

# Love, Lies, and Hocus Pocus: Allies

The Lily Singer Adventures Book 3  
by Lydia Sherrer

## DRAFT SAMPLE

What kind of music do cats like? Under normal circumstances, this would be a difficult question to answer—one which scientists and cat experts have, no doubt, puzzled over for decades. Lily Singer, on the other hand, didn't have to puzzle. In fact, she didn't even have to ask. She was informed, loudly and unequivocally, that cats prefer jazz, specifically ragtime. This was the obvious answer, she was told, because country was too whiney, rock too angry, pop too undignified, and classical too boring—though it was an acceptable substitute. The expert in question? Sir Edgar Allan Kipling, magical talking cat extraordinaire. What, exactly, made Sir Kipling an expert on cats' taste in music Lily had no idea, but she'd learned it was best not to argue with one's cat. At least, not if you disliked losing.

So it was that she spent the first half hour of their drive shuffling through radio stations until she found one which met Sir Kipling's exacting tastes. How he even knew about jazz, or

ragtime for that matter, was a mystery to her. Up until several weeks ago, he'd been a normal cat. At least, as normal as a wizard's cat could be. For Lily Singer was not just the archives manager of Agnes Scott—a private women's college in Atlanta, Georgia—she was also a wizard. And being a wizard meant odd things often happened. In Sir Kipling's case, a mysterious entity had gifted him with the ability to understand, and be understood by, his mistress...

[SPOILERS REMOVED. Bear with me. I removed the page recap of Books 1 and 2 so people wouldn't have those ruined for them if they haven't read them yet!]

...There was only one possible ally that Madam Barrington knew of, a person she would take Lily to meet herself, when the time was right. But first, she insisted Lily go visit her family. It was, in fact, the reason for her current road trip with her musically opinionated cat. They were on their way to Bertha, Alabama, to see her family for the first time in seven years.

It wasn't that Lily didn't love her stepfather and stepsiblings. She was just so...different. She didn't fit into their country way life. They were perfectly content to drive tractors, raise crops, and enjoy the simple but rigorous life of Alabama farmers. Lily, on the other hand, disliked working outside. Knowledge was her milk and honey, and all she'd ever wanted was to read, study, and be left alone. Growing up on a small peanut and cotton farm with four younger siblings to take care of didn't afford much alone time. She'd been happy to leave, and was apprehensive about returning.

Even so, she missed her family more deeply than she cared to admit and was worried how they would react to her visit. What if they wouldn't forgive her long absence? How was she going to explain about wizards and magic? Should she even try? What if they thought she was

abnormal? What if they rejected who she'd become? These doubts, and more, were why she'd never come home. It was easier to keep her distance and bury her loneliness than deal with the possibility of rejection.

"You know," came a silky meow to her right, "you really should stop worrying. It only makes you cranky." Sir Kipling twitched his whiskers, not lifting his head from where he lay curled up in the passenger seat.

"How in the world would you know if I'm worrying?" Lily asked, annoyed.

"You smell different."

"I smell—" Lily stopped herself, and sighed. She should know by now not to try and fathom her cat's maddening ability to know far more than he ought. He claimed it was all part of being a cat, which was hogwash in her opinion. She was sure the entity who'd given him human-like intelligence had given him far more than that, but so far Sir Kipling was playing dumb. So Lily simply grumbled about his "cat magic," and left it at that.

Silence returned to the car. Lily had turned off the radio to give herself room to think—that is, worry—and she stared unfocused at the road ahead. The passing scenery, a mix of coniferous woodland and verdant peanut and cotton fields, offered no comfort. It was only a three and a half hour drive from Atlanta to Bertha, and they were approaching the end of the journey. As familiar landmarks became more frequent, her apprehension and discomfort grew, exacerbated by Sir Kipling's exaggerated sniffs and whisker twitches.

In no time they were passing Eufaula. The sight of it recalled vivid memories of her and Sebastian's "virtuous" break-in of the Shorter Mansion museum during their attempt to undo the Jackson family curse. And, of course, of Sebastian's theatrical "escape" kiss. It had been suspiciously enthusiastic for being only a ploy to throw off the security guard. At the time she'd

put it down to his generally over-the-top nature, but ever since he'd helped save her from her father's clutches, she'd wondered. Of course, it wasn't the kiss itself that made her blush now as they drove past the quiet Alabama city. It was the memory of how it had made her feel. Feelings she had promptly, and appropriately, quashed.

