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Sinner Man

Written by Lawrence Block

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Sinner MAN

by **Lawrence Block**



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SINNER MAN

I

"Oh, for Christ's sake," I said. "You can get up now. No matter how long you lie there, nobody's gonna give you a fucking Academy Award for it."

No response. I noted the trickle of blood from her temple, the angle of her head where it met the surround of the field-stone fireplace.

I stood there, waiting for someone to run the film backward, waiting for her to rise up from the carpet, waiting for my hand to draw back from her face, to delete the blow that had sent her stumbling and falling and cracking her head on the stone with a sound that still echoed through the room.

Waiting for the past five minutes to erase themselves.

I don't know how long it took for me to kneel down next to her. I felt for a pulse that wasn't there, tried to remember what else you were supposed to do. In movies they'd see if there was a trace of breath to fog a pocket mirror, but strangely enough I didn't happen to have a mirror in my pocket.

There was a large mirror mounted above the fireplace. I thought of hauling Ellen to her feet and pressing her face against the mirror, but that didn't strike me as a very good idea. Or I could try smashing the thing and holding a piece of it to her lips, but I had the feeling I was already in for enough bad luck, I didn't need seven years more.

I could just wait a few hours and see if she cooled to room temperature. That would be a pretty good sign, wouldn't it?

Not that I needed a sign.

What I needed was someone to blame.

How about Ray Danton? Or Legs Diamond, the slick fellow

I'd watched him play a few hours earlier? Or another slick fellow, Johnnie Walker by name, whose picture was on the bottle on the mantel over the fireplace. The bottle was half empty or half full, depending on whether you were an optimist or a pessimist.

But there looked to be two bottles, one the mirror's reflection of the other. One was half empty, I decided, and the other was half full.

I dismissed the bottle in the mirror and uncapped the real one.

Haven't you had enough to drink?

Ellen's voice, clear as a bell in my head, as if it were still echoing around the room. God knows she'd spoken the sentence often enough over the years, and the answer was always no, I hadn't had enough to drink, now that she mentioned it.

But maybe this time she was right. I'd need a clear head, wouldn't I?

For what?

I compromised by taking a short pull straight from the bottle, then recapped it and set it down.

My wife was dead. And while I might try to blame her—for provoking the blow, for falling clumsily, for landing wrong—it was clearly my fault and not hers. Nor could I blame those three old smoothies, Ray and Legs and Johnnie.

Though they'd all played their parts…

It's hard to say where anything starts, but it may have been that day at lunch, and it wasn't Johnnie Walker but his cousin Gordon who supplied the jigger in the woodpile. Gordon's Gin, that is to say, and when my lunch companion suggested a second round of martinis, I thought it sounded like a good idea.

After lunch we went our separate ways, and my way was

supposed to lead to an appointment with a client. I'd been softening the guy up for a while now, and he was just about ready to bite on a hefty straight life policy, and all I had to do was meet with him and reel him in.

That second martini loosened me up just enough to question the need to waste the afternoon in that fashion.

Not that it was an afternoon that made one rush to the beach, or hike in the mountains. It was a gray day, constantly threatening to rain but never quite getting around to it. A day to sit in a movie house and watch something dark and nasty.

I was in my car, driving in the direction of my afternoon appointment. And I caught a red light at the corner of Wayland and Lamonica, and I looked over to my left at a movie marquee. *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond*, I read.

I'd read something about the film. It had just opened. And I knew a little about Legs Diamond, who'd operated in New York and up the Hudson Valley to Albany, which is not that far away from Danbury.

And I've always loved gangster movies.

I parked the car, checked the schedule, discovered that the picture was going to start in twenty minutes. That gave me just enough time to find a pay phone and cancel my appointment, and find a liquor store and switch from Gordon to cousin Johnnie. Just a half pint, to keep me company while I watched Ray Danton bring the late Jack "Legs" Diamond back to life.

For a while at least, until a hail of bullets cut him down.

I watched the film through to the end, and when it was over I wished it was the first half of a double feature. But there was just the one picture, and I walked out thinking that maybe that was just as well, because I'd sipped my way through the half pint of scotch while Legs was occupied with rising and falling.

I suppose I was a little bit drunk. Closer, certainly, to drunkeness than to sobriety. But I didn't feel drunk. I felt deeply relaxed, very comfortable within my own skin, and at the same time I felt energized, ready for something to happen.

Yeah, right.

