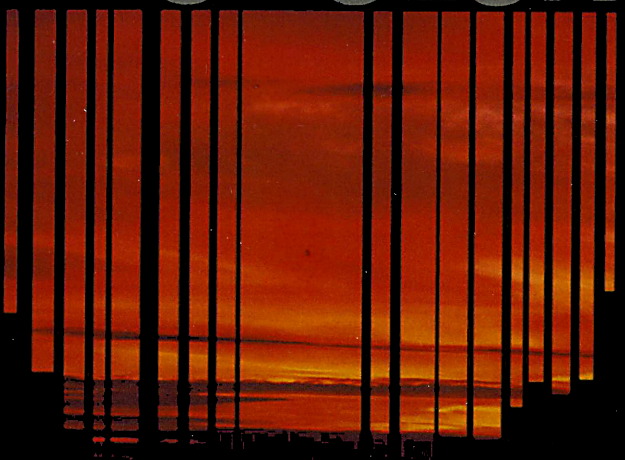
"This collection is like a box of chocolates - each piece more delicious than the last." — Hamish Downie, *Matcha & Vanilla*

SUMMER BLUDGEON



EDITED BY H. DAIR BROWN & ROBIN KNABEL

An Unsettling Reads Anthology

DINNER FOR TWO

Ken Luer

Harry Walker knew he shouldn't have come. He could get knocked off right here, middle of dinner. Sitting in this quiet back room of Donovan's Fine Dining in the North Jersey suburbs. Leaning over his soup, let's say, and next thing he knows, Johnny Avalon stands up and pops him, just like in a movie, and Harry dies face down in a bowl of crab bisque.

But here he sits, watching as the other man chews appreciatively on a mouthful of steak, red juice dripping onto his chin from the barely cooked meat. Avalon's beefy hands clutch his fork and knife, ready for the next strike. Instead, he swallows, places the fork and knife on his plate, picks up his glass of Chianti and takes a deep gulp. Then he looks at Harry.

"I've given this a lot of thought. Here's how I see it. Your buddy Brian came up with the idea to hit my game, pulled you into it. You probably didn't want to, knew robbing me was stupid and dangerous. You're smarter than Brian, after all. But he's a good talker. Convinced you wearing masks and working quick, you'd get away with it, just a smash 'n grab. That about right?"

Harry's frozen, can't get words to crawl out of his mouth. He's a hard guy himself, comes to that. One-on-one, he'd stomp Johnny Avalon's ass, bad enough the guy'd never be the same. But if trouble came, it wouldn't be Johnny and it wouldn't be one-on-one.

And he's got to admit, this local crime boss sees it right. When Brian first pitched his plan to knock over the high stakes poker game Johnny Avalon stages twice a month, Harry said No. When Brian insisted it'd be easy–burst in with guns, put the players on the floor, grab the cash and get out–Harry said No. When Brian said, "This kind of game, gotta be a couple hundred grand on the table," Harry wavered. Then Brian said, "Aren't you tired of living hand-to-mouth, working that shitty job at the box factory? This could kick start us into new lives." That's when Harry gave in.

Avalon's gruff voice breaks Harry's thoughts. "Forget it. You don't have to answer. I see it in your face." Avalon picks up his utensils, slices off another piece of T-Bone, raises it to his mouth. He chews without expression, swallows, then continues.

"So, here's what we're gonna do. You'll kill him for me. Pull a gun, point it right at his face, pull the trigger. Close enough you'll have to wipe yourself off and burn your shirt."

Harry stares back, steak lying untouched on his plate, getting cold.

"Don't like the idea? Sure, I get that. And you have a point: The two of you planned this together. So why don't I just have my guys kill you both? I can do that if you prefer. Just say the word."

Harry stares at Avalon, his mouth dry, his heart pounding inside his chest.

"So, what'll be? I do you both, or you do him and walk away?"

"You won't let me walk away. You'll kill me too."

"Yeah, I see how you'd think that. But I coulda done that already, that's what I wanted. Wouldn't be sitting here trying to make a meal outta this tiny, overpriced steak. Don't get me wrong, they cooked it fine: one pass over the grill, then onto the plate, still bleeding. But when I order a steak, I expect a hunk of meat makes it hard to leave the table under my own power."

Johnny Avalon cut another piece, chewed, swallowed. "Anyway, I think my idea is more fun. Brian sees you pull the gun, dies knowing his best friend going back to short pants is the one who killed him. And you–here's the best part–walk away knowing you killed your best friend. Left his wife and kids with no one and nothing. All to save your own skin. Think how shitty you're gonna feel the rest of your life."

Johnny lifts his wine glass, takes another long swallow.

"What'dya think? Pretty good, huh?"

"You don't have to do this, Johnny."

