expression, as if he'd seen it all before. Which, of course, he had.

They climbed the steps onto the porch, old wood creaking beneath their feet as they approached the front door. Sebastian pulled out a large, ornate key from his pocket.

Lily's eyebrow rose in question.

"The owner gave it to me so I could come and go as needed to cast out the 'evil spirit,' " Sebastian explained, adding air quotes to show his opinion of the man's ignorance. "He hates the

place. Wouldn't even come inside to show me around. Just handed me the key and made some excuse about a meeting before he took off."

Lily grinned. "Aw, you poor thing. He didn't stick around for you to show off to? What a shame."

Sebastian only harrumphed in reply, turning to unlock the grand front doors while muttering to himself. Lily caught words like "unprofessional" and "serious business transaction" from where she stood behind him.

Double doors unlocked, Sebastian pulled both wide open, letting in air and light to the grand front hall. The sight made Lily catch her breath. A large, open room stretched out before her, the space two stories high, its ceiling and walls encrusted with ornate, crown moulding. She entered hesitantly, feeling out of place in all the grandeur and treading lightly on the dusty, but smooth wooden floor. Looking up, she marveled at three crystal chandeliers, also covered in dust, hanging suspended above her. A grand staircase wound up and around the edge of the room, leading to the second story. Doors opened to her left and right, and through them she caught glimpses of parlor furniture covered in old sheets. At the far end of the great hall, another set of doors led to a dining room. A massive table filled the space, surrounded by over a dozen chairs, all draped in dust-covered sheets.

"This place is beautiful," Lily murmured, half to herself, half to Sebastian who stood behind her, hands in his pockets. "Why did they abandon it?"

"Feeling a bit chilly?" Sebastian asked, ignoring her question.

Now that he mentioned it, Lily became aware of a deep chill creeping over her. It wasn't

the normal cool of a shaded and well-ventilated summer home. It was the biting chill of a cold, empty house in winter. Her breath fogged the air in front of her and she shivered.

“Is that what I think it is?” she asked.

“That, m’dear, is the resident ghost, Francis Jackson.” Sebastian grinned, then called out to no one in particular, “Francis, old boy, come out and say hello to my friend, Lily Singer. Remember, I said I’d bring someone who could fix our little problem?”

The grand hall echoed with his voice, then silence fell. Lily noticed the birdsong and soft rustlings of summer outside now sounded hushed and distant.

A breath of icy air washed over her, and she jumped, looking around for its source. There, between her and Sebastian, a gray shape materialized. Though its edges were fuzzy and indistinct, like smoke, the shape was recognizable as a tall, handsome man in a dressing gown. He had a trim mustache and goatee, and looked to have been in his mid-forties when he died.

“Hello, Miss Singer. Welcome to my home,” the ghost said, voice as faint and wispy as he was. He gave a flourishing bow, reminding her so much of Sebastian she felt the momentary urge to giggle. Behind his gallantry, however, she could hear a note of deep sadness. She wondered how he’d died.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jackson,” Lily said, standing awkwardly. Should she curtsy? Bow?

The ghost of Francis Jackson waved his hand, dismissing her formality. “Please, call me Francis,” he said.

Lily nodded, not sure what else to say. Would it be rude to ask how he’d come to haunt

this house? She shivered again, involuntarily.

“Do excuse me, my lady. I forget sometimes how very...chilling my presence can be.”

Francis did something, and the room got warmer, though still not as warm as it ought to be.

Lily muttered a thanks, trying not to blush.

Sebastian saved her from the awkward moment by suggesting they all go sit down, so Francis could fill her in on the details of their “little problem.”

Francis led them to a side parlor, well lit by floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out onto the front and side porches. It was filled with several wing-backed chairs, various couches, some side tables, and even a piano in the corner. All were draped with dusty sheets, and one chaise lounge already had a Sebastian-sized indent in it. Obviously this wasn’t the first time he’d been here “chatting” with Francis.

The two humans settled onto pieces of furniture. Lily eased gingerly onto a wing-back, trying to disturb the antique chair as little as possible, while Sebastian flung himself across the already-dented chaise lounge as if he owned it. Lily glared disapprovingly in his direction, but he ignored her.

Francis, too, sat in a wing-backed chair, though part of his insubstantial body sunk beneath the sheet draped across it, so all they could see were from the knees down and the chest up. The ghost glanced longingly to one side, at the end table beside his chair. Lily wondered if it had held his pipe or snuff box in years past.

