

DARLINGS OF DECAY



ZOMBIE STORIES FROM YOUR
FAVORITE FEMALE AUTHORS

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Thank you for joining us on these tales of zombie horror. As you begin to read these stories, wrap your mind around this...

The world as we've known it has ended. No one, living or dead, can be trusted. Now, desperate times call for desperate measures, because every single day is a struggle to live. The gates of hell have opened and hope seems well beyond reach. But... there are still survivors, and through blood, sweat, and tears, they'll fight to live in a world where tomorrow is never a guarantee.

Sit back as your favorite authors of zombie lit take you on a wild, horrifying ride that will leave you breathless. Come and meet the women who love to entertain you with their own unique versions of the zombie apocalypse.

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Tamara Rose Blodgett

Excerpt From:

Death Whispers

I am Caleb Hart, son of the first scientist to map the human genome back in 2010. Now, fifteen years later, all us kids (during puberty because we're so lucky) get to draw what's equivalent to a winning lottery ticket. What paranormal power would we have, would I have? It could be anything as benign as Empath, Telepathy, Pyrokinesis, Astral-Projection, and the real creeper, Affinity for the Dead, AFID. New abilities kept cropping up, like an untended garden. The paranormal ball had begun to roll and it was all downhill from here. As long as I didn't get anyone's attention, I was down with that. I should think Science is the bomb, but it's not, it's a bomb alright-- right on my head.

In eighth grade, we're required to take pre-Biology. My teacher is enthusiastic, so there's never a dull moment.

Especially with me passing out all the time.

That's how it happened the first time. The frogs came in and I went out... like a light.

At least that was the first time I hadn't been able to ignore it anymore.

Xavier Collins had reined in his ranting about bees becoming extinct and other huge rage-topics on the environment, to delight in telling us our next experiment would be dissection.

I didn't have Mark "Jonesy" Jones in this class but my other best friend, John, was here, so not a total loss. Jonesy kept school in balance, making jokes at the expense of the teachers (very wise). John countered with keeping Jonesy from getting us in trouble (not always happening). The drag of it was the two kids that hated my guts in a steaming pile were in Biology.

Carson Hamilton and Brett Mason sat next to each other, never giving me a moment's peace about anything. Carson had

everything anyone could want: money, looks (he's a mirror-lover) and parents that didn't care about anything he did. My parents had not caught the disease of indifference yet. Brett didn't have it so hot, but he was as miserable as Carson.

John sat down next to me with two pencils up his nose while Collins was at the whiteboard, discussing how to pin the frogs down.

Nice.

“Did ya make sure the erasers were in there first?” I asked him.

“Yeah, duh.” The pencils bounced as he spoke. For a smart guy, he had some weird ideas about self-entertainment. It was very “Jonesy” of him.

“You still buzzing?” he asked.

I looked at John. “Yeah, it's on and off.” I felt kinda defensive about this part, I was avoiding thinking about it myself, and didn't really want to talk about it.

“I've been thinking about that,” he said.

How he could think with pencils up his nose? A mystery. “Yeah?”

“I think you have the undead creeper, like that Parker dude,” John said.

That would be bad. “He's the one that could corpse-raise, right?” I asked.

John nodded.

Hadn't I just been thinking about how much that ability sucked? However, the rareness of corpse-raising might come in handy. Not likely to happen though.

“It would suck for you.”

Nice, John restating the obvious. Yeah, it would suck. I mean, what's so great about communicating with the dead, locating the dead? Any of that... ah, *no*. Nothing in it for me but weirdness.

“Government took him. Bye-bye... gone.” John made a fluttering motion with his hand like a bird flying away. The pencils kept bouncing in a distracting way.

I'd heard about that. Corpse-Manipulation, rare-much. Jeffrey Parker was the only recorded case.

“Why do you think?” I was interested for once, sometimes John would lose me in a tech-rant and it was all over.

“Are you shitting me? Dead people... come on.” I got an

image of zombies with M-60s, interesting.

“No, think about it. They could get people raised and force them to do stuff. From a distance, they could look like they were alive, important people.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Presidents?”