"You should have asked him to come with us." Sir Kipling commented, once again out of the blue.

Lily kept her eyes fixed on the road, contemplating the possibility that her cat could read minds. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh please. Don't insult me," Sir Kipling drawled. "Your body temperature just shot through the roof and you're blushing. You're thinking about Sebastian." It was not a question.

"That's ridiculous," Lily protested, trying to sound casual. "I could be thinking about any manner of embarrassing things."

"You could be," Sir Kipling admitted. "But you're not, because you also smell—"

"Alright fine!" Lily interrupted, having no desire to know what she smelled like when she was thinking about Sebastian. "So I was thinking about him. But only because I'm relieved he's not here. He would just make things worse. Imagine trying to keep him out of trouble *and* deal with my family at the same time. What a disaster."

"Mmm," Sir Kipling murmured noncommittally, obviously unconvinced. "Of course, his absence also conveniently lets you avoid confronting your feelings."

Lily looked away from the road long enough to glare at her cat. "Who elected you matchmaker? I'm dating Richard, for your information—"

"You mean that lawman who suspects you're lying about everything? At least Sebastian already knows you're a wizard."

Sir Kipling's comment earned him another glare as Lily's insides squirmed. "Sebastian is an uncouth reprobate with entirely too many secrets of his own. In any case, he's taken up with that witch, Tina. If you ask me, they deserve each other." Lily knew her words were harsh, but Sir Kipling's barb had stirred an uncharacteristic defensiveness in her.

"I see. So, since when does one coffee translate into 'dating'?" He asked, eyes still closed.

"Well, there would have been more," she pointed out, "but things got in the way." She'd only just recovered from her last fiasco when Agent Grant got back in touch, hoping to schedule another date. They'd settled on next Friday evening. Or at least she thought they had. She'd written it down on a slip of paper by the phone but hadn't been able to find it the last time she'd looked. She would look again when they got home. That is, if she survived the weekend with her family.

"If you say so," her cat said, dropping the matter, much to Lily's relief. Faced with the dubious task of navigating familial relationships, this was no time to face the complicated tangle of emotions that were her feelings for her troublemaking friend.

The sudden ringing of her phone was startling in the heavy silence, and she almost dropped it in her rush to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hi honey." Her mother's voice sent a comforting warmth through her tense shoulders, and she relaxed.

"Hello, Mother," Lily replied, lips lifting in an unconscious smile. Though her father's schemes had done plenty of harm, they'd had one unexpected benefit: reconciliation with her mother. It had been such a relief to finally make things right. She still felt a tinge of resentment,

but knew her mother had only hidden the truth to protect, not hurt her.

“How far away are you?” Freda asked. After staying with Madam Barrington for a week and visiting Lily every evening, she’d left Atlanta the night before to prepare the house, and the family, for her daughter’s visit.

Lily checked her map. “About thirty minutes or so.”

“Good. Supper’s in the oven and Tom and the others can’t wait to see you.”

At the mention of her stepfather’s name, Lily’s smile faltered. “Alright. I’ll be there soon.”

“I love you honey. Bye bye.”

“I—love you too. Goodbye.” The words caught in Lily’s throat, but she forced them out anyway. Unlike her mother—who wasn’t shy about speaking her mind—Lily had never been good at showing affection. The words felt clunky and alien on her tongue. She was almost embarrassed to let them escape her lips.

After recent events, however, she knew it was foolish to take anything for granted. She’d let resentment steal seven years from her relationship with the people she loved, and wasn’t planning on giving it any more.

If only she could figure out what to do with all those people now that she’d gotten them back.

The dirt road leading to her childhood home was just as bumpy as she remembered. No doubt it had been leveled and repacked at least once since she’d left, yet the typical ridges and washouts had simply reformed. It was like driving over a washboard. A mix of pine, maple, and oak trees lined one side of the drive, with a ripening field of peanuts on the other. All over, the

reddish sandy soil ubiquitous to the south peeked through sparse undergrowth, and a dust cloud of the stuff rose into the hot, August evening, marking their bone-shaking progress. Her teeth rattled as they drove along, a fitting counterpoint to the jitter of butterflies in her stomach. Not even the sight of Sir Kipling's alarmed expression as he gripped the seat with all ten claws could ease her nervous tension.