“I was born in the late 1800s and raised in this house,” Francis began in his wispy voice. “My father was a wealthy businessman, and built it for his wife, who came from rich plantation-

stock and was used to such grandeur. I grew up rather spoiled, I'm sorry to say, and in my younger years I was quite the ladies' man. My parents threw balls and parties almost every week, and at each one I'd woo another girl. But one night, I met a ravishing young lady named Annabelle Witherspoon. She was the picture of fiery passion, with long red curls and luscious lips. I was enamored at once, and employed every gentlemanly and romantic gesture to gain her good graces. We fell deeply in love, and I proposed to her soon after. It was rash of me, I know, but I was young and drunk on love.

"Sadly, the naive perfection was not to last. I had proposed heedlessly, and ignored many warning signs. Annabelle was witty, quick to laugh, and kind-hearted in her own way, yet exceedingly vague about her family and past. It was only later, after severe disapproval from my parents prompted an investigation into her background, that I discovered the ruin of her family name and the loss of their fortune several years before. In addition, she displayed frightening mood swings, as sweet as a buttercup in spring one moment, then cross and unpleasant a spoiled child the next.

"I ignored these episodes, passing them off as isolated outbursts, perfectly normal in one as fiery and passionate as her. But when I confronted her about her family, the mood-swings increased. Strange things started to happen when she was in one of her moods. Small trinkets flew across the room toward me of their own accord, as if she'd thrown them, but not by her own hand. Objects which weren't there before appeared underfoot, tripping me. Doors with no keys locked, holding me prisoner to her whims.

"Finally, my parents put their foot down and insisted I break off the engagement. They'd

let no such unruly, red-headed waif into their household, they declared. I still loved her, but I was nothing without my parents' fortune to fund my lavish lifestyle, and feared they would cut me off should I stand beside her. I tried to put her away quietly, and asked, rather ashamedly, for the return of the ring I'd given her, as it was my grandmother's."

Francis' wispy voice grew even more quiet as he recounted the painful event. "As I had feared, she flew into a rage, calling me ghastly names which, on reflection, I admit I fully deserved. Yet, having been jilted by her one true love, and with no recourse, she relented, declaring I would regret my faithless cowardice. She began throwing things at me—anything in the room she could lift—and shouted words I didn't understand, perhaps from some ancient language, yelling as one crazed that I and my house would be cursed forevermore. Then she fled, sobbing, and I never saw her again.

"Though shaken and ashamed, I diverted my attention to other women and fine wine, eventually finding a respectable girl of good family and fortune to please my parents. We were wed and my unfortunate past seemed forgotten. But alas, happiness was not to be mine. Slowly, imperceptibly, a pall crept over the house. It drove my parents to depression and sickness. My father was constantly distracted, making poor business decisions and endangering the family fortune. My wife grew cold and distant, and we fought often. An air of misfortune seemed to hang over us. I drowned my sorrows in the bottle, knowing, somehow, that I was to blame, and wondering what Annabelle had done to us. Sometimes, I even wondered if she'd been a witch."

Sebastian snorted at that, looking affronted. But Francis didn't seem to notice, just continued his story.

“My wife died in childbirth, along with the baby. I died several years later, alone and in my sleep, of too much drink and a broken heart. They found me, cold and stiff the next morning. I’m not exactly sure how, but part of me stayed behind. I suppose guilt prompted my spirit to remain, held back by unrighted wrongs. I watched from the shadows as my parents died and the house was sold off to cover their debts. The next family fared no better, strife and disaster tearing them apart. The next as well, and so it went over the years. I had no notion of how to prevent these misfortunes from befalling, so I did the only thing I could think of: cause enough mischief to drive the poor fools from the house.

“So here I am today, keeping watch over an empty, cursed house. My one achievement, not even in life but in death, has been to convince the owners their house is haunted, so no one has lived here for years. I even get to scare away the occasional foolhardy boy bent on vandalism. The owners are desperate to sell, but no one will buy. Which is why, of course, they hired young Sebastian here, to ‘cast me out.’ But once I explained the situation to him, he quite agreed my absence wouldn’t solve the problem. He was confident, however, that *you* would know how to proceed, and how to lift this dreadful curse.”

Francis fell silent, staring intently at her, a flicker of hope on his sad, gray face.

