

Hack

verb (1)

: cut with rough or heavy blows.

Chapter 1 Father Theo

"I named her Lizzie," the girl said. "Like Lizzie Borden."

Her words made three grown men shudder.

The first crossed his arms to try to hide it.

The second peered nervously into the shadows under the staircase like he could see the ghost there. It was the wrong ghost, but he couldn't have known that.

And the third made the sign of the cross.

Father John Theo barely stopped himself from repeating the sign, first, because it had become a habit rather than a true demonstration of piety, and second, because he wasn't a priest right now. And by, *right now*, he meant – he didn't know if he was still a priest at all. The Church had taken a surprisingly trauma-centered approach to his near-death experience by offering him a six-month sabbatical from his diocese and his assignment on the committee he'd dubbed *REARS* – that is, Rites, Expulsions, and Related Supplications. At the end of six-months, he'd extended his sabbatical indefinitely.

They'd probably intended for him to use his sabbatical as a missionary or at least in a wandering monk sort of way, not as a ghost hunter, but his and the Catholic Church's views on spirits had irreparably split since King Quarry. That was largely because of one spirit in particular.

As if the direction of his thoughts had tugged at her, Winter's upper body materialized from under the staircase, her skin and hair as rich as shadows come to life. But then she smiled at him, her dazzling white teeth flashing and Theo had to tear his gaze back to the occupants of the room.

The living occupants, that is.

"Lizzie Borden," he repeated, making a note.

"Her name is a joke," the girl added defensively. "Because of Bob's ax and because I read a romance trilogy about a ghost also named Lizzie. It's not because she's violent. She just has a sense of humor."

The innkeeper's throat cleared pointedly at his daughter. "Genevieve..."

"Well, she didn't *used* to be violent." Genevieve Goldman scuffed her shoe against the dark wood of the floors. The way she was looking down so severely made Theo wonder if she was fighting back tears. He hoped not. He was no good with tears.

Theo guessed from her gangly limbs and the acne dotting her forehead she might be around 13 or 14 years old. An awkward stage to be sure, but the innkeeper's redheaded daughter had steady brown eyes that somehow reminded him of Winter. They were shades lighter, but had equal depth.

Ask the girl if she's seen her. If she can tell us what Lizzie looks like.

Theo glanced back to the staircase, but Winter had vanished. Visible or not, she remained *very* present for him. He sensed her the moment her spirit entered the room, whether she was exerting the great effort it required for her to be seen or not.

Whether she was speaking directly into his mind or not.

They were linked somehow, whether it was because of the quarry or because she'd been the one to pull him from his coma last fall.

"What does Lizzie look like when she appears to you?" Theo asked Genevieve.

The girl paled as the three men glared at her.

"She – she doesn't *appear* to me. I just think her sense of humor – you know, the way she picks on the guys the most – I knew she was a girl right away"

Have any of them seen the ghost?

"Have any of you seen the ghost we're talking about?" Theo parroted Winter's words, her willing mouthpiece.

The girl's father and the cook both shook their heads.

The groundskeeper — the one Genevieve had called Bob — made another sign of the cross and then offered, "I've seen a silhouette. Shadows under the door where feet should be. But I open the door and no one is there. Close it back and them shadows are still right there. I can hear her breathing."

He couldn't help but compare Bob's thick southern accent with Winter's soft one. The vowels in Georgia and Louisiana somehow sounded completely different.

It had taken weeks for him to accept Winter's voice in his head. When he'd first woken up in the hospital to her urgings to open his eyes, he'd thought more than the use of his legs had been lost to King Quarry. He thought he had been on the edge of madness, his nightmares bleeding into the day. He'd resisted her voice right up until a surge of cold, staticky energy filled his room and Winter's wavering form appeared to him. It had exhausted her so completely she couldn't appear again for months, but it had done the trick.

So none of them have seen her.

"So no one has actually seen her?"

We're going to have to force a sighting to figure out who we're dealing with.

"We mostly hear her," the innkeeper said, shoulders dropping along with the pretense he didn't believe in this ghost that had been terrorizing his guests of late. Ed Goldman was a nonsense man in his late 40s with a full head of perfectly coiffed, graying hair. He looked the picture of a modern Southern gentleman, but no amount of composure could hide he was exhausted. "Footsteps on the porch, doors closing, shutters rattling —"

"And the lights go out without warning," added the cook, crossing his stumpy arms across his round belly. "TVs too, usually during the two-minute warning or whenever the Dawgs are about to score."