As they finally rounded the last bend, a two-story farmhouse came into view, its long-ago whitewashed walls now chipped and fading. Yet despite its aged appearance, there were signs of repair, newer boards and paint contrasting sharply with the original construction. There was even a new room built onto one end of the house—probably an additional bedroom. Lily noticed the front porch steps had finally been replaced, much to her mother's relief, she was sure. Broken down cars and one aged, rusting tractor populated the yard, each surrounded by a ring of weeds and tall grass. Growing up, her step-father, Tom, had always talked about repairing them. He probably still did, for that matter. Their working farm equipment was tucked into sheds behind the house, alongside the chicken coop and various other outbuildings her family used in their peanut and cotton farming.

As she pulled up to the house, parking beside her mother's dented car and her step-father's dust-covered pickup truck, the yard erupted with life forms. The first to reach the car were the family dogs, two mutts that barked and leapt in excitement, their claws making scratching sounds against the car door. Lily had only a moment to register Sir Kipling's reaction—back pressed to the seat and ears flattened against his skull—before her attention was pulled toward the crowd pouring out the front door. Her mother led the charge, with her step-siblings close behind and her stepfather bringing up the rear. In typical southern fashion they swarmed her as she opened the car door, pulling her out and enveloping her in one hug after another, all

exclaiming and talking over one another. Of her siblings there was Dru, the oldest and tallest, a more youthful version of his tanned and weathered father. Then came Sally, blond hair bleached almost white by the sun that she loved to work in. Third was Becca, only a year younger than Sally but as different from her as night was from day with dark brown hair and a fiery temperament to match her sister's easygoing one. Last was little Jamie. Or at least, he'd been little when she'd left seven years ago. Now he was a lanky, chestnut-haired young man of fifteen. Of her four siblings, he was her only half-sibling, the others being step-siblings—offspring from her stepfather's first marriage.

Surrounded by chaos, smiles, and voices, it felt for a moment like she'd never left. Despite their differences, her stepfamily was still her family—the only one she'd ever known. Amid the rush of loud and crushing goodwill, she belatedly recalled the defining mark their relationship: their good-natured disregard of her personal space. Ah well, one couldn't expect too much as an introvert in a family full of extroverts, and southerners to boot.

Yet as they surrounded her, pelting her with one question after another, she could tell by their sideways glances that all was not as idyllic as it seemed on the surface. That was when she finally noticed Jamie had not joined the throng. Before she'd left for college, he'd been as rambunctious as any eight-year-old boy, always in the thick of things. But now he hung back, solemn face unreadable as he stared at her with grey-blue eyes. There was something odd about him, a sort of presence she couldn't recall being there when he was a boy. She'd practically raised him, with Freda busy helping her stepfather on the farm. But he'd grown so much since then. He looked, and felt, like a completely different person.

Freda finally took control of the chaos, shooting off orders like a general deploying her troops and breaking Lily's concentration. She sent Dru to the car for Lily's bags, Sally to round

up the dogs—they were sniffing excitedly at Lily’s open car door, undeterred by the furious hissing coming from within—and the others inside to set the table for supper. Lily watched Jamie as he retreated, trying to figure out what was so different. But her mother distracted her as she began to pull her toward the house and the waiting food.

At a plaintive meow from inside the car, Lily came back to herself, regaining her head for the first time since the swirl of chaos had descended. “Really Mother, it’s alright, I remember how to get to the kitchen. I’ll be along in a moment,” she said, extracting herself from her mother’s hold and turning back to the car.

With the offending canines now safely tied to the front porch railing, Sir Kipling had ventured down from his perch on the passenger seat headrest where he’d taken refuge from their frenzied yapping. He looked distinctly ruffled. Though the fur along his back now lay flat, his fluffy tail still resembled a bottle brush. If cats could frown, he would have been. “While your confidence in my abilities of self preservation is refreshing, I would prefer, in the future, to be forewarned of threats upon my life,” he said in his most disapproving tone.

“I do apologize, it slipped my mind.” Lily tried only half-heartedly to hide her grin. She *was* sorry, it *had* slipped her mind, and she wasn’t one to laugh at another’s misfortune. That was Sebastian’s purview. Yet only a complete stick in the mud would pass up a chance to chuckle at the expense of her annoyingly smug cat.