Lily thought for a moment, considering the situation. She felt much pity, both for the mournful Francis, punished a hundred-fold for his foolishness, and for the fiery Annabelle, a young girl with a broken heart.

“Annabelle sounds like she was...um...quite a woman,” Lily said, trying to offer some sort of comfort to the gloomy ghost.

“Yes,” he agreed, sighing, “indeed she was. And yet, hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

“Tell me about it,” Sebastian muttered. “She must not have been familiar with the concept of overkill. That kind of overreaction reminds me of dear Aunt Barrington’s choice words when she disowned me for being a witch. Though at least the old biddy didn’t curse me. Anyway, *can* you help, Lil?”

Lily turned her head sharply, giving him a pointed glare.

He rolled his eyes, not at all contrite, but giving in for the sake of her cooperation.

“Alright, fine. Can you help, *Lily*?”

She pursed her lips, maintaining a severe expression. But Sebastian was unmoved, and she eventually relented, curious about the spell but not wanting to admit it. Apart from Madam Barrington’s, she’d never gotten to examine another wizard’s spells before. She didn’t even know any wizards besides her mentor. Focusing on her wizarding studies had kept her busy since graduation, but this could be the perfect reason to finally start on the research she’d always longed to do: searching for her family.

Growing up, her mother had never breathed a word about their family or past, and got upset whenever Lily had tried to ask, something Lily resented. All she knew was her mother had re-married when Lily herself was three. As a child, Lily had always felt different from her step-siblings, but didn’t know why. The moment she’d turned eighteen, she’d left, sick the backwater farm life of her childhood, and moved to Atlanta to go to college. It wasn’t until she’d been taken in by Madam Barrington that she’d finally found a name to put to her sense of difference:

wizard.

Yet even Madam Barrington was tightlipped on the subject of wizarding families, always advising Lily to keep to herself. According to her, no good would come from Lily seeking out her own kind. She claimed it was because wizards were less likely to clash and cause trouble among themselves, and others, if they lived alone, or at most, with a mentor or student. “As troublesome as a house full of wizards” was a common phrase of hers. But to Lily, her past was everything. She wanted to know where she came from, wanted to know her heritage. She felt like her mother had stolen it from her, and she wanted it back. Maybe if she recovered her past, she could figure out what kind of person she was supposed to be. If Annabelle had been a wizard, it was a place to start, a family tree to research.

Lily nodded to Francis, giving him a reassuring smile. “I can take a look and see what kind of spell has been cast. Depending on what it is, I may be able to dispel it. But I’m not making any promises. Spells can be as unique as those who cast them, and you often need insight into the caster to undo their work,” she said, quoting her mentor. “Counter spells are much easier; they only need to react to the target spell’s effect. Reversing a spell, on the other hand, requires knowledge of how, and why, it was cast.”

“Well, that’s enough mumbo jumbo to last me a month,” Sebastian said, jumping to his feet. “But I assume it all means you have a plan. Where do we start?”

Lily had Sebastian bring in her bag from the car while she talked to Francis, asking him questions about the night of his breakup with Annabelle.

When Sebastian returned with her things, Francis floated behind her into the great hall so

they could keep talking while she made preparations. First, she laid out a miniature brazier filled with sage and lit it. The herb itself had no magical qualities, but the smell was pleasant and calming. It helped her focus, which was essential for the kind of magic she was about to do. She laid a small cushion on the bare, wood floor to sit on, then had Sebastian stand right behind it, warning him sharply to be still and quiet. For once, he didn't joke around. He knew well the dangers of wizardry, and wasn't foolish enough to treat it lightly.

Lastly, she took a stick of charcoal and drew a circle around them both. Again, the charcoal was not magical, it merely served as a physical marker to aid her concentration. She could cast a shield circle without it, but saw no point in taking risks simply to impress an audience. Risks were for desperate situations. This, in contrast, was research.

Settling down on her cushion, she withdrew a small, clay tablet from her bag, and laid it on the floor in front of her. It was imbued with runes of power and would serve as an anchor for the shield spell, enabling her to form the magic into a set shape and affix it to something, after which she could release it to do its job while she cast other spells.