I sat in the car, left my key unturned in the ignition, and gave myself over to the film I'd just seen. Somewhere in there, buried beneath the drama and action, there looked to be a moral. And, because that's how Hollywood works, it pretty much had to be *Crime Does Not Pay*.

And I suppose it didn't, if you went by the ending. Legs Diamond wound up dead.

But doesn't everybody? All of us, even those of us who wear Brooks Brothers suits and sell whole life, wind up the same way.

But Legs sure had fun while it lasted…

I stopped at a liquor store on the way home, and my house was empty when I walked in the door. I cracked the seal on the bottle—Johnnie Walker Red Label, a fifth of the same medicine I'd had a half pint of in the tenth row at Loews Danbury. I used a glass, and when it was empty I filled it up again, and when it was full I sipped at it until it needed filling.

Somewhere along the way Ellen came home.

I don't remember how the argument started, or what it was about. The fact that I'd been drinking was mentioned, you can be sure of that, and that line—*Haven't you had enough to drink?*—was spoken, and answered silently, unless you count the sound of liquor transferred from bottle to glass.

She put dinner on the table, though neither of us had much of an appetite for it. And then the argument resumed, and she said something about the folly of breaking appointments with valuable clients, and I said something about having to see movies

during the daytime, because I could no more stomach the Rock Hudson–Doris Day crap she liked than she could sit through a good gangster movie. And it got nasty, the way an argument can, and that's what you get in a marriage that's not very good and probably never should have happened in the first place.

But that would have been nothing new, an argument, with each of us saying things we shouldn't have said, and me drinking too much, and in the morning we'd pretend it hadn't happened.

Nothing we couldn't live with.

Except her mouth just wouldn't quit, and I reached for the scotch bottle, and she said it was already half-empty. I could have said that was a pessimistic way of looking at it, that you could as easily say it was half-full, but that sort of banter wouldn't have matched my mood. I had hold of it by the neck, and her eyes widened as I stepped toward her, bottle raised overhead.

She thought I was going to hit her with the bottle. But I swear that was never in my mind, it was enough that the threat cut off the flow of words. I set the bottle down.

And the words started flowing again.

And, finally, I gave her a smack. Openhanded, across the face, just to make her shut up.

Nothing that hadn't happened a couple of times before.

Except she fell, and don't ask me why because I didn't hit her all that hard. And she landed wrong.

And now she was dead.

Did they still have the death penalty in Connecticut? I couldn't remember.

It seemed to me there'd been a movement to abolish it, but I didn't know if it got anywhere. I smoked a cigarette and thought about it. I remembered the bullets that Legs Diamond got, and

I wondered how the state did it. A chair wired for electricity? A rope around your neck? A room full of gas?

Or just a lifetime in a prison cell?

Whether or not there was a death penalty, I didn't have to worry about it. Not even a low-grade moron would plan to murder his wife by smashing her head in their own living room. There were plenty of rational ways to kill Ellen, and I'd had fantasies of most of them at one time or another, running them through my mind the way you do. Some were simple and some were elaborate, but none of them was anything like what had just happened.

So I had not committed premeditated murder. What would a jury call it? Second-degree murder at worst, temporary insanity at best, with some kind of manslaughter in the middle, and the most likely.

So I wouldn't get the chair, or the rope, or gas, or life—whatever was dispensed in this state. I'd catch either a short-to-middling prison sentence or an acquittal. All I had to do was pick up the telephone and call the local police and inform them that I, Donald Barshter, had just accidentally killed my wife. They would do the rest. From that point on it would be out of my hands, a judicial tug of war between the district attorney's office and my own lawyer. I could relax and let them figure out what they were going to do to me.

I reached for the phone, I held the receiver to my ear with my left hand and fitted my index finger into the little hole marked O for Operator. Then I took a deep breath.

And stopped cold. And took my index finger out of O for Operator and put the receiver back in the cradle.

This picture came to me. It was a picture of my little world with everything gone right—an acquittal, say, or the suspended sentence they give you that says you're a solid citizen who

made a mistake and please don't do it again. I wondered how many people would be likely to buy an insurance policy from Donald Barshter, wife-killer. I wondered how many of the friends Ellen and I had shared would ask me over for a few drinks and a rubber or two of bridge. I thought about the way the good folks of the town would stare at me on the streets and the way the mothers would chain their daughters home when I was walking around.

I thought of courtrooms, jails and newspaper photos. I thought of all the little details that completed the picture. All I had to do was call the police and I would make that picture my life.

