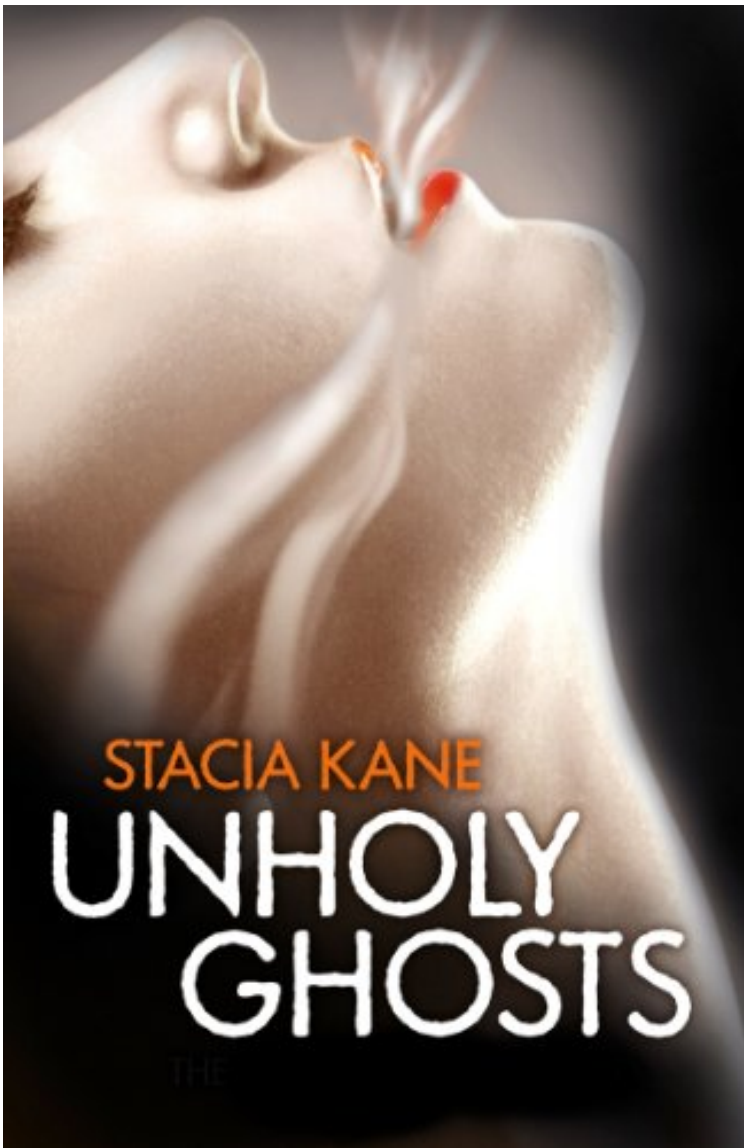


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# Unholy Ghosts (Downside Ghosts, Book 1)



*Par Stacia Kane*  
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(Downside Ghosts, Book 1)

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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIf you liked the compelling characters in 50 Shades of Grey, youll love the Downside Ghosts series.Murderous spirits and ruthless drug dealers combine to create serious problems for fiercely independent heroine, Chess, in these fast-paced, sexy and addictive novels.The world is not the way it was. The dead have risen and constantly attack the living. The powerful Church of Real Truth, in charge since the government fell, has sworn to reimburse citizens being harassed by the deceased. Consequently, there are many false claims of hauntings from those hoping to profit.Enter Chess Putnam, a fully-tattooed witch and freewheeling Debunker and ghost hunter. She's got a real talent for nailing the human liars or banishing the wicked dead. But she's keeping a dark secret from the Church: a little drug problem that's landed her in hot

and dangerous water. Chess owes a murderous drug lord named Bump a lot of money. And Bump wants immediate payback. All Chess has to do is dispatch a very nasty species of undead from an old airport. But the job involves black magic, human sacrifice, a nefarious demonic creature, and crossing swords with enough wicked energy to wipe out a city of souls. Toss in lust with a rival gang leader and a dangerous attraction to Bump's ruthless enforcer, and Chess begins to wonder if the rush is really worth it. Hell, yeah. Extrait Chapter One And the living prayed to their gods and begged for rescue from the armies of the dead, and there was no answer. For there are no gods. The Book of Truth, Origins, Article 12 Had the man in front of her not already been dead, Chess probably would have tried to kill him. Damned ghosts. A year and a half shed gone without having to deal with one the best Debunking record in the Church. Now when she needed her bonus more than ever, there he was. Mocking her. Floating a few feet off the parquet floor of the Sanfords comfortable suburban split-level in the heart of Cross Town, with his arms folded and a bored look on his face. Too good to go where you're supposed to, Mr. Dunlop? Mr. Dunlop's ghost gave her the finger.