The other man holds up his hand. "Mr. Avalon to you."

Harry flinches, says, "Mr. Avalon. Sorry. But you don't need to do this. We'll give you back the money. We haven't touched it. It's all in the same bundles as when we took it from your game."

"Oh yeah, you'll give the money back. No question there." Avalon pauses to take another gulp of wine.

"But that's not enough. Disrespect was shown and a fair price must be paid. I let the two of you walk on this, someone else says, 'Hey, let's hit Johnny Avalon's game. He finds out, we just give back the dough. No harm, no foul.' Pretty soon, they think, 'Why not take Johnny out, then it's our game?' You see how that sort of wrong thinking can snowball, right?"

"Then beat us up. Bad. Do it in public, leave us lying there as an example, until someone calls an ambulance." Harry knew he and Brian could take it, pay that price. The world was hard; you had to be harder.

But Avalon frowned. "No, not enough. I need people to see

one of you dead. And the other one walking around shrunk and hangdog reminds folks, keeps their memories fresh."

Harry starts to speak, but Avalon says, "Enough of this. My mind's made up. Let us not spoil our meal."

A BIT LATER, HARRY'S SITTING ON HIS COUCH, A LUMPY BROWN leftover from the previous tenant. The landlord apologized when he walked Harry through the place and said he'd have it hauled away. Harry said to leave it, he needed a couch. Here he is, pushing forty, sitting on a discarded couch that's the focal part of his living space. The card game hit was supposed to change that, give him a new start.

Harry's not sure how he got home. He walked out of the restaurant in a daze. It's mid-August in Northern Jersey, must've been still near eighty and muggy, with mosquitoes out on their nightly blood raids. He barely felt it. The last thing he remembers is unlocking his car and climbing in. He only knows he drove home because he's here.

He's got no doubt Johnny Avalon meant what he said at dinner. Avalon's not one for idle threats. There were stories. One had it that he killed his older brother. Cut Bobby's throat and watched him bleed out in a parking garage. Over a girl Johnny'd only been seeing for three weeks and dumped a month later. Was it true? Well, no body was ever found, but Bobby was never seen again. Where would a mope like that go, under his own power?

So, Harry's choices are: Kill Brian or go on the run.

But how would going on the run work? He and Brian split the money, head off in different directions? It'd have to be that 'cause Brian would need to bring Dorese and their two daughters with him. And where could they all hide? How would they stay off the grid?

That leaves killing Brian. But Johnny Avalon had it right: Harry and Brian have been best friends since they teamed up more than thirty years ago in Mrs. Elkins' First Grade classroom. When Harry was four, his father, three sheets to the wind, smashed their beat-up Chrysler Reliant into an oncoming long-haul truck. After that, Harry grew up in an all-female household– his mom, three older sisters, and him. Brian became the brother Harry never had.

So how could Harry kill his brother?

But it was Brian's fault, them being in this mess. They weren't crime virgins. Starting at nineteen, Harry and Brian spent three years doing B & Es. They picked easy ones, spotting quiet houses during vacation or holiday periods. That kept them going, till Harry got snitched by a girl bargaining her way out of a drug charge. The Judge made Harry enlist to avoid felony time. The girl knew Harry had a partner but didn't know Brian's name and Harry didn't give him up.

In 2006, when Harry came back from his tour in Iraq, he swore off crime. Too much risk for too little reward. And he'd stuck to that until Brian talked him into hitting the card game. Now here he was, faced with Johnny Avalon's ultimatum.

Three times now, Harry had picked up his phone, tried to make himself tap Brian's number from the "Favorites" list, then dropped the phone back down on his couch. But he had to make the call tonight. Brian was holding the money. How long before he opened a bundle and started spending? And once Dorese got a look at the haul, she'd be pushing him, saying what she and the girls needed. If Harry couldn't return all the money to Johnny Avalon, he and Brian would *both* be dead.

He picked the phone up again and, before he could think about it, pushed the listing for Brian. He heard the ringing on the other end, then Brian's voice, sounding a bit groggy. "Yeah. Harry?"

"Hi Brian." Harry's throat was dry, his voice tight.

"Jesus, you know what time it is?"

Actually, Harry had no idea. He looked at the phone screen. "It's only eleven," he said.

"Yeah, it's eleven. We go to bed early. The girls have school tomorrow."

Harry had to recalibrate. He had no wife and kids. His latest girlfriend dropped him six months ago. "Sorry, forgot about that. But this is important. We need to meet tomorrow morning."

"What's so important it couldn't wait for you to call me then?"

Harry had known this question would come, had an answer waiting. "I heard a rumor he knows it was us."

He can picture Brian sitting bolt upright in bed now. "You mean Jo—"

"No names," Harry says. "Not over the phone."