But what was the alternative? Ellen looked up at me with a flat empty stare. She was dead, I had killed her—and the dumbest cop in town could figure out that much with his eyes shut. I couldn't get Ellen's blood out of the carpet, couldn't patch her head with plastic wood. I was her husband and that made me suspect number one from the start. No matter how cute an alibi I cooked up, the police would pick it to pieces and laugh in my face.

So I reached for the phone again. And stopped.

Donald Barshter, thirty-two-year-old representative for one of the country's leading life insurance companies, was a goner. The life he had been living for those thirty-two years was over. He was finished, washed up, through.

Well, to hell with him. I still had a chance.

It was Friday night. In a little less than half an hour it would be midnight. Ellen had been dead almost an hour. Her skin was already growing cold. I still sat on the edge of our bed. I was working my way through the last cigarette from the pack.

I had picked a bad night to kill her. There was the unimpressive sum of fifty-three dollars in my wallet and a few bucks in

change in various pockets here and there—which was not nearly enough.

I got rid of the cigarette, went to my desk and began adding up assets with paper and pencil. There was fourteen hundred in the checking account, thirty-five hundred in the savings account. There was the cash surrender value of a few life policies, a couple thousand tied up in stocks, a little more in mutual funds. But there was no time to surrender the insurance and no time to sell the securities. I had forty-nine hundred dollars in cash assets and I couldn't get to them until Monday morning.

Since the banks opened at nine, I had fifty-seven hours to kill. Fifty-seven hours to spend at home with Ellen, who was dead.

I went downstairs and made myself a cup of instant coffee. I found a fresh pack of cigarettes and smoked one while I drank the coffee. Then I came back upstairs and returned to the bedroom. I picked up Ellen's body and carried her to her closet. She was heavy but not hard to carry. I placed her on the closet floor and closed the door on her. The room was much emptier without her body in the middle of the floor. It also made her death that much less real. And thinking that much easier.

Fifty-seven hours. The daytime hours would be the hard ones, with the phone ringing and the doorbell ringing and too many people to talk with, too many explanations to invent. Nights would be easier.

And, because there was nothing else to do for the time being, I got into my own bed and slept. There was a lot of tossing and turning before sleep came. There were hectic dreams later, but when I awoke I couldn't remember them.

There were two phone calls for Ellen Saturday morning and one during the afternoon. I told three women that she was out,

that I didn't know when she'd be back, that I'd have her call them. I made one call on my own. We were supposed to have dinner with three other couples Saturday night, after which we were scheduled to play bridge at somebody's house and spend a dull evening with them. I called Grace Dallman and told her we wouldn't be able to make it, that an aunt of Ellen's in North Carolina had died and that Ellen was catching a train that evening for Charlotte. The funeral would be held Monday and she wanted to get there early.

It was a handy story. Ellen actually did have an aunt in North Carolina, a noisy and unpleasant woman who had never been sick a day in her life as far as I knew. But I liked the story and stuck to it that evening when a few more of Ellen's friends called up. I told them all that she would be back Tuesday or Wednesday. They were all properly sympathetic.

So I spent Saturday night watching television and nursing a can or two of beer. I have no idea what I watched on the twenty-one-inch silver screen. It was a way to pass time and nothing more. For the time being I wanted to do as little thinking or planning as I possibly could. That would come later when my mind was a little looser and the fact of Ellen's death a little further removed from reality. Any thinking now would be colored too strongly by fear, shot through too thoroughly by worry. There was time.

I went to sleep at two, with the fifty-seven hours pared to thirty-one. I slept until ten and cut the time down to twenty-three hours. We were getting right down to the wire.

I scrambled a pair of eggs and fried bacon for Sunday breakfast. I smoked the day's first cigarette with coffee and thought about one thing I'd been consciously avoiding. Now it was time to think about it.

Because the killing of Ellen wasn't manslaughter anymore. The killing wasn't manslaughter and it wasn't second-degree murder—it had ceased to be either the minute I stuffed Ellen's corpse in her closet and decided to leave her to heaven. Now it was Murder One, the big one, and I was a murderer in the first and foremost degree.

The killing had stopped being manslaughter the minute I decided not to call the police, the minute I decided not to go to court or to jail. I couldn't plead for gentle justice anymore. I couldn't get caught at all.

So now I was the man on the run. The fact that I wasn't running at all, that in fact I was having breakfast in my own kitchen, had nothing to do with it. I had to run—hell, I had to do more than that. A lifetime on the run was nothing but a life sentence to a mobile jail.