“Rulers or whoever,” John said. “He was a five-point. He could do the whole tamale. I think the government exploits whatever they can; using whoever they can.”

I laughed.

“What?” he asked.

“I can't take you seriously. You look like a dumb-ass” The pencils dangled indignantly inside each nostril, humiliated.

John pulled them out, checking the ends for gold.

Huh.

I'd been wondering why my head was buzzing. Now memories surfaced. When had the buzzing started exactly? What triggered it? Could John be right?

“Okay people, zip up here and pick up your trays. Your sterilized utensils should already be at your desks,” Collins said.

John went for our trays, minus the attractive pencils. I stared out the window, the splatters of rain causing rivulets that looked like gray streamers marring the glass.

I shook my head, clearing fuzziness. I couldn't shake the buzzing, a dull noise that ebbed and flowed. I felt it today the strongest. As soon as I entered class, the buzzing increased, like whispers.

“Here you are. One frog for the both of us” John plunked down a frog that had once been green but was a bone-gray now, staking pins gleaming under the LEDs.

That's when the screaming started.

The whole earth felt like it was swiveling on its axis, and I was on top. The whispering grew in volume until images flooded my head. There were marshes and swamps. A frog, in the bloom of its life, shiny with amphibian iridescence, leaped to a log, hoping to fool a small water moccasin close enough to take it.

(NO!)

Right behind you! I shouted in warning. But I couldn't be heard, these were images... memories.

A motor boat was closing in on the frog, getting ready to take it with a metal pole and loose net on its end. Caleb heard the

frog's thoughts, *strange predator must seek cover... noise... hurts...*

(NO! NO!!!)

It wasn't the only frog with memories. Every cut my classmates made, a new flood of memories came. I realized through some dim sense that I was on my back on the Biology floor. Carson and Brett in the background wheezed with laughter.

“He bit it over a frog? Seriously?” Carson ranted.

Brett, not to be outdone caterwauled, “He's a total girl!”

Collins was moving his hand in front of my face, holding up fingers, but I was caught in the grip of the death memories, absorbing my consciousness. The last thing I remember was John's anxious face taking turns between telling the dumb-ass duo to shut up and seeing if I was gonna live. My vision became gray at the edges, a pinpoint of black expanding to clear my mind of everything and I knew no more.

CHAPTER 1

Trees surrounding the cemetery danced in the languid breeze of the mild spring night. I looked behind me at the pair of eighth grade boys who'd come to egg me on. They had discovered my secret: that I knew the dead, heard the dead.

Headstones glimmered like loose teeth in the moonlight, the whispering like a steady thrumming of white noise in my head. My hands grew clammy.

“Caleb, show them you're not a frickin' poser,” said Jonesy.

“I don't pose.” My thoughts raged against each other in contrary purpose. Proving to Carson and Brett that I had AFTD wouldn't keep them off my back completely, but it'd notch down their stupidity to something me and my posse could manage. That's where it was, managing their shit behavior.

I took a step through the high, Victorian-style gate, my foot touching its reluctant toe on hallowed ground.

The feeling of being forced pressed uncomfortably against my mind.

Crossing the threshold of sanctified ground, the whispering turned into voices. One voice whispered to me the strongest. I stopped feeling tentative and like an invisible string pulled, was drawn toward one of the gravestones, standing sentinel near the middle of the cemetery, glowing softly in the moonlight. I came to stand in front of the headstone which read: *“Clyde Thomas, born 1900, died 1929.”*

“Wake me...” it said.

“What?” I whispered.

It speaks.

“Wake me...” it repeated.

“Caleb, who are you talking to?” John asked, lack of understanding clear on his face.

My head swung in slow-motion as if through quicksand, moving in his direction, blood rushing in my ears and my heart beating thick and heavy in my chest. Everything became crystallized in that moment. John's frizzy hair and freckles stood out like measles. A microscopic chip lay like an imperfect shadow on the headstone, shining stark contrast to the white marble.

Something... something... was building, rising up as if

underwater, rushing to the surface. I was supposed to finalize something, but what? The whispering of the corpse in the earth was so loud it drowned out John's words. John's mouth was moving but no sound was coming out.