Asshole. Why couldn't he just accept the inevitable? He'd been an ass in life, too, according to her records. Hiram Dunlop, formerly of Westside, banker and father of two, all deceased. Mr. Dunlop should have been resting for the last fifty years, not turning up here to rattle pipes and throw china and generally make a nuisance of himself. Right. She set the dog's skull in the center of the room, checking her compass to make sure she faced east, and lit the black candles on either side of it, her body moving automatically as she arranged her altar the way she'd done dozens, if not hundreds, of times before. Next came the tall forked stand in its silver base, garlanded with specially grown blue and black roses. She set the bag of dirt from Mr. Dunlop's grave in front of the skull for later use. Her small cauldron in its holder took a few extra minutes to set up. Mr. Dunlop moved behind her, but she ignored him. Showing fear to the dead or any sort of emotion at all was asking for trouble. She filled the cauldron with water, lit the burner beneath it, and tossed in some wolfsbane. With a stub of black chalk she marked the front door and started on the windows, stepping deliberately through Dunlop's spectral form despite the unpleasant chill. The set of his jaw lost some of its defiance as she pulled out the salt and started sprinkling it. This is probably going to hurt, she said. Her gaze wandered to the grandfather clock in the corner, just outside the sloppy salt ring. Almost eight o'clock. Fuck. She was starting to itch. Not badly, of course. Nothing she couldn't handle. But it was there, making her mind wander and her toes wiggle in her shoes, when she needed to be sharp. She'd just begun closing off the hallway when Mr. Dunlop bolted up the stairs. The symbols on the doors and windows she'd already done the bedrooms would keep him from leaving the actual building, but . . . shit. She'd forgotten the master bedroom fireplace. The chimney flue. Pausing only long enough to snatch up the bag of grave dirt, she raced after him. The grave dirt wasn't supposed to come until later, when the psychopomp had already shown up to escort him, but it was the only way she could think of to stop him. Mr. Dunlop's feet were only just visible when she reached the bedroom, hanging in the fireplace. She grabbed a small handful of dirt and flung it at them. Dunlop fell. His silent lips formed words that were probably not kind. She ignored him, ducking into the fireplace to mark the flue with chalk before he could try again. There's no escaping. You know you shouldn't be here. He shrugged. From her pocket she pulled her Church-issued Ectoplasm marker nobody ever said the Church was clever, just that they knew how to protect humanity from spirits and uncapped it. Dunlop stared up at her, his face rippling in panic. She leaned toward him and he sank through the floor. Before he managed to disappear completely she ran back downstairs and grabbed her salt, finishing the hallway while Dunlop floated through the ceiling outside of the circle. In the short time they'd been upstairs the atmosphere in the room had changed, her energy mingling with that of the herbs to fill the room with power. Chess glanced at her altar. The dog's skull rattled and clicked like a set of castanets, rising slightly from the floor. The psychopomp was coming. Dunlop backed away when she started toward him, holding the Ectoplasm marker out in front of her. She'd already memorized his passport symbol. Now she just had to get him back into the circle and get the symbol on him before the dog came. Only once had she heard of a Debunker who didn't manage it. He got lucky. The dog took the ghost. But that was luck, nothing else. Without the passport, the minute that dog finished materializing could be the last minute of her life. Dunlop bumped into the wall and glanced back, surprised. Ghosts could choose to touch inanimate objects or slide through them . . . until the object was solidified on the metaphysical plane. I marked them. She used her foot to break the line of salt. You can't get through them. You can't escape. This will be a lot easier if you just relax and let me do my job, you know. Why don't you come here and hold your hand out for me? He folded his arms and shook his head. She sighed. Okay. Have it your way. She crushed a *safetida* between her fingers and sprinkled it over the floor around him. Hiram Dunlop, I command you to enter this circle to be marked and sent to rest. I command you