Definitely a she, Winter quipped.

Theo cared very little about SEC football, but he smiled in agreement. Sense of humor indeed. So far none of this sounded that bad.

"Anything else?"

"She hides my ax all over the grounds," Bob said sourly. "I've even found it in the attic."

"All of this sounds like fairly common, even playful spirit behavior," Theo said. "Your email mentioned something changed a couple months back. Can you tell me more about that?"

"She's going to put me out of business," Ed said tightly over the wordless protests of his daughter.

The cook shuddered. "We're the only staff left, me and Bob here. All the others have quit. All the women that is. The ghost cuts them. Female staff, female guests, and the ones who didn't get hacked up were sick of cleaning up the blood. Genevieve is the only exception."

The girl flinched.

Cuts?

Theo echoed obediently, "What do you mean by cuts them?"

Ed picked up where the cook had left off. "It started small — shallow slices on their arms or legs they'd wake up with. The housekeepers mentioned blood on the sheets and a few employees found cuts on themselves, but we thought it was a coincidence and none of the guests said anything at that point. Then the cuts started getting deeper and a guest woke up in the middle of the night having a nervous breakdown. We got into her room and she was all cut up like — like she'd fallen into a briar patch or something. Police took her away to a hospital and we thought she did it herself but she was screaming about being held down in bed. Someone standing over her. A woman's voice telling her not to move."

Winter wavered back into view, intently staring first at Ed and then at Genevieve. The temperature in the room dropped and Ed shivered. Genevieve's brow furrowed and she glanced in Winter's direction, then over her shoulder up the stairs before rubbing the goosebumps on her arms.

"I checked the cameras," Ed added helplessly. "No one was in the hall. No one went into her room or left it."

A whisper of movement on the stairs yanked at Theo's attention. The second floor was heavily shadowed and he squinted, but didn't see anything now. Winter had winked out of existence after similarly scrutinizing Bob and the cook. He'd have to ask her later what she had been looking for.

Ed was still reciting the horrors like he couldn't stop now that he'd started. "Next was the housekeeper. She was pregnant and a gash opened up on her abdomen. The doctors said it looked like an untrained attempt at a C-section and that's what they ended up having to do to save the baby," Ed choked slightly. "Then my intern was gutted."

Theo startled, racking his memory for a mention of a death caused by this spirit in the innkeeper's frantic email.

"She lived, but barely. We were in the middle of inventory. If surveillance video hadn't been pointed right at me to prove I didn't move until she fell into the frame, I would probably be in jail. I was standing there talking to her as blood appeared on her shirt and her intestines spilled out as she fell to her knees. The doctors said the injuries missed her arteries or she'd have died. They're calling it a spontaneous bowel perforation or some shit, and I'm no doctor, but – something *did* this to her."

This is a highly unusual manifestation of violence for a spirit, Winter noted.

That sounded – correct, he supposed.

"How long ago was that?" he asked.

"About a week," Ed said. "That's when I emailed you. I didn't know what else to do."

"Has anything happened since then?"

"No," Genevieve whispered.

"No cuts," Ed clarified. "But guests don't make it through the night without having to check out. They report waking up with someone standing in the room, usually a woman in a long dress holding a bloody towel. We've all heard a woman screaming from outside, heard running footsteps. It has to stop."

That was odd, Theo thought. Why would a ghost ramp up to the point of gutting someone just to go back to more traditional haunts like standing over beds and screaming? He made a few more notes in the journal he'd begun since leaving his lengthy stay in the hospital. It had started as a way for him to keep track of possible Charlotte sightings, but it had become something else as he and Winter chased the vengeful spirit across the southern United States. As had his sabbatical and his newfound purpose in life, he supposed.

They'd only recently started taking hauntings they knew full well weren't going to be Charlotte. The first one had been a favor called in by a spirit medium friend of Winter's mother, Aurielle Lucas. She'd tried to reach out to Winter and had been astonished to get through not via phone, but via her occult talents.

At Winter's behest, Theo had driven to Hollow, South Carolina and knocked on Aurielle's door, claiming to be a friend and business partner of Winter's who was carrying on her work. Aurielle had been justifiably skeptical of a wheelchair-bound, white Catholic priest being either of these things to Winter, but the sudden appearance of Winter's furious face in Aurielle's foyer mirror did the trick for convincing her.

