

KILLING IT SOFTLY

A *Digital Horror Fiction*
Anthology of Short Stories



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DIGITAL FICTION
P U B L I S H I N G C O R P

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Foreword

Suzie Lockhart

I must admit, when I was first presented with the title ‘Killing It Softly’, it gave me pause. I wondered if it sounded a bit, well, sexist?

But then I realized the title held a sarcastic tone, because the irony is: *these stories are anything but soft!* Women authors instinctively knew that, because the short stories flooded in.

And because ‘Killing It Softly’ is a reprint anthology, the submission call lured the best of the best. Making decisions about which stories to feature in this anthology was an excruciating process, because practically every one we received was well above the fray!

Finally, however, the selection of dark and dangerous tales was complete, and what we ended up with was a ‘*Best of Women in Horror*’ anthology.

The mere prospect of writing an introduction for this anthology was so intimidating that I almost convinced myself it wasn’t necessary. *What could I possibly say*, I thought looking through the list of amazing authors from all over the world now gracing the pages of ‘Killing It Softly’, *that would be worthwhile?* I mean, with authors such as: Rebecca Snow, Carole Gill, Carson Buckingham, Tina Rath, Gerri Leen, Elaine Cunningham, and Nancy Holder gracing the pages of this book—just to name a few—well, if you’re a lover of the horror genre, you get the picture. I mean, some of these women are award-winning authors; members of the Horror Writers Association; some have appeared in anthologies edited by Ellen Datlow and P.C. Cast; others have appeared in Stephen Jones’s ‘Mammoth’ books of horror; and some—already best-selling authors—nonetheless answered the call.

I was moved when one of the authors thanked me for giving female horror authors a voice. One of the reasons I wanted to do this anthology was because I felt, as a female horror author of dozens of

short stories myself, that we were an under-represented, and sometimes misunderstood, group.

I want to thank the wizard behind the curtain, Executive Editor Michael Wills for offering me this opportunity, and S. Kay Nash for all her hard work as Copy Editor. Being Managing Editor for an all-female anthology was something I've longed to do since I had a story of my own appear in 'Mistresses of the Macabre' a few years back. Now, watching this amazing book come to life will be another goal I can cross off my bucket list...



Suzie Lockhart attended The Art Institute of Pittsburgh after graduating, but the gnawing urge to write always remained. After discovering the innate ability for macabre storytelling, Suzie embraced her inner-creepiness. Her middle son, Bruce began writing chilling tales, and they teamed up. Five years working together have yielded nearly 50 short story publications, in dozens of paperbacks and eZines. The pair have also edited several anthologies, including two top ten Preditors & Editors™ Readers' Poll Awards. [Web: Suzie Lockhart](#)





Torn Asunder

Rebecca Snow

Charlotte's eyelids trembled. Her fingertips flinched, and her nose twitched. Something fluttered from her nostrils. The scents of cinnamon, sandalwood, and cedar wafted through the close air. Uncrossing her arms, she flexed her hands and brushed the detritus from her face. With her eyes wide, she saw only white flecks of total darkness. She blinked to clear her vision and craned her neck as far as she could turn, but the pitch black remained.

Lifting to her elbows, her head collided with a hard surface, and she fell back onto satiny cushions. She opened her mouth to cry. Instead of a shrill yell, she gagged on wads of oiled cooking spices. She reached between her teeth and pried the debris from her cheeks. Her next shrieking effort brought forth no more than a muffled choke.

Charlotte shed her long evening gloves. She could not recall having donned them. The thin hide caught at her knuckles. Exploring the snags in the darkness, she caressed several recognizable stone rings. She slid off the hindering metal jewelry and tucked it into her bodice before she freed her hands from the confining goat skin. Her naked palms trembled as she pressed forward and found a solid wall of wood.

Spidering her fingers to the place where the stitched fabric seams met the boards above her, she ripped until the threads rent from another wooden wall. She rapped against it and heard an echoless knock. As she searched her clothing, she discovered the shape of her grandmother's locket draped around her neck.

Charlotte kicked her legs and encountered the same wooden prison below her waist. She shoved with all her strength, grunting with the effort. Employing her knees in the endeavor, the process succeeded in tearing a piece of her skirt but nothing more. She drooped back into the satin folds and coughed a hissing sob for help.

