

# **MURDER WITHOUT A CORPSE**

NORMAN A. DANIELS



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Patrolman Mike Conway rounded the deserted corner of Ninth Avenue and Barrington Street. He was stowing away his keys after the 1:15 duty call. Therefore Conway's hand wasn't very far away from his holstered gun.

He saw two things, almost simultaneously. A sedan was moving slowly along the wrong side of the street, and a man on the sidewalk was running crazily.

The blast of a gun broke the early morning quiet! The killer fired four shots, very fast but apparently with remarkable accuracy for the man on the sidewalk stopped, straightened up to his full height, and then pitched forward. He rolled limply off the sidewalk into the gutter.

Conway's service pistol barked a warning shot. Not that he expected it to be obeyed, but Conway was considered the crack shot of the force and knew that he could afford to waste a shot. There was a marksman medal pinned beneath his badge.

The car gained speed. Conway slowed up, curved his left arm in front of him and rested the muzzle of his pistol against it. He snapped three shots this time, and they didn't miss. Conway knew they couldn't have. He'd wasted enough ammunition to be sure he'd never miss at this range.

The car gave a wild lurch to the left, climbed the curb, rolled across the sidewalk and smashed into the stone wall of a building. Instantly there was a puff of smoke and flames leaped from the vehicle.

Conway cast a quick glance at the victim in the gutter, knew the man must be dead because of the way he fell, and then raced toward the now fiercely burning car.

Someone jumped out of the rear, a slim man with hat brim pulled low and collar high. He darted along the sidewalk for about ten feet, swerved and disappeared into the mouth of an alley.

Conway had no time for him; there was someone else in the car. The driver, probably, because Conway saw an arm hanging limply through the window. He tried to approach the car, but those flames beat him back. He curled an arm over his face and tried again. He felt his hair and eyebrows singe; felt the searing heat and jumped back. The flames and smoke prevented him from seeing the face of the man behind the wheel, but he did notice that there were three bullet holes through the back of the sedan, attesting to his marksmanship.

Conway raced for a firebox on the next corner, yanked down the lever, then hurried back to where the first victim had been sprawled in the gutter. Conway stopped and gaped.

The body was gone!

How could a man, hit by two or three bullets that brought him down violently, get up and walk away? Nobody had appeared to pick him up. Conway was positive of that.

There wasn't much time to waste wondering. Fire apparatus roared up and two radio cars answered the same alarm. Conway sent one of the cars to the precinct for help from the homicide division. Then he went to aid the firemen.

By the lavish use of chemicals, the fire was soon extinguished; but Conway gulped and turned away when he got a look at the corpse. There wasn't much left of it, nor of the car, either.

All this didn't look so well—for a patrolman to tell about a man falling in the gutter, riddled with bullets, and then have no corpse there to prove it. By the way things looked, Conway might have just taken a pot shot at the driver of the car.

But maybe there was blood on the sidewalk, or bullet marks in the building walls. Conway went back to where the stranger had fallen.

He gave a grunt of satisfaction. There was a stain on the sidewalk, just where the man had collapsed. It glistened slightly in the rays of the street lamp. Conway bent down, frowned and touched his fingertip to the stuff.

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It wasn't blood. The tip of his finger turned a violent blue. This was some kind of ink, or dye, and it had been spread rather lavishly over the cement.

Then Conway was busy. Homicide men arrived. He told them the whole story, recognized the doubt in their eyes, then stepped back while they compared notes.

Sergeant Malloy said: "This copper is cracked. If a guy dropped like he said he did, we'd have another corpse. Did you men see any signs of bullet marks?"

"None! And if they missed the guy, we'd have found them. If they didn't, the guy would still be there. Looks fishy to me. The medical examiner just told me a slug went right through the dead man's head. Can't tell the caliber."

Another pair of detectives joined the circle. One held out a partly burned wallet.

"This is going to make trouble, sarge. That car belonged to young Weldon Somers. Remember? There's been an alarm out to look for it. The kid disappeared a couple of days ago, and his folks are worried. This wallet contains pretty badly charred pieces of paper, an insurance card, driver's ticket and some name cards. Everything is made out to Weldon Somers. There were gold cuff links on the body, with initials that match Somers'."

Sergeant Malloy carefully tucked the evidence into his pocket. Then he spoke with the heavy tones of authority.

"Get Patrolman Conway. I'm not satisfied with his story. That guy is afflicted with a mania for sharpshooting—the best shot on the force. Maybe he was doing a little target practice, knocked off this Somers and then cooked up the whole story. It sounds phony to me." But they didn't get Conway. He, in fact, agreed thoroughly with Malloy and knew the consequences might mean suspension or worse. There was no evidence to back up his wild story. So Conway just faded down the same alley that the man who escaped from the burning car had used.

He reached a small, dark public park and sat down on a bench to think it over. Until he could prove his story, there wasn't much sense in facing the precinct captain, reporters, photographers and finally the police commissioner.