Brian's voice is dead serious now. "Alright. Where should we meet?"

"We need to stay out of sight. Meet me at our usual spot. Be there at eight."

"Yeah, okay. I'll have Dorese take the girls to school."

HARRY GETS THERE EARLY. THE PARKING LOT BEHIND THE OLD, abandoned furniture factory out on Route 22. He's sitting in his dull green Dodge Dart, grey paint patching the passenger-side panel, odometer showing a hundred eleven thousand miles. He's working himself up to what needs doing.

Harry was up most of the night, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. He tried to convince himself that they could all get away, him in one direction, Brian and his family in another. But he couldn't see it working. He tried to think of some other plan,

but came up blank. Then he thought about killing Johnny Avalon.

Harry can kill if he has to. He's done it before, three times in the desert. Sure, that was sixteen years ago, and he'd been in uniform, in combat, but so what? Each time, he looked through his scope and pulled the trigger, saw a guy his age blasted backwards into the dirt, dead for all time. When you pulled a trigger to save your life, the uniform didn't really matter. And after the first time, you didn't much think about it afterwards.

But any way he looks at it, killing Avalon won't save them. First off, how would Harry get to him? Last night at Donovan's, two guys stopped Harry outside, frisked him hard before letting him go in. And even if Harry *could* get to him, there's no way Avalon's murder would go unanswered. Whoever stepped into his shoes would see to that.

Sometime in the wee hours, Harry finally gave up trying to think of some other way and dropped into a fitful sleep. Now, sitting in the Dart looking out at Jersey's gloomy winter sky, he knows the choice is this: him or Brian. Harry's not ready to die. Hard as it is, he's got to shoot Brian. It's the only way.

Then, as Johnny Avalon had put it, Harry will have to live forever after with the terrible memory of that deed. Like Cain, after he did Abel. He almost wishes it was him about to get shot. Almost.

He's willed himself into a sort of clenched-jaw trance, freezing his heart, when he hears tires crunching into the gravel of the empty parking lot. It's Brian, of course, in his Chevy Trailblazer, with its fading blue paint and side panels rusted at the bottom. The one Brian had said he'd replace with a new Toyota Highlander till Harry convinced him to hold off, so Johnny didn't see them flashing new toys right after his card game was robbed.

The Trailblazer grinds to a stop and Brian climbs out, in

jeans and a T-shirt under his light grey parka, hanging open and loose. He stops in front of Harry, hands jammed into the side pockets of his parka. He says, "OK. Let's have it. What have you heard?"

As much as Harry practiced this, he's speaking too fast, rushing his words, and he knows it. "I think Johnny found out we robbed his game. Maybe we need to run."

Brian shakes his head. "That won't work. First, if we run, he'll know it's us. Second, I got Dorese and the girls. I can't leave them behind. Where we gonna go he won't find us?"

Harry steels himself. He's let Brian see there's no way out. It's now or never. He reaches behind and pulls a snub-nose .38 from his back pocket, points it straight at the center of Brian's face, steadies his forearm with his left hand. Brian looks back, face drawn down in shock.

"What are you doing, Harry?"

"I'm sorry Brian. I got no choice. Avalon *does* know. He says I have to kill you and give the money back. If I don't, he'll kill the both of us. Dorese and the kids too." Johnny hadn't said that last part, but Harry figured it might convince Brian this was for the best.

Brian speaks, his tone quiet and sad. "Please don't do this Harry. We're closer than brothers. Since we were little kids. How can you look me in the face and shoot me dead?" He lets that sink in, as Harry struggles to keep it from invading his mind.

"And what about Dorese and the girls? Picture it: She picks Lily and Rose up from middle school, tells them their 'Uncle Harry' has killed their dad? You're their godfather, for Christ's sake, took your turn holding them at their baptisms. Now you're going to make them orphans?"

Harry's resolve crumbles, and he lowers the gun. "You're right, I can't. But what now? He'll come after us."

Brian shrugs his shoulders, but when his hands come out of

his parka, the right one's holding a pistol. "Drop your gun, Harry."

Harry is stunned, manages, "Brian, what are you doing? You can't shoot me, any more than I could shoot you."

There's a loud crack and Harry feels a sharp sting tear through the flesh of his upper right arm. His gun slips from his hand, hits the gravel with a thud. He stares at Brian, unbelieving.

Brian shakes his head. "I knew you couldn't do it. I know that I can. I don't want to, but, like you put it, what choice is there?"

Harry, trying to put this together, says, "How did you know?"

"After you called last night, I made some calls of my own. Found out you and Johnny had dinner at Donovan's last night. You told me you'd heard rumors, but that was a lie. That's when I knew. You lied to me, so I wouldn't suspect what might be coming when I met up with you."