A memory formed in her clouded brain. She remembered a man's smiling face leaning over her. A single gold tooth gleamed like the evening star. The recollection faded as her stomach grumbled. She thought of the moist richness of a slice of jam filled cake. Reaching to her left hand, she felt a small metal band and wondered if the man had been her husband.

She picked at the buttons on the unfamiliar taffeta dress she wore. Straining her mind, she believed the texture of the embroidered designs resembled the garment that hid in the deepest corner of her wardrobe. The fashionable gown was to be worn in the event of her death.

Charlotte gasped as much as her throat would allow. She released the buttons as if they had stung her. The wooden box, the aromatic spices in her mouth and nose, the funeral clothes, all her significant jewelry, each piece clicked into place like a puzzle, and she understood. Thrashing her fists, she pounded on the hard surface above her. Rasping shouts fell from her uncooperative lungs.

Charlotte's mind flashed. Her father would not have buried her in anything but a security coffin. He had made an order with the cabinetmaker. A string was to be attached to one hand and one foot. The line would be secured to a bell on the surface. When the lead was pulled, the bell would ring.

The buried woman patted her wrists and felt along the lid of the coffin. No filament presented itself, and the hole to allow the cord entrance was missing. Not knowing how long she could survive, she attacked the bare wood with her fingernails. Splinters pierced the delicate skin under her nails as the tips peeled to the quick.

Her stomach gurgled, and she dropped her hands to her sides. A memory of a banquet seeped into her head. Platters of food sat on every surface, her pastel wedding gown shimmered in the moonlight, and the man's golden grin reappeared. His smile had made her squirm before it faded into her deepening hunger. The unsatisfying thought of watercress sandwiches remained.

Scrambling her hands through the folds of fabric, she seized one of the long gloves and bit into the wrist. She gnashed her teeth, ripping the kid gloves to ribbons. Aside from the saltiness of her dried sweat, the clothing had no taste. The chewing calmed her mind, and her father's face filtered through her thoughts. Papa's wicked grin alongside the gold-toothed man and a sideways glance down an alleyway flickered like a magic lantern show at the New Richmond Theatre. A purse, bulging with banknotes, fell into her father's hand.

Charlotte's ravenous insides felt as though they twisted in knots, though the memory of her father's transaction endured. She gnawed at the remaining tatters until a vision of a whirling dancer interrupted. She imagined a meal of stewed mutton and beef tongue instead of tanned hide gloves as her teeth gnashed into the tough leather.

A small vibration thumped through the ground. Charlotte froze, trying to discern the thud's reality. After a moment, she felt another tremor. She kicked at her wooden prison and coughed a feeble yell. Growing still, she lapsed into silence as she envisioned the gold-toothed man wrestling her to the cobblestones. The deserted park on

Libby Hill overlooked the James River. The sunset sky transformed from dull orange to dusted sapphire as Charlotte struggled against her attacker, her husband, as he wrapped his hands around her throat. As his grip tightened, her memory congealed.

The coffin shuddered as debris crept through a thin crack in the wood and onto Charlotte's face. She swept the loose earth away with the back of her hand as a hard knock sounded above her.

"Fred," a man's deep voice said. "I think I found 'er."

A series of metallic scrapes followed.

"Good job, Henry," a second voice said. "Now alls we got to do is get 'er out and over to Ole Chris."

A heavy thud sounded above her face. She flinched but remained silent. Her stomach lurched under the constraints of her corset. Her cravings grew. The memory of a dripping mouthful of ox heart at Ford's Hotel eased the pain, but the imagined meal did not satisfy her all-consuming appetite.

"How much do you think he'll give us for 'er?" Henry asked. "She ain't been under but a day."

A brisk sweeping sound followed a series of grunts.

"Better be more 'n last time," Fred snorted. "Specially since he's been askin' for a woman to cut up at the college." A shuffling boot scraped the wood. "Even so, this one'll have some pretty baubles for us to make up the difference."

Charlotte closed her eyes to protect them from the falling soil. Her mind raced with questions. Where had she been buried? Did her father know she was here? Why had he taken money from the gold-toothed man? Why had her husband tried to kill her? What was his name? In a matter of moments, she believed she would know the answer to at least one of her questions.