What-the-hell? He was arguing with Jonesy, his teeth a pale slash against his dark face.

Flailing, Jonesy's hand suddenly connected with my face. My teeth slammed into my tongue and the taste of copper pennies filled my mouth. I leaned over and a drop of blood hung tremulously on my bottom lip, falling to the grave like a black gem.

Everything clicked into place, vertigo spinning the graveyard on its side as if it had been waiting for this moment. The ground rushed toward my face and I threw my hands out to brace my fall, fingers biting into damp earth. A clawed hand broke through the ground like a spear through flesh. Searching, it grasped my wrist, the bones pressing in a vise-like grip that captured my breath, the intense coldness of the grave lingering on its dead flesh.

The head of the corpse broke free of the ground, its shadowed gaze meeting mine, the hand releasing me. I scuttled backward, standing up, swaying, overcome with, excitement? Fear? I had done this thing and now, didn't know how to undo it. The corpse moved with purpose, pacing me as it used the undisturbed ground to leverage itself as another drop of my blood fell and landed with a dull plop on the corpse's forehead.

The zombie's gaze fixated on mine, it put a hand on its knee and began to push itself upright. Dull, lank strands of hair hung loosely from a scalp strung together by a tight mask of rotten sinew.

Jonesy had long since run out of the cemetery and was at a "safe" range from what the ground had disgorged.

He better get his ass back here. He couldn't get away with whacking me *and* not helping me with corpse-boy.

"Why have you awoken me?" The words sounded garbled, maybe there was *some* tongue in there?

Must not be rude, not my strongest point.

Out loud I said, "You asked me to."

John was standing at my right, trying to mask a fine, all-over tremble. His freckles stood out on a pale face like beacons of fright.

"What the hell is this?" John asked.

He didn't really just ask that? John... duh.

The zombie looked at me with eyes that clung from threads of sinew; moving wetly in its sockets, sucking like a vacuum.

"Why have you woken me?" it repeated, shambling a step closer. The smell... wow. It rose like a torrent of rotting garbage. John clapped his hand over his nose, taking a step backward.

The corpse took another step closer.

"Got any brilliant suggestions?" I asked John, my eyes steady on the zombie, hoping like hell John would lend an intellectual hand.

"Do *not* have the *Zombie Handbook* handy," John said, his eyes a tad wide.

Not helpful.

The corpse looked at me, head tilted, "You're just a boy... how could you know for what purpose you have disturbed my slumber?"

Uh-oh, coming up with an excuse, *so* not my thing.

"I didn't... mean to wake you up..." I fumbled out. I wasn't usually this tongue-tied but meeting a corpse in the flesh (ha-ha) stole my speech.

"You do not know what you would have of me? You use your life-force to waken me and yet... without purpose? Put me back," he said thickly. His clothes hung in tatters and the smell was definitely old, dark coffin, not that I knew what *that* smelled like.

John's look clearly said, *do something!* I guess what I hadn't told my friends was that I had never thought that I could actually raise the dead. But here he was, standing before me in all his rotting glory.

Looking out amongst the teenagers collected outside the cemetery, "To whom much is given, much is expected. Put me back," he said.

Adults were all the same, even dead, lecture, lecture.

"How?" I asked.

"You are the necromancer, boy, not I." Again that quizzical brow over rotting facial countenance.

Interpretation challenge... but I was managing.

"A what?" I asked, surprisingly calm, for the first time, there were no whispers. Perfect, blessed silence filled my head. It was the most natural thing in the world; talking to the dead.

Looking at the corpse, its eyeballs like inky marbles stared back at me with uncanny devotion.

“A diviner of the black arts, magic...” he replied.

All that time with the star in my basement, huh, *right*.

I could still taste distressingly metallic blood in my mouth.

I was connecting dots here, but I had an epiphany, I could put it back with blood! Things had only gotten über-weird when I had my lip busted open by Jonesy. I looked back at the corpse, Clyde--no longer feeling that sense of swimming power just underneath the surface. Now was not the time to get queasy with the dead. I needed to regain that essence, fast.