The death of Winter Washington had been more than just an article in the local Florida paper. More than a missing persons case or a body fished out of King Quarry. She'd been a

legacy and the premier ghost hunter of her generation, even if she abhorred that title. If not for her vast knowledge and patience still being accessible to him, Theo knew he never would have managed to usher any ghosts into the afterlife.

Fortunately, none of the spirits they'd encountered so far had been anything like Charlotte King. He hoped this *Lizzie* wouldn't be an exception. According to Winter, very few spirits became vengeful and even fewer became as prolifically murderous as Charlotte had been. Which meant 'ghost hunter' really was a misnomer.

They were more like ghost...shepherds.

In the past few months, they'd encountered a few poltergeists who took perverse joy in terrifying people, a spirit in denial that he was in fact quite dead, and a woman in white trapped in a cycle of vengeance not unlike Charlotte's. The only difference was her willingness to cross to the other side when they asked. That was the common thread with every ghost Winter had led him to – their yearning for peace. Their overwhelming desire to finally rest.

Sometimes these ends were achieved from a conversation with Winter or a prayer from Theo. Occasionally Winter would tell him something disturbing, like he needed to burn a photo album or baby blanket serving as a tether. She'd warned him he might eventually have to dig up a grave to burn the spirit's bones.

"Who do you think I am? Dean Winchester?" he'd asked.

Winter had used a precious few seconds of energy to become corporeal so she could give him a critical appraisal up and down. *You would look good in a leather jacket*, she'd quipped before vanishing again.

The blood warming Theo's cheeks and neck distracted him from the impossibility of him actually digging up a grave. What would he do after a certain point? Roll his wheelchair into the hole? Fling himself down amongst the bones and burn with them?

He knew he had been lucky to survive Charlotte. Becoming a paraplegic really wouldn't interfere with his priesthood duties if he returned, or even his new daily reality hunting ghosts. Advances in technology allowed him to drive and his extravagant wheelchair could prop him up enough for him to almost feel like he was standing temporarily. He could thank Rye United Mining for both the wheelchair and his wheelchair-accessible van. They'd written him a ridiculous check for his role in banishing Charlotte from the quarry.

Probably for his silence too, but it wasn't like anyone would believe him if he told the truth. Ray Vance had been the perfect scapegoat for the town's drownings.

They didn't even seem to care that the Charlotte problem hadn't *really* been solved. She might not be Rye United's issue anymore, but she was still very much Winter's and Theo's responsibility. She had to be found and stopped before she chose a new town to terrorize.

But Charlotte would have to wait.

Why were you inspecting everyone so closely earlier? he asked Winter.

The way they're describing these cuts – it sounded almost demonic to me. But none of them displayed any signs or scents of possession. I've just never heard of a ghost doing something like this. Is it for the blood? The fear? Why only women?

"How did it happen?"

Genevieve's question interrupted Winter's series of them and made Theo let off on his chair's control so he coasted down the hall for several more feet. He hadn't realized the girl had followed them when he had separated from the group to tour the old house and look for clues of the spirit's identity.

Her eyes were fixed on his atrophied legs.

"A ghost tried to drown me in a bathtub." He had no idea why he told her the truth, but something about her strange solemnity compelled him.

She didn't even blink.

“And you’re a priest, right? Why don’t you wear the priest outfit?”

“I’m on sabbatical,” he said finally before continuing his route down the hall. The hair stood up slightly on the back of his neck. He hadn’t mentioned his priesthood, had he?

The girl padded next to him on near-silent feet. “Will you hurt her?”

“Who?”

“Lizzie.”

Winter materialized and pressed a hand against his shoulder. It felt like a cobweb on his skin – intangible, but unmistakable. For once, she didn’t tell him what to say.

“We want to help Lizzie,” he said, only stumbling over the name slightly. “But we have to stop her before she hurts anyone else.” This was the hardest part for him to get used to with his diocesan training – viewing these spirits not as satanic energy, but as souls. It went against everything he’d learned, but Winter herself was unmistakable proof that ghosts were far more than the Church taught.

Genevieve stepped into his path and stared down seriously. “I lied earlier. I do see Lizzie. I’ve been seeing her for years. And she isn’t doing this – she wants me to tell you she isn’t the one doing this.”