She squinted as a sliver of lamplight shot through an imperfection in the wood. Her stomach grumbled at the sound of a stomping foot. She thought of tearing into a rare steak and watching the blood drip down her arms. The coffin lid splintered at her waist.

"Hand me the crowbar," Henry said.

Something clattered above her.

“Watch it,” Henry hissed. “You almost took my good foot off.”

Having eaten her gloves, Charlotte had none to wear. She folded her hands on her chest and closed her eyes. A cracking of pine preceded a small dirt avalanche. She hazarded a peek from behind her long lashes and saw the stocky form of a man fold the split planks into a packed wall of earth.

“Hey, Fred,” the man said, pointing to the wood he had removed. “Looks like this one was still kickin’. We got claw marks.”

A second head appeared above her and squinted to where Henry gestured.

“Only three nails missing. Couldn’t have been too alive.” Fred adjusted his cap and wiped a filthy handkerchief across his face. “Well, strip her and haul her out. We got two more stops to make before we head to Baker’s.”

Fred’s words speckled Charlotte’s face with flecks of spittle before he disappeared from view. She wanted to wipe away the slobber, but she remained motionless, thinking of slaughtered meat. Henry grabbed the lantern and shone the light on Charlotte’s prone form.

“Fred,” he said. His deep voice turned up in a question. “She don’t look like a scared rabbit like the other scratchers.” Squatting on a thin ledge of dirt, he pressed his ear to her breastbone. “But she’s got no heartbeat.” He felt her pale forehead with his calloused touch. “And she’s clammy cold.”

Charlotte’s stomach rumbled. On instinct, she wrapped her thin fingers around his forearm and pulled his burly muscle to her mouth. Henry’s saucer eyes bulged. He shrieked when Charlotte jammed her teeth into his gristly tissue.

“Hush down there,” Fred said from his perch. “You tryin’ to wake the dead?”

Glancing into the pit, a string of curses flew from his tongue. He leaned into the hole and clung to Henry’s collar. The frayed fabric tore, and Fred fell back into the empty graveyard. He shot to his feet

and took a last look at Henry's flailing free arm before he fled into the shadows.

Charlotte's grip strengthened with each hunk of flesh she devoured. Henry stopped screaming a moment after she plucked his arm from his squirming torso. His body lay in a heap next to her as she ripped through tendons.

By the time Charlotte's hunger diminished, she had made a meal of most of Henry's organs. The dead man's brain had been a challenge, but she had managed to snap his spine and saw through his neck muscles with her teeth. She had scrambled from her grave and smashed Henry's skull on a white marble slab, exposing the gray matter. Spooning her cupped hand into the cavity, she dug out his lobes and slurped them like snails. She squatted on her haunches and licked her fingers as her father's face blinked into her mind.

With her thumb in her mouth, she glimpsed the dark stains on her white lace cuffs. She lowered her hands as if she were approaching a skittish animal and stared at the chunks of carnage swaying from her sleeves.

She peered into the open trench. The lantern rested next to Henry's remains. Charlotte croaked a scream, remembering her part in his destruction. She thrust her hand to her chest. No telltale thump of a beating heart met her fingertips. Henry had been right; she did not live. Her husband had not *tried* to kill her, he *had* killed her. She had become a monster.

Pieces of a picture trickled into her thoughts like drizzle on a drought-ridden streambed. Thomas, her husband, held a needle to her throat. The man had stolen her away from their wedding feast under the guise of a connubial kiss and stabbed her in the neck.

Jolted by the memory, Charlotte whirled. *What had been inside the syringe? Had the shot made her hunger for flesh?* The nearby holly trees hid her from the surrounding city. Marble tombstones scattered the landscape. She staggered past a large wrought iron cage and toward the sound of rumbling water.

The James twinkled below her in the moonlight. Charlotte fell to

her knees. She recognized the view. The end of her father's street looked out on an identical idyllic scene. Her stomach protested as the hunger returned. She rose to her feet and gazed at the statues and tombs. Just beyond the gates of Hollywood Cemetery, her father slumbered in his Oregon Hill home.