I had to be someone else. I had to be someone who was not Donald Barshter, someone who didn't live in this town, someone who didn't sell insurance. Someone who hadn't murdered his wife. Someone who wasn't running.

Someone with a new name and a new address and a new personality. Someone with his own life to live and his own fish to fry. Someone settled in his own little groove.

And it couldn't help being an infinitely better groove than selling insurance to people who didn't really want or need insurance; living with a woman I didn't even like, let alone love; making monthly deposits in the savings account and the checking account and balancing these precariously with monthly payments on the house and the car and the television set and the washer and the dryer; and saying the same dismal words day after day to the same dismal people.

The impersonation might even be fun. Like an actor playing a part. Like Danton playing Legs.

I left the breakfast dishes in the sink and wondered if anybody would ever wash them and dry them and put them to bed in the proper cupboards. I went upstairs again, took a shower and got dressed. I found a good leather suitcase of mine, one of the few that hadn't been monogrammed. I opened it, propped it up on the bed and looked through drawers and closets for things to put in it. I found few things. It was going to be necessary to travel light. The wardrobe that suited Donald Barshter would not suit the man I was going to become.

Clothes are part of a personality. Donald Barshter's tweeds and pinstripes and regimental ties and button-down shirts were part and parcel of his grownup Ivy League personality—they went hand in hand with the briefcase and the actuarial tables and the memo books. Barshter's clothes wouldn't do.

I packed three white shirts, a few pairs of undershorts and T-shirts, a few of my louder ties. I didn't bother with suits or shoes—I would wear one suit and one pair of shoes and that would be enough. The less of Donald Barshter's clothes I had, the less I'd have to get rid of later on.

That more or less took care of Sunday. During the afternoon I wandered around the corner to the drugstore and picked up a copy of the *New York Times*. I ran into a few people I knew and mentioned that Ellen was out of town and that I was living a bachelor's life for the next day or two. I even set up an appointment to talk a fellow into carrying more life insurance. Then I went home and alternated between the *Times* and the television set until it was time to go to sleep.

I didn't sleep much.

I had the alarm set for eight-thirty but I was up before it had a chance to go off. I was completely awake the second I opened my eyes and my blood nearly sang with energy. I showered and

shaved and dressed, picking out an anonymously gray suit and a pair of Italian shoes. I tried to remember the last time I'd felt so thoroughly alive, so excited and ready to go. I couldn't remember a comparable morning in years. There had been similar mornings in Korea, of course, and a few in the first years of marriage. But since then excitement had not been part of my life, had not been a common feeling at all. Which was a shame—excitement is a healthy thing.

I tucked my wallet in one pocket, my keys in another. I scooped up a handful of loose change and dropped it into a third pocket. Next I found my bankbook and my checkbook and made room for them. I picked up the suitcase, which wasn't heavy at all, and carried it out of the house to the car. I put the suitcase in the back of the car on the floor.

The two banks where I had accounts were across the street from one another on Chambers. I cashed a check for thirteen hundred at the bank where I had my checking account, leaving a hundred dollars to keep the account warm. I crossed the street and emptied the savings account, explaining that I had a cash deal pending and needed the dough in a hurry. The teller told me I could take a low-interest loan and keep my account intact but I managed to talk him out of it. I left the bank with forty-eight hundred-dollar bills in my wallet. I hoped the sum would be enough.

Now I felt tension building up in my body like steam in a teakettle just before it whistles. I crossed the street to my car, the morning sun coming down strong. I couldn't help feeling that everybody was looking at me, that I was marvelously conspicuous with Cain's mark on my forehead. Or maybe there was a special mark for uxoricide, a particular sign for wife-killers.

I got into the car and drove out of town. There was a perfectly good railroad terminal in town just a few blocks away—but I had to go somewhere safe, to a place where I wouldn't be

stepping on acquaintances. I drove to Hartford and put the car in a downtown parking lot. I carried the suitcase to the railroad station. On the way I shredded the parking check and dropped it in a trash can.

It was a shame to give up the car but I could hardly keep it. And it might have hurt more if I had liked the car or if it had been paid for. As it was I owed an impressive sum to the finance company, so it wasn't quite as though I were abandoning the entire car. Just the power steering and the power brakes and the automatic transmission—I could live without them just as I could live without Ellen.

There was a line in front of the ticket window in the railroad station. I stood in line and waited my turn, still feeling painfully conspicuous, still feeling that everyone was taking careful notice of me. Finally I was at the front of the line. I bought a ticket to New York and went to the platform to wait for my train. It came and I boarded it.