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Theo stood in the inn’s library leafing through the papers Genevieve had handed him. One was a generic admissions brochure for the small women’s college directly across the street from the inn. The second was an informational booklet on the town’s involvement in the Civil War and the small battle that had occurred nearby. The third was a flyer for a new museum exhibit curated by the history department at the college. It was about how the college had been used as a makeshift hospital during the war.

One picture in particular stood out to Theo.

It depicted a woman in a black gown wiping bloodied hands on her white apron.

“What are you trying to tell me?” Theo asked Genevieve.

“I think Lizzie is trying to stop him,” she insisted.

“Who?”

“I don’t know,” Genevieve said in frustration. “She doesn’t hold conversation like a living person. Sometimes she just repeats things or answers in ways that don’t make sense.”

Winter – Theo thought, knowing he was out of his depth.

She hovered in the shadows cast by the drapes over the library window.

Ask if we can talk to Lizzie ourselves.

“Can we meet Lizzie?” Theo asked the girl.

“I can’t summon her or anything, she appears to me when she wants to be seen. Like your ghost, right?”

Theo stared at Genevieve, any response lying dormant on his tongue.

“My ghost,” he said finally.

“The one by the window,” she said like she was commenting on piece of furniture. “The pretty lady with skin like the night sky.”

I adore this child, Winter purred into his mind.

“How old are you?” Theo asked.

“Twelve and a half,” she said. “But I’m tall for my age.”

“Among other things,” Theo muttered. He wasn’t sure if this girl was going to be a poet, a psychic, or something else entirely.

Let’s find out.

Winter smirked and stepped – well, floated – several feet into the room until she was directly in front of Genevieve.

Can you hear me, Genevieve?

Genevieve's fathomless gaze unfocused and she tossed her head slightly like a spooked horse. "I – yes. I am."

Theo scribbled notes madly in his journal. It took enormous energy for a ghost as new as Winter to appear to strangers, but even if she made the effort none of them could hear her the way Theo did. Until now.

Tell us more about what you think Lizzie is trying to stop.

Genevieve swallowed. "I've only seen him once. It was after the housekeeper almost lost her baby, but before Dad's intern –"

Was it the light or had the girl paled slightly?

"What happened?"

"I was in here late reading and as I walked back to my room I realized it was darker than usual. All the nightlights in the hall were off and every step I took the air got colder and colder. It sounded like someone was walking behind me, so I started running. I could see my breath as I ran into my room and turned on the light. He was standing right in front of me." Her voice wavered to match her trembling at the memory.

"What did he look like?"

"Handsome," the girl breathed.

Theo narrowed his eyes. "Handsome?"

"Yes," she said. "At first. He was in a gray uniform and had a black beard and hair. But something was wrong with his eyes. I jumped away from him and then he changed. Old blood stained his uniform and his hands. His head crooked to the side and the bones in his neck looked all messed up. His eyes glowed white and he tried to grab me with one hand. He had a weird, long knife in the other."

Theo's heart pounded. His first thought after seeing the flyer might be right after all.

"Then Lizzie was there, jumping between us and pushing his arm away. She was screaming so loud I thought my head would burst. The man vanished and so did she."

"And Lizzie?" Theo said maybe a little too eagerly as he glanced back at the photo of the Civil War nurse. "What did she look like?"

"Like I'd never seen before – normally she wears a dress with a big skirt and her hair is up in braids. This time though, right before they collided she had a bloody rag in her hands and her throat was bruised. I didn't see her for a few days after that and I was so afraid for her."

Winter's semi-translucent arms encircled the girl. *She was protecting you. I think she has been for a while. That's why you're the exception.*

Theo held up the flyer so Genevieve could see it. "Does Lizzie look like this?"

She studied the Civil War nurse and nodded slowly. "A little."

"Why haven't you told your dad any of this?" he asked the question, suspecting he knew the answer.

"I can't," she breathed. "I can't tell him there's another ghost without telling him I can see Lizzie. He'd think I was crazy like – like my mom got crazy. Before she died."

Theo winced. He hadn't guessed that last part about her mom. That was a trauma to delve into another day, even though his years of giving confession to his parishioners made him ache to ask her more. Had Genevieve inherited her ability to see ghosts from her mother?

The flyer flew out of Theo's hand with a sudden icy gust and Winter was shielding him from a woman who had appeared next to the fireplace. She stared vacantly at him, mouth opening and closing around soundless words.

"Lizzie?" Genevieve beat him to addressing the spirit and she turned her head, a brief flash of affection crossing her face.