Skirting the marble angels and obelisks, she traversed the night. Though her hunger drove her forward, she ducked behind a large rectangular stone as a large black dog trotted past. The idea of ingesting the four-legged creature repulsed her. The mongrel took no notice of the shadows that held her. When she unfolded from her hiding spot, Charlotte glanced over her shoulder and noticed the dog had vanished.

The closed iron gate blocked her exit. She shook the bars, but the lock held fast and rattled in protest. Placing a low-heeled boot between the metal staves, she grasped two of the finials and hoisted herself over the barrier and onto South Cherry Street.

Carriage wheels clattered in the distance, and Charlotte clung to the darkness against the fence. She could recognize the porch steps from where she stood. A lantern flickered in the parlor window. Her father had not retired for the evening.

A knot in Charlotte's gut bent her double. She wrapped her arms around her middle and waited for the piercing pain to pass.

"Excuse me miss," a voice whispered from a nearby alleyway. "Are you all right?"

Charlotte straightened as if she had been a marionette yanked up by the strings. She squinted toward the stranger but made out no more than a furtive form. Her hunger fogged her mind, but she waved away the question and nodded into the gloom. Turning on her heel, she strode toward the familiar veranda.

The five wooden stairs creaked as she climbed. Covered in Henry's drying blood, she reached out her crusted fingers and cranked the bell. Footsteps approached. The latch rattled before the door jerked open, banging into the wall.

"Where have you been?" her father shouted, turning away from

the doorway. "We've got to go get her. The shovels are in the..." His gravelly voice trailed into silence as he turned and saw his daughter's soiled figure. "You," he croaked. "I should not have doubted Thomas." He stepped back and beckoned her into the room. "Come inside. You must be starving."

Charlotte lunged at him with a vigor she had not possessed in life. Tearing at his clothes, she bit into his shielding wrists and clawed at his face. He toppled into the hall table and sent a silver candlestick sliding across the surface. He stretched his arms toward the polished holder as Charlotte cinched her fingers into his hair and snapped back his head. Her father collapsed into a heap. His body twitched. Charlotte fell on his carcass and indulged her appetite with his entrails.

As she lifted the ornate silver cylinder to bash in his skull, a scuffling step sounded at the open door. Forgetting the delicacy encased in her father's head, she stiffened and took a measured turn. A gold-toothed grin gleamed from the entryway.

"Charlotte," Thomas mewled, holding his grin. "What have you done?"

Charlotte snarled and stepped toward him. Thomas shut the door and edged around the wall. He backed into the parlor and rounded the horsehair sofa, using it as a barrier between them. Charlotte stalked into the room and glared at him from behind her gore-drenched bangs.

"Now, Charlotte," Thomas said. "Calm yourself. Your father only wanted what was best for you."

Charlotte hurled the candlestick. Thomas ducked as the projectile sailed past his head and crashed into the velvet-papered wall. A smirk bloomed on his face when he saw a pout form on her blood-stained lips.

"I met your father after a lecture at the medical college," Thomas spoke as if comforting a tantruming child. "I had been asked to speak on the possibilities of eternal life."

Charlotte took a single step closer to the fresh meat. Thomas

tensed but continued to talk.

“Your father requested that I join him after the discourse to discuss my findings in more depth.”

Charlotte scowled and tilted her head as if listening or taking stock of her prey.

“I told him I had made strides in perfecting a chemical formula that would make death obsolete. My success rate among four-legged mammals intrigued him.” Thomas cleared his throat and waved a dismissive hand. “Still, my colleagues insisted on my insanity.” A crease burrowed between his bushy brows. “With only the human trial remaining, they still refused to sanction my study.” Thomas glanced at the pile of man on the floor. “But your father understood. He believed.” His metallic tooth shone in the flickering light. “And look at you, a success.” A frown darkened his eyes as he tapped his thin lips. “I may have to adjust my ratio calculations for two-legged mammals. You seem to have developed quite an appetite for long pig.”

Charlotte sprinted around the couch and slid into the dense lace curtains covering the front window. Her sticky skin and torn nails snagged the eyelets. A single panel spat from a rod as she tried to free herself. Thomas chuckled, strolling to the front of the sofa. Charlotte flung the drape aside and whirled to face him.