Lily took several slow, deep breaths, inhaling the sage. Her fingers curled tightly around the amulet that normally dangled from her wrist. It, also, was marked with runes of power, serving as a focus and amplifier to help her cast more precise and powerful magic. She cleared her mind, then reached inside herself and tapped the Source, the place from which all magic came. Being a wizard meant being born with an innate connection to this power, and the ability to draw on it at will—after much training, of course. For the Source was not sentient, only raw power. And raw power directed without skill or discipline could cause more damage than good.

Having power and knowing how to use it were not the same thing, after all.

Magical power drawn from the Source had to be shaped and directed by the caster's will, with the aid of words of power—an ancient language called Enkinim, derived from, or perhaps parent to, Sumerian. Passed down over the centuries, it shaped the parameters of each spell, both activating, and limiting, their effect. Though many set spells existed, the power of the Source was, in theory, limited only by the willpower and knowledge of the caster. The stronger a wizard's will, the more adroit his mind, and the better his understanding of Enkinim, the more he could do with magic. A wizard could also use dimmu, the written form of Enkinim, to make runes, imbuing objects with magic.

Now fully connected—in communion, as it were—with the Source, Lily spoke words of power, visualizing a shield which would block the effects of any spell she might trigger as she probed the curse cast by Annabelle. Magic flowed out of her, following the blueprint in her mind as her will shaped it to form an invisible bubble. This she anchored to the clay tablet, commanding the permanent parameters of the spell as she broke it off from the Source's flow and let it sink into the runes on the tablet. Now the tablet held the shield, and she could turn her mind to other things.

She took several more deep breaths of sage before expanding her awareness over the whole house, searching for signs of magic. She didn't have to look far: it was everywhere. She hadn't noticed it when she'd first entered the house because of how subtle it was, sunk into every board, nail, and stone around her. This was no flashy, instant-effect spell. Its aura was so imperceptible, you'd never notice it unless you knew what to look for. Its effect did not take

place in days, or even weeks, but was a slow-moving poison that took months to seep in. The spell appeared in her mind as a dark, viscous mist seeping out of every pore of the house's ancient frame. It was the work of a hundred-year-old curse, oozing sadness, depression, spite, jealousy, despair, madness, and every imaginable thing opposite to happiness and peace.

What power, force of will, and intuitively creative mind Annabelle must have had to create such a long-lasting and complex spell. It had to have an anchor somewhere, a physical object she'd attached the spell to. But it could be anything; runes could be made on the fly and concealed from the human eye. An individual could be protected from the curse's influence by magical shielding, but the only way to get rid of it for good would be to destroy the anchor. Even then, such an act would only eliminate the source of this viscous mist. For all she knew, once the anchor was gone, the mist would take years, perhaps decades, to fade. Maybe it never would. She had to find a way to *unmake* the curse. It needed to be reversed, not just broken.

Lily drew back into herself, having found what she was looking for. She spent a few moments just breathing, relaxing her will, resting her mind. Controlling magic took effort, and could be fatiguing, depending on the complexity, duration, and power of the spell. Then there was the giddy high that came with using magic. It was a heady feeling, and took skill to manage without becoming distracted or filled with foolish, overconfident thoughts. She'd read about wizards who'd stayed in constant contact with the Source. Eventually, it drove them mad, or else some botched spell ended them forever. Only a few, exceedingly powerful wizards from ancient legend, figures such as Belshazzar, Jannes, or Nimrod himself, would have been able to bear permanent communion with the Source. Wizards of that caliber hadn't existed for thousands of

years. The Source was a power to be tapped in need. Like any stimulant, too much could be a bad thing.

Finally, she stood up, unfolding herself from her position on the pillow. Sebastian looked at her quizzically and Francis hovered, hopeful.

“Find anything?” they asked in unison.

“More than I expected,” she replied, bending to extinguish the sage and pack up her brazier. At the same time, she scooped up the clay tablet and pressed it into Sebastian’s hand.

“Keep this on you,” she said. “It has a five foot radius, and will shield you from any harmful effects of the curse while you’re in the house. The enchantment will only last a few weeks before it starts to fade, but we should have things well in hand by then.”

“Will do,” he said, examining the tablet, curiously. “What about you though?”

Lily gave him a mysterious smile. “Really Sebastian? I’m a wizard. I have my ways.”

Sebastian shrugged and put the tablet in his pocket. “So, kemosabe, what’s our next move?” he asked.

Her smile turned distinctly mischievous as she replied. “We, Mr. Professional Witch, are going to pay a visit to Madam Barrington.”

Sebastian groaned.