Harry, his voice breaking more from sadness than fear, says, "I'm sorry, Brian. I was scared of Johnny Avalon. He made me do it."

Brian nods his understanding but keeps his gun trained on Harry.

Harry gropes for an out. "Look, like you said, you and Dorese and the girls can't hide from Johnny forever. Why don't we kill him before he gets us?"

Brian laughs, a snort, really. "We'll never get near him. You know that."

His voice is gentle now. "I'm sorry, Harry, but it has to be this way. Dorese left with the girls last night. After you called, I woke her, told her how things were. We packed what we could and bundled the girls into our other car. They must be near Ohio by now. When she hits Columbus, she'll find a park or something like that, keep the girls occupied, wait for me to catch up by late afternoon. Then I'll steal a car, we'll leave ours in

long-distance parking at the Columbus Airport, along with our cell phones. We'll head west, or north, or south, whichever hits our mood, and we'll never look back."

"But you said yourself, Johnny'll find you. People get found on the Internet. And he's probably got contacts with made guys all over the country. He won't let it go."

"I just said that to play along. I'm not worried about him finding us. I got a source for false IDs, a guy outside Columbus. And you're giving Avalon too much credit. He ain't exactly the boss of bosses. He's a big guy around here, but in the end, he's a small guy with a small reach. We'll melt into the landscape somewhere out there. And, besides, he'll get his pound of flesh."

Harry tries again. "Brian, you said it: We're brothers. Scared as I was of Johnny, I couldn't go through with it. That has to count for something."

"It does. I'll always know you loved me like a brother." Then he shot Harry three times in the chest, each bullet entering within a half-inch radius of the others. When the sound of the last gunshot faded out, he said, "I'm sorry, Harry."

Writhing in pain, feeling the warm liquid pulsing from his chest, Harry looks up from the hard ground. He sees Brian wipe tears on his sleeve, then turn and walk away. No looking back. Harry remembers his meal with Johnny Avalon. Johnny had been right: Brian was a good talker. When it counted, he got Harry to drop his guard. After that, Harry doesn't think anything.

Ken Luer began life in Columbus, was spirited away to NJ as an infant, escaped to VA for college, and nine years later took the Donner Trail to LA (OK, maybe flew over it). He's been a golf caddy, factory worker (ask him about making paper boxes or plastic molds), copyboy at a city paper, paralegal, and lawyer. Ken's first story, "Whiskey and Rain" appeared in Vol. 2, Issue 2 of *Down & Out Magazine*. "No Going Back" is set for an upcoming issue of *Yellow Mama*. Ken writes what he loves to read: noir and crime, with a touch of lit. You can reach him on Twitter: Ken Luer @KenLuer.

"Summer Bludgeon proves that summer is prime time for crime. This is not your ordinary beach read. It's a white-knuckle roller coaster ride, one in a seedy amusement park where fatalities keep happening. Climb aboard and hang on tight!"

— Jill Hand, the *Trapnell Thriller Series*

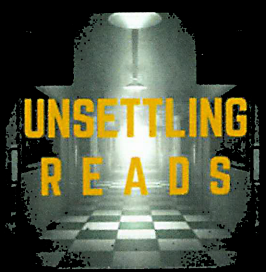
33 ORIGINAL TALES ABOUT SUMMER'S DARKER SIDE

Inspired by an earworm from a song in the 1978 film *Grease*, "summer lovin'" became "summer bludgeon." *Voila!* A new collection was born. The stories, poems, and art included in this collection highlight the dark corners of our hearts. They pull back the curtains and show us people at odds, broken relationships, romantic love gone terribly wrong. Cold deeds and chilling words unfold against the simmering backdrop of the "warmest" season of the year.

TALES FROM BEV VINCENT, JOSEPH S. WALKER, BRANDON BARROWS, COREY LYNN FAYMAN, LEE PLETZERS, JM CONNORS, AMANDA NICHOLSON, SHANNON LAWRENCE, JAHMIL EFFEND, CHRIS WHEATLEY & MANY MORE FROM THE CRIME, MYSTERY, NOIR, SUSPENSE, & THRILLER GENRES.

Unsettling Reads, LLC was founded by fiction authors, **H. Dair Brown** and **Robin Knabel**, and focuses on publishing and reviewing fiction and authors from the Crime, Fantasy, Horror, Literary, Mystery, Noir, Sci-Fi, Suspense, and Thriller genres (and associated sub-genres). Visit the website for up-to-date info on releases from Unsettling Reads, author interviews, spoiler-free book reviews, reading lists, and recommendations. Find them on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (@unsettlingreads).

www.unsettlingreads.com



ISBN 9798813083112

9 798813 083112

90000