“Dear, since your father is dead, this house and its contents are mine.” Thomas crossed his arms over his chest. His brocade waistcoat strained across his rounded shoulders. “As are you. I paid your father a handsome dowry to have the privilege of taking you as my wife.” He looked from her grimy face to the torn curtains and the dented wall. “I would appreciate your taking better care of my possessions.” The bridge of his nose wrinkled to a sneer. “And wash yourself, you resemble nothing more than a wild beast.”

Charlotte’s stomach protested its famished state. She sidestepped the lamp-topped table and growled. Her ruby-stained teeth glistened. The discarded drapery tangled in her boot heel. As she approached the edge of the couch, the trailing fabric snared the insubstantial table.

The glass globe atop the lamp shattered as it fell, and the room dimmed before the glowing wick ignited the spilled oil. Flames snaked across the carpet to the remaining curtains. Charlotte crouched to pounce as her husband backed away from the rising heat.

Thomas shrieked when gnarled knuckles wrapped around his ankle. Charlotte's father glowered from where he lay in the oozing remains of his own innards. The older man's teeth ground together as he tried to pull Thomas down to the floor. Shaking his leg, Thomas attempted to dislodge the corpse's grip.

"How do you still live?" Thomas muttered as he tugged his foot. "You received no serum." He relaxed his pull as his mind toiled. His eyes grew to saucers. "Charlotte's saliva must have transferred her eternity along with her malady to you, old man."

In reply, the consumed man's jaws snapped at the empty air.

"What have I done?" Thomas asked the rising flames.

The blaze flared as it enveloped a framed portrait. Thomas glanced up to see Charlotte's accusing likeness blacken to ash as it stared from the wall. With his opposite heel, Thomas pried the dead man's hand from around his leg. He took a step backward as boughs of fire flicked around the doorframe and into the entrance hall.

"Forgive me," he whispered, taking a second step back as the parlor ceiling collapsed.

Thomas spun toward the closed door and into the waiting arms of his hungry bride.



Rebecca Snow is a Virginia writer who enjoys weaving her real world into her fictional fabrics. When not scribbling, she enjoys photography, herding cats, and travel to anywhere there isn't hot weather. [Web: Rebecca Snow](#)





Lambent Lights

H.R. Boldwood

There is no rest for the wicked. This morn, I awoke to a symphony of saws and hammers that heralded the raising of my gallows. No doubt by midday the news had spread through the city more quickly than consumption. *The Graveyard Ghoul to swing! Ian Bates dies on the morrow!* The merchants of Baltimore surely bustled in the streets, hawking their wares like draggletailed harlots. *Sundries for the hanging! Parasols for the ladies. Hats for the gents. Penny candy for the babes.* I'll wager that upon the lighting of the street lamps, the town cronies raised a toast to my impending demise.

So quick they are to see me dangle at the end of a rope...and so blind to the truth.

Moonlight bleeds through the iron bars of my cell, spilling across first one stone and then the next pursuing me relentlessly. I conceal

myself in the shadows, certain beyond all reason that the Angel Gideon, sword held high, rides that light like a stallion. Patient as Job, he is waiting to pass judgment upon me.

Without question and for just cause, I shall be found lacking. But I should not stand alone. Let me be clear. It is not forgiveness I seek whilst idling in the shadow of the hangman's noose. It is vengeance against the demon seed who put me here.

It was well past midnight on June 3, 1830, when wearied by my duties as night watchman at The Westminster Hall and Burying Ground, I leaned against the carriage gates to enjoy a paste cigar and partake in some mindless woolgathering. From the corner of my eye, I spied a lambent light at the edge of the property.

Having served as the cemetery's watchman for nearly a decade, I speak with great authority on the matter of these mystifying lights. These ghostly will-o'-the-wisps are sentient beings, at best mercurial, at worst malignant, and have lured many a man to his damnation. We both ply our trades in the dead of night, these lights and I. In that regard are we kindred, and so, we afford each other easement as we go about our business. Given the fickle nature of these fiery sprites, I am wont to grant them a wide berth.