“Ah... hang on a minute,” I said to the corpse, who stared blankly back... ah-huh.

“John, give me your blade.”

“What the heck Caleb? What are you planning to do with this...” John said pointing his finger at the patient corpse, “...thing?” who was as immobile out of his grave as in.

“I figure my blood made it jump out of its grave, now I need some to put him back and you're going to help me,” I said in a one sentence rush.

John's face got paler, if possible. “Ah, we're good friends and all but no, not a good plan! We don't know that for sure anyway.” The logic-master was not feelin' it. Couldn't say I blamed him, me holding a knife and all.

“... here's the deal, let's do a little 'friendship blood bank' just for the sake of putting the dead guy back in his grave, eh?” I began tapping my foot on the disturbed mess of the grave. John would ante up the blood or this was gonna be a long damn night.

“What?” strained trust crowded his eyes.

“Just here, give me your forearm.” I placed the side of the blade on his forearm where it shone black in the pale moonlight. My left hand wrapped tight, steadying his flesh for puncture.

John took a deep breath, “Okay, but you're going to owe me, big time.” The whites of his eyes bulging.

I pressed the point of the blade against his arm until the pressure broke the skin. John sucked in a lungful, blood welled and I let up the pressure. The zombie's head jerked at the sight of the blood, causing the disturbing sound of neck bones popping.

Would I ever get used to that noise? I repeated the process with my own arm. Our identical wounds pressed together, I offered

it to my zombie. I could feel somehow that he was mine, I knew it.

A vibrating tuning fork of trembling power welled up inside me. A strange mixture of fear, dread and excitement paralyzed me. My teeth throbbed with the intensity of it. The zombie's hand snaked out, taking hold of the offered forearm. It felt cold against my warm flesh, like iced tentacles. I swabbed a blot of blood, inking it with my index and middle fingers on the zombie's forehead, like warpaint. It rolled those empty eyes up at me, its dead bones clinging to my fingertips.

We shared a suspended moment in time, a terrible beauty of control balanced precariously. "Go back and rest," I said, feeling that balance reached, that *I* was choosing for both of us.

The zombie reluctantly let go of my arm, sand through a sieve, lying down on the disturbed ground while his grave encased him in a shroud of earth.

I was a corpse-raiser, one of two, and it was not a safe thing to be.

John and I stared at each other over the grave for a swollen minute, his face showing a mixture of sympathy and dread. He knew what this distinction would mean for me in the world we lived in.

I was shaking from the intensity of it all, there was no controlling it. This was not the same as Biology experiments and roadkill, this was real, this was huge. Looking outside the cemetery perimeter at two enemies and one friend, I knew it was time to swear the group to secrecy. A trickle of sweat slithered down my back, pooling at the waistband of my jeans, instantly chilling against my fevered flesh. I didn't want the same future as Parker, that loss of freedom was so *not* a part of The Plan, my plan.

John and I headed out of the cemetery in a wave of uncertain promise.

CHAPTER 2

I smacked my alarm, just five more minutes I thought, dozing off.

“Caleb!” Mom yelled up the stairs.

“Yeah?” I yelled back.

“School!”

I stumbled out of my bed and looked on the floor for today's clothes.. Hmm, what to wear that wasn't too wrinkled. I picked up a pair of jeans and a shirt and took an experimental whiff. Good enough! I jerked the jeans on with a hop and a zip. Opened the underwear and sock drawer, nothing. I ripped open every drawer for socks, ah-huh! Finally, a couple of socks, not matched but clean... happy day.

I trudged over to the kitchen table, scarred from a thousand meals.

“You cookin' today?” I asked, hopeful.

“No, but you're eating.”

Eating in the morning blows. I was that lazy. I'd open the fridge, nothing. Then the freezer, repeat. I usually ended up cramming a yogurt down.

Mom looked in the fridge. “What flavor?”

“Do we have blueberry?” It was the only non-barf fruit I could think about eating this early.

“Last one.”

“Where's Dad?”