She wrung her hands in her apron and he watched red bloom across the white fabric.

Nurse! The voice was male and slurred slightly. *Get in here.*

Beyond the disembodied voice came the wails of the dying and distant gunshots. Lizzie glanced over her shoulder, then held her hand out and let something spill through her fingers.

It clanked to the floor, the blood dripping between her fingers following it to the ground to anoint what Theo recognized as a bullet. From its misshapen edges, the bullet that had been removed from a wound. From a soldier.

When Lizzie vanished as abruptly as she'd arrived, the battlefield noises, blood, and bullet went with her.

"I think I know what's going on here," Theo said.

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Theo recognized that he must look like a madman, rolling through an otherwise empty museum exhibit with only a preteen and a ghost for company.

"Why does your ghost get to travel with you? I only ever see Lizzie in the inn. I *wish* she'd come to school with me," Genevieve chattered, for once acting her age.

Theo checked over his shoulder before saying under his breath, "I wish you'd quit calling her *my* ghost."

"Is she not?"

Winter's laugh tinkled pleasantly inside his head.

"Don't say it as loud at least," he said under his breath.

Genevieve lowered her voice ever so slightly. "And why does your ghost talk like a person? When Lizzie talks she just repeats one or two words over and over. They're different each time she appears, but like when you first showed up she kept saying Father. I thought she was saying something about my dad at first, but she pointed to you and oh!"

"What is it?"

"She wears a cross necklace, I forgot that part. But she touched it and pointed to you again and that's when I realized what she meant."

What other things has she said? Winter asked.

"Umm, well one night she woke me up saying a strange word over and over. It was like – I think, *hack*. Hack. Hack. Hack. She was sitting at the foot of my bed rocking back and forth. I'd never seen her do anything like that before."

"When was this?"

"Before. Right before people started getting cut."

What she did for us in the library – the background noise and the bullet she dropped. Has she ever done THAT before?

Genevieve pondered this. "Not exactly like that. But sometimes I can hear other voices around her. Sometimes she's wiping her hands and they're bloody, or she's heating a tool in the fire and I can hear a scream."

Winter caught and held Theo's eye for a moment and raised her eyebrows. They would be talking about this later. Theo got the sense what Lizzie could do was rare, like a projected auditory hallucination. Theo had never heard of anything similar while working with REARS, but then, the Church would have to fully capitulate to the existence of bodily spirits to admit they could bring scenes from their past with them.

"So you think Lizzie is protecting me," Genevieve said. "And that another ghost is doing the bad stuff to the inn?"

"Yes," Theo said simply. Actually, he believed the confused ghost of a Civil War doctor who had probably been Lizzie's boss was performing unnecessary surgeries on the women in the inn, but he was still searching for proof. He couldn't get the male voice out of his head.

Nurse! Get in here.

It also didn't fully make sense why he would only cut the female staff and guests. Most of his patients in life would've been male soldiers.

Maybe he isn't confused, Winter had suggested when he'd whispered his theory to her on the way to the museum. Maybe we have another Charlotte on our hands.

They were missing something, but Theo believed they were on the right track.

"Can I answer any questions about our exhibit?"

A young woman with a name tag reading HANNAH G. and laptop tucked under her arm smiled at him and Genevieve brightly.

"Actually," Theo asked, "What do you know about the doctors who would've worked at this hospital? Anything about them that stands out?"

The student chewed her lip. "Well, this was a Confederate hospital, so it was poorly funded and they didn't have a great survival rate. Is that what you mean?"

"Not quite, I—" Theo grimaced. "Actually, I'm asking because I'm staying at the Goldman Inn across the street and everyone is saying it's haunted. Silly, I know. But some of them think they've seen a soldier walking around and that he's holding some sort of surgical tools. Most of their doctors would've been in uniform back then, right?"

This was a gamble, but as he'd hoped, the student's eyes lit up. Girls and their enthusiasm for ghosts was a phenomenon that should be studied.

"Oh! Yes, actually. And that inn is really interesting. Did you know it was a boardinghouse for a bunch of the nurses and doctors who worked at the hospital here? I'm not surprised it's haunted!"

"Would you be able to do some research for me? If you have time?"

"I happen to be doing research for my thesis on the battlefield nurses from this area, so if it's related to that at all..."

Perfect.

"Oh, it very well could be," Theo said.

She opened her laptop with a mischievous smile. "What are we looking for?"