to leave this plane of existence. She jumped when the growl echoed through the room and the skull leapt into the air. The rest of the dog flowed into existence behind it, each bone sharp and clean in the wavering candlelight. Shit! Shit, shit. She was still the only one in the circle. Worse, they both smelled of asafetida. She hadn't rinsed her hands yet. The dog magically created to sense the herb wouldn't know the difference between them. Chess screamed as the skeletal dog lunged at her, skin and fur growing over its bones. She fell into the floor through Hiram Dunlop. The cold was worse this time, probably because she wasn't ready for it, or maybe because she was terrified by the sight of those sharp, shiny canine teeth snapping the air only inches from her arm. If they reached her the dog's mouth closed around her left calf, pulling. Eyes appeared in the formerly hollow sockets, glowing red, brighter as it firmed its grip and tugged. Behind the dog the air rippled. Shadowy images superimposed themselves over the tasteful taupe walls of the Sanford house, silhouettes gray and black against the light. Something inside Chess started to give. The dog the psychopomp was doing its job, tugging its lost soul out of the Sanford house and into the city of the dead. But her soul wasn't lost at least, not in the way required. Hiram's eyes widened as she reached for him again, her hand passing through his chest. Hiram Dunlop, I command you. The words ended in a strangled gurgle. It hurt, fuck, it really fucking hurt. It was peeling, as if someone was tearing away layers of her skin one by one, exposing every tender, raw nerve she possessed, and she possessed so many of them. Her vision blurred. She could let go, if she wanted to. She could float away the dog would be gentle once it knew it had her and vanish, no more problems, no more pain, no more . . . Only the boredom of the city, with nothing to take the edge off. And the knowledge that she'd died a stupid death and let this miserable jerk of a spirit beat her. No. No way. She moved her hand, reaching again for Hiram. This time her fingers connected with something solid, something that felt warm and alive. Hiram. He wasn't alive. She was dying. But in death she could grab hold of him and drag him into the broken circle. In death she could use the strength of her will to bring the Ectoplasm marker down on Hiram suddenly solid flesh. In death she could mark him with his passport, the symbol to identify him to the psychopomp, and physically hold him in place. Desperately she scrawled the figure on his arm, while her soul stretched between Hiram and the dog like a tight clothesline. She didn't dare look away to see what her physical body was doing. She managed the last line as her vision went entirely black. Pain shot through her as she fell to the floor with a house-rattling thud, but it was physical pain this time, bone pain, not the agony of having her living soul ripped from her body as it had been moments before. She opened her eyes just in time to see Hiram Dunlop disappear through the rippling patch of air. Her fingers scrabbled at the clasp on her heavy silver pillbox, lifting the lid. She grabbed two of the large white pills inside and gobbled them up, biting down so the bitterness flooded her taste buds and made her nose wrinkle. It tasted awful. It tasted wonderful. The sweetest things were bitter on the outside, Bump had told her once, and oh, how right he'd been. Her fingers closed around her water bottle and she twisted off the cap and took a gulp, swishing it around in her mouth so the crushed pills could enter her bloodstream under her tongue, so they could start dissolving before they slid down into her stomach and blossomed from there. Her eyes closed. The relief wasn't everything it would be in twenty minutes, in half an hour as the Cepts were digested fully. But it was something. The shaking eased enough for her to control her hands again. Cleaning up was the worst part of Banishings. Or rather, it was usually. This time the worst part had been feeling her soul pull from her flesh like a particularly sticky Band-Aid. Carefully she put her altar pieces back in her bag, wrapping the dog skull in hemp paper before setting it on top of everything else. She'd have to buy a new one. This dog had tasted her. She couldn't use it again. Her Cepts started to kick in as she swept. Her stomach lifted, that odd, delicious feeling of excitement and anticipation making her smile without really realizing it. Things weren't so terrible, after all. She was alive. Alive, and just high enough to feel good about it. The Sanfords arrived home just as she knelt outside their front door with a hammer and an iron nail. Welcome home, she said, punctuating her words with sharp taps of the hammer. You shouldn't have any more problems. He's . . . gone? Mrs. Sanford's dark eyes widened. Really gone? Yep. We can't thank you enough. Mr. Sanford had a way of speaking, his voice booming out from his barrel chest, that made his voice echo off the stucco walls of the house. Part of my job. She couldn't even bring herself to be mad at the Sanfords right now. It wasn't their fault they were honest and haunted, instead of faking like ninety-nine percent of Debunking cases. She finished driving in the nail and stood up. Don't move that, whatever you do. We've found that homes where a genuine haunting occurred are more vulnerable to another one. The nail should prevent it. We won't. Chess put the hammer back in her bag and waited, trying to keep a pleasant smile on her face. Mr. and Mrs. Sanford shuffled their feet and glanced at each other. What were they? Oh. Why don't we go on inside, and we'll finish off your paperwork and get you your check, okay? The Sanfords' anxious expressions eased. Chess couldn't really blame them. If she

was about to be handed fifty thousand dollars from the Church just because she had an escaped ghost in her house, she'd be pretty relaxed, too. Just like she would have felt if she'd gotten her bonus. It would have been ten grand on this job, enough to pay Bump and have something left over until the next one. Stupid ghosts always ruined everything, like loud babies in a nice restaurant. They offered her coffee, which she declined, and water, which she accepted, while they signed various forms and affidavits. It was almost nine-thirty by the time she handed over their check, and she still had to stop by the graveyard before she could get to the Market. Damn Mr. Dunlop. She hoped he was being punished justly.

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