Mom and Dad were on the opposite end of the spectrum. She was free-spirited (read: hippie) and thought the mystery of life and choice was taken when the scientific puzzle of the genome mapping was solved.

It made for an interesting family life.

“He is working on that new project.”

Great, hopefully not anything new for kids to rant about. I'd gone through enough being hassled as I was growing up.

“Does that mean he'll be home for supper tonight? I've got something to talk to him about.” I wisely didn't want to mention the whole corpse-raising episode. Dad was logic and fairness mixed. He'd know what to do. This.. I might need some help on.

“Yes, he will, you know how important meal time is,”
Mom said.

Maybe, maybe not. Science was important to Dad.

After I wolfed down the yogurt, knowing the beast would awaken again at 10 a.m. in class, perfect timing, I made a 2-point shot at the trash can. Swish! No mess, but that didn't stop the frown forming on Mom's face.

I moved quickly to grab my backpack but she blocked me and I was forced to look up at her. Every girl in the world was taller than me... wonderful.

She brushed the hair out of my eyes and it shot back down. “You need a haircut.”

“No, mom.” A time-sucker was all a haircut was and I had more important things to do.

Slamming the door behind me I took the stairs two at a time, cruising at a jog. I wanted to reconnoiter with the dudes, get things straight in my head from last night.

I slowed to a walk. I'd still be there early and I was feeling lazy. Looking up, I noticed the canopy of trees allowing filtered morning light to break through, speckling the ground with sunspots. My head began the familiar thrumming, a buzz seeping into the crevices of my mind as I walked toward the school.

I stopped where I stood, the buzzing had become whispering, my heart speeding, my breath quickening in response, my palms dampening.

The whispering of the dead had arrived.

I looked around, noticing the paved street, the pebbling of the asphalt worn away by a million cars, the shoulder giving way into the ditch.

Nothing.

I started walking again but the whispering grew louder. I followed the dull roar of the insidious voice like a magnet and was rewarded with volume.

There, on the border of the forest and the soft dirt of the ditch lay a crumpled body, torn and broken, its head at an awkward angle. My hands trembled as the whispering broke through to voices and images, flooding my head like a pulse-screen.

I heard the thoughts:

Headlights bursting like twin spots before its eyes as it tried to escape

those lights... rushing forward... it sprinted across the street, not timing the advance properly and the twin orbs bore down on it.

Pain. Intense pain and blinding light.

The cat thought of its litter, its people... then-- was no more.

My breath returned in a paralyzing rush, my feet planted at the base of her body. A small body that had shared the last moments of its life with me. A life that was now gone.

I stood for a moment, taking it in, realizing that life as I knew it was never going to be the same. I wasn't going to breeze through being a teenager.

Snapping back to reality I realized I was the Pied Piper of road kill.

Great. Definitely my life-goal.

This was just the kinda thing that had been happening. The frogs in Biology, there had been so many. I hadn't been able to camouflage that. People would be suspicious. Why couldn't I be developing something righteous like Pyrokinesis? Now that would be tight. At least only Brett and Carson knew the corpse-raising part. Getting them to cooperate with silence, that was another thing.

I trudged on, my limbs heavy, my head swimming with the heaviness of an undead-moment. I lifted my hands, the fine shaking almost gone. Beaded sweat decorated my upper lip and I wiped it off with the back of my hand. I needed to get a hold of this thing. I was on it. That's what I told myself but my gut churned with uncertainty.

The familiar doors to our daily prison came into view. I went inside the school, spotting the "cemetery group."

John and Jonesy stood apart from the others in stark contrast to each other. Almost five foot ten, with a shock of frizzy, carrot-colored hair and pale blue eyes, John looked a little freakish but he was my main dude, the go-to guy when things went sideways. I gave Jonesy an unfriendly look, touching my face. He had short, nappy hair and teeth that stood out like white Chiclets in a dark face. He was taller than me too, but built stocky. They'd been with me since Kindergarten.

The rest of the group was a mixed bag, didn't feel solid here. It would take some clever conniving to get promises of secrecy from the rest. Brett Mason and Carson Hamilton stood

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