Sir Kipling shot her an irritated look. “If you expect me to put up with these mongrels for two whole days, you had better be prepared to pay the price.”

“The price?” Lily asked with a raised eyebrow, the urge to smile still threatening to betray her.

“Salmon. Every day. For a week,” Sir Kipling said decisively.

“I see. Well, that depends on whether or not you behave yourself.”

He sniffed. “Behaving is for dogs.”

“Behaving is for troublemakers, like you. Now, are you going to walk to the house or shall I carry you?”

“Humph. I have my dignity,” he said, jumping down to the dusty ground and glaring in the direction of the two dogs, both of whom sat at quivering attention, eyes following his every move.

“You know, you could just stay in the house. They’re outside dogs.”

“And let them think they have the upper hand? Inconceivable. These are *dogs* we’re talking about. Besides, I’ll need to inspect things, get the lay of the land.”

“If you say so,” Lily said, giving up the fight with her facial muscles and letting a grin spread across her face. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” Closing her car door, she headed for the house, feeling in better spirits. At least she wasn’t the only one with problems.

Supper time at the Singer house was just as she remembered: loud, chaotic, and delicious. Her mother hadn’t been much of a cook before she remarried. Lily remembered living off grits, fried cabbage, and cold chicken for most of her early childhood. But once Freda had four new mouths to feed, all used to the delights of traditional southern cooking, she’d finally bit the bullet. With help from enough cookbooks to choke a herd of horses, she’d done what she always did when she put her mind to something: succeeded. Freda could now cook with the best of them, and had taught Lily to do the same. Admittedly, Lily’s cooking had become much more cosmopolitan since moving to Atlanta—unlike her mother, she preferred not to smother everything in grease and butter. Thus she was slightly overwhelmed by the abrupt return to all

things southern, with a dinner of pork chops, fried chicken, fried okra, collard greens, mashed potatoes, and corn pudding, topped off with a chess pie so sweet you could feel your insides crystallizing as you ate it.

During the meal she fielded question after question about her job, house, love interests—which she deftly sidestepped—and life in Atlanta. It was similar, yet different in important ways from Ursula’s busybody grilling a mere two weeks ago. Her grandmother had only cared about what advantage Lily brought to the LeFay name. The Singer clan, on the other hand, wanted to share in her life, so she made an effort to remain open. Of course, there was the teensy matter of her being a fully-fledged wizard that she had to keep tiptoeing around, glancing toward her mother the whole while.

Despite some initial awkwardness, she felt herself warming to these familiar strangers, so grown and changed over the years. Their eager joy in every detail she divulged made it clear that they had truly missed her. She’d left her siblings a group of obnoxious adolescents, who’d since blossomed into young adulthood. Dru was as loud and country as you might expect, but well-rounded with a healthy dose of manners no doubt pounded into him by his father, with whom he worked on a daily basis. Sally was the mature one, obviously having taken Lily’s place as their mother’s primary helper. Her good-natured words were employed liberally to keep peace in this family of hard heads and quick tongues, the quickest being Becca’s. She’d broken from the family tradition of farming and was attending the local community college. While Becca had certainly grown out of her snotty brat stage, her new personality as a sarcastic teenager wasn’t much better. Lily decided she and Sir Kipling would get along very well, if only they could understand each other.

But the most changed was Jamie. The fun-loving boy she remembered was gone. Oh, he

joked readily enough with his other siblings. But he barely said a word to her, and didn't ask a single question. Perhaps it was because he'd been so young when she left, he wasn't used to her now. She hoped the explanation was that simple. Of all her family, she'd been looking forward to seeing Jamie the most. He'd been her little pal, her Jammy boy. While the others had been off raising hell around the farm, she and Jamie used to curl up in a cool corner together while she read to him. Even as he grew into the energetic eight-year-old she remembered, he'd always preferred hanging around Lily and asking incessant questions to climbing on tractors or hunting down frogs in the creek. But now he shied away from her gaze, and only murmured responses to the few questions she was able to work in amid the storm of conversation. And that strange feeling kept bothering her. She couldn't put her finger on it, but it reminded her of something.