However, on this particular night, the shimmering specter beckoned me, refusing me respite until I answered its call. Senses keen and nerves a-tingle, I grabbed a mucking shovel from the gateway and proceeded into the burying grounds. Then came an unexpected sound that chilled me to the bone. It was a nearly imperceptible ringing in the distance. *Steady now*, I thought, *'tis likely your ears deceive you, nothing more*. I continued on my way to where I'd seen the ghost light, whence came the sound again, only stronger. Without question, it was a bell with resonance and reverberation and not the result of fitful hallucination. My anxiety grew.

To a watchman on duty, a knelling in the night could carry horrific implications; implications that made me shudder.

The ringing magnified one hundred fold—a banging, clanging,

pealing appeal; a demanding, commanding call to action that could not be denied. Upon discovering its source, I stopped in place. My dread had proved well founded.

The sound that had beckoned me was the tolling of a safety bell from atop a freshly dug grave! I drove the shovel deep and threw the dirt aside, scarcely allowing myself to consider the untenable truth. *The occupant of this grave was still alive.* “I’m coming!” I screamed. “Hold fast!”

The shovel was far too small for the task but the only tool at hand. Faster and harder I shoveled and heaved, calling out, “I am almost there!” Soon, I began to hear a muffled thumping from beneath the dirt, and moments thereafter, a frantic voice screaming from within the coffin.

Breathless, and with arms that had given their all, I raised the shovel high and brought it down like the hammer of Zeus upon the lock, breaking it free. I threw back the lid to the casket. Its occupant sprang upright like a demented jack-in-the-box!

Ne’er in my life had I seen such a sight. The man gulped air as if to inhale the sky; his eyes so wide they might have popped, his skin more pale than a bloodless corpse. The cord that stretched from inside his coffin to the bell above ground remained in his hand. Adrift in a fugue, he continued to yank it reflexively, causing the bell to toll again and again. One by one, I pried his fingers free. He grabbed at me with such forceful desperation as to dislodge the buttons from my jacket. A croup-like cough burst from within his chest. I handed him my handkerchief and waited for his lungs to clear before moving him.

Once stabilized, I led the exhausted man to the caretaker’s shanty and placed him in a chair beside the desk. He shivered in spite of the warm summer night. I laid my jacket across his shoulders, and he began to babble.

“God bless you, Sir. Thank heaven you appeared! I hadn’t long left. You saved me from a fate more gruesome than I could ever have imagined. My name is Angus Winchell. How may I repay you? I don’t even know your name.”

“I am Ian Bates, the watchman of Westminster Hall,” I said. “You’re safe now, Mr. Winchell. I suggest you rest and pull your wits about you. Perhaps then you will explain how you came to be...buried alive.” I shuddered at the sound of those words, pulled a flask (reserved for medicinal purposes) from my back pocket and poured him a shot. It vanished, as did the next. So pallid he was, with eyes that looked feverish and over-bright.

“Mr. Bates, I assure you, I am of sound mind despite what you may come to think. Mine is a preposterous tale defying all explanation; still, it is the truth. I will swear to it on my mother’s grave.”

“How utterly appropriate,” I said, taking a goodly swig from the flask. Leaning back in my chair, I placed my feet atop the desk and sighed. “This entire episode defies explanation, Mr. Winchell. The prospect of a more implausible tale boggles the mind.

“There could be no story without Malcolm Fletcher,” he began, “the most villainous lout ever slipped from a mother’s loins. I rue the day I met the double-crossing bastard. We shared a coach and several bottles of whiskey while traveling from Charleston to Baltimore. He was a bright man, affable enough when he was in his cups, but as fate would have it, a taciturn tyrant when abstinent.

“The fool that I am formed a partnership with him before his sobriety surfaced. We opened The Winchell Fletcher Trading Company.” He raised his brows. “Perhaps you know of it?” I shook my head, and he continued. “Fletcher saw to the daily operations. I avoided him like the plague, simply supplying the capital as needed. We split the profits evenly. All was well and good, until he decided he no longer needed my money and wanted to buy me out.”

“The thankless bugger!” I said.

“Wasn’t he, though? I told him absolutely not, and if he did not agree, it would be I who bought him out. We did not speak for days; then suddenly, he appeared in my office, hat in hand, offering me a glass of Hermitage Burgundy. He admitted that he had wronged me and lamented his odious behavior. Tired of the quarrel, I accepted his

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