Once supper was over, she tried to help with the dishes, but was rebuffed by Sally. "You go rest yer feet now, hear?" Sally said, busily gathering up dishes and silverware to take to the kitchen. While Freda had instilled in Lily the importance of "proper" English, she hadn't managed the same with Lily's step-siblings. They took after their father, southern twang rolling off their tongues like honey. So while Sally did the dishes and Tom and Dru headed outside to finish up the evening chores, Freda showed Lily to her room.

Her room wasn't technically a bedroom, it was the attic. Being a family of seven in an old farm-house, they'd had to make do. Growing up, her siblings had shared two of the three bedrooms, her parents occupying the third. Above one end of the house the eaves peaked to make a small attic that got dreadfully hot in the summer, but was vastly preferable to sharing a room with her overloud siblings. Now, at least, her parents had moved to the new bedroom downstairs, which meant Dru and Jamie each had their own rooms, with the Sally and Becca sharing the third. But the little attic room had been left untouched. As her mother opened the door, she could

see all her things were just as she'd left them, though they'd been joined by several piles of boxes. It was an attic, after all.

"I dusted things up and washed the sheets," her mother said. "I thought you'd prefer your old room. Though if the heat's too much, you're welcome to change your mind. I could make Jamie sleep with Dru and you could have Jamie's room, or the couch downstairs."

"No, this is fine," Lily assured her, staunchly ignoring the beads of sweat already forming on her forehead. It was worth it for some privacy. Looking around, she saw Dru had already laid her bags on the bed, though Sir Kipling was nowhere in sight. She briefly wondered if she should go looking for him—she hadn't heard a peep out of the dogs, so had no clues what he was up to—but decided against it. If he was going to accompany her in what was quickly becoming a bona fide adventure, she couldn't constantly worry about him. Either he could take care of himself or he couldn't. So far he'd handled demons, crazy wizards, a mechanical crow, and more besides with signature grace, so she doubted a couple of excitable dogs would pose much trouble.

"Well, I'll leave you to unpack," Freda said after a moment of awkward silence.

Lily stopped her with an outstretched hand and a look. "Not so hasty, Mother dear." She closed the attic door and pulled her mother to the bed, taking a seat beside her. "You aren't going anywhere until you explain to me why you haven't told them yet."

"Told them what?" her mother asked, avoiding her gaze.

"About *us*, that's what!" Lily said exasperatedly. "I understand why you kept it from me all those years: to protect me. But now John Faust"—she refused to call him father—"knows who I am, and can easily figure out where I'm from, if he hasn't already. We need to tell them, for their own safety. What if John Faust shows up one day looking for you, or me? They need to know, and we need to ward the house."

Freda opened her mouth to protest, but Lily raised a hand. “I know any magic in a backwater place like this will shine out like a beacon, but he can find us easily enough without it, so there’s no point hiding anymore. You didn’t really stop using magic because you feared it, did you? That’s what he said happened...”

“No, of course not.” Freda’s sigh was deep and long. “You’re right, I only stopped to keep us hidden. Since then I’ve grown positively rusty. But I doubt you’ll accept that excuse.” She smiled faintly at her daughter, who smiled back.

“Not a chance, Mother. I saw you flinging enough magic at that...that man, to know you remember your Enkinim well enough. Madam B gave me a full rundown of wards to use on the house, and one way or another, you’re going to help me cast them.”

“Yes,” Freda said with another sigh, “she warned me she would do that. She agrees with you, of course. Better to tell the truth. I just don’t know *how* to tell them...after so many years. They won’t believe us.”

“Of course they won’t, but we have to tell them all the same. And *you* will be the one to do it, not me. You’re the one who decided to keep it a secret in the first place, and you’re better at explaining things anyway.”

“I suppose. Perhaps in the morning—”

“No. Now,” Lily insisted. “No more waiting. No more lies.”

“Well...about that...”

“What?” Lily asked suspiciously.

“I didn’t know for sure, not until yesterday when I got home after using magic for the first time in years. My senses weren’t what they used to be. I felt it as I approached the house, and as soon as I saw him, I knew...” Freda trailed off, worry creasing her brow.

Lily's skin tingled in sudden realization and her eyes widened as she stared in disbelief at her mother. "No."

"Yes." Freda insisted with a resigned nod. "Your little brother is a wizard."

*End of draft sample.*

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