Conway knew all about this Weldon Somers. His father was wealthy. The boy had too much money and influence. He liked poker games, liquor, horse racing and blondes. Especially the blondes.

Forty-eight hours ago his father notified the missing persons' bureau that Weldon hadn't come home and that his sedan was also missing. A quiet alarm had been sent out. Conway even had the numbers of that car filed away on the card in his hat.

A good lawyer could make a lot out of that little detail, insinuating that Conway saw the car, called to the driver to halt and, when he didn't, opened fire. Realizing his mistake, the patrolman then fashioned this phony story to cover the results of his itching trigger finger.

At that thought, Conway remembered his own stained forefinger. He brought out his flash-light and studied the stain intently. He realized that the man who had pretended to be the victim of a gunman, must have had a bottle of this blue dye in his pocket. When he hit the ground, the bottle broke. On that slender clue, Conway had to base his entire case. It looked hopeless, but Conway recalled the way he'd first faced a target on the police pistol range. That had seemed hopeless, too; but he'd made the grade and topped all comers.

He knew also that Weldon Somers had been last seen entering the roadhouse owned by Jim Bowker. It was just this side of the city limits and isolated enough so that spotters could give a quick alarm if police cars showed up at the wrong time. Plenty of money changed hands in the rooms on the second floor of Bowker's place. He'd been chased out of the bright-light district months before, The Broadway squad hadn't liked the sound of his roulette wheels.

But Somers' trail ended at the roadhouse because plenty of people had watched him drink himself into a state of plastered frivolity and pester the show girls and customers.

Jim Bowker's story was that he led Somers out of the place, put him in his car and told him to beat it. Yet Conway's blue-stained finger intrigued him even more than this much public history of young Somers.

Conway glanced at his watch. About this time Bowker's place would be going full blast. If he had any kind of a hand in the murder of young Somers and the apparently faked killing of that other man, he'd be there alibing himself all over the place. Which meant his house in town might be empty. Conway decided to have a look. Not that he had anything on Bowker, but sometimes wealthy, foolish kids mix too well with gamblers and racketeers.

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It was a little difficult moving about town because Conway knew there'd be a radio alarm out for him. He had one advantage. He knew most of the beats in this neighborhood and timed his travels so he'd miss the patrolmen.

Bowker's place was a narrow, private dwelling, tucked between two big mercantile buildings. The whole section was given to small and large business enterprises; but Bowker stayed there, broadcasting the fact that he had a sentimental attachment for the place. In reality, it was an excellent spot for a crook. Men could come and go with ease. There was a rear exit; another led over rooftops. Bowker's sentimental rating of this house was more of a self-preservation idea.

Conway reached the house, stalled in a deep doorway until the patrolman passed by, and then, with a wary eye out for radio cars, sprinted across the street, up the brick stairs and into the alcove. He tried the knob carefully. The door was locked. Conway wondered what a little matter of burglary would add to his sentence as he wadded his handkerchief against the small pane of glass in the door.

Using his gun butt, he tapped hopefully; then, with a grunt of exasperation, he gave the glass a solid smack, It made some noise, but not as much as he had expected.

Reaching through the hole he had created, Conway unlocked the door and also removed a burglar chain. That chain gave him ideas. Somebody was in the house, unless Bowker had a habit of leaving his home via the back door and an alley.

Conway drew his gun, just to be on the safe side. He passed down a long hallway and stared up the steps to the second floor. Someone was up there, cursing steadily and furiously. Then the oaths were drowned by the sound of a shower being turned on.

Conway went up those stairs softly. He knew his hunch wasn't wrong; but if he failed, there was no telling where he'd end up. Morgue slab or prison cell, it didn't make much difference. Conway would have no peace until he cleared himself,

He walked into a bedroom, approached the bathroom door slowly and took a quick look inside. It was equipped with a glass inclosed shower and a swarthy man was scrubbing rather vainly at a brilliant-blue stain on his chest. His clothes were carelessly draped over a chair. The shirt was badly stained with the blue stuff, and there was more on his vest and coat. This was the man who had taken a dive on the sidewalk and had given a perfect imitation of a corpse.

Conway yanked open the shower door. "All right," he snapped, "you can come out now. Ten hours in there wouldn't remove that blue stain on your chest."

The man turned around, wiped water out of his eyes and began to swear softly. He shut off the water, kept his hands shoulder-high and stepped out. Conway threw him a towel.

"Dry yourself and hurry it up. Don't get any blood on that towel, either—from those bullet wounds you should have drilled through you."

"What is this?" the man protested. "What's the idea, huh? You're Conway, the cop who—"

"Who is supposed to have gone gun crazy and knacked off young Somers. That's me, only you said too much that time, buddy. Nobody knows about the affair, yet, except the police who were there. Put on your clothes and no stalling, or I'll take you in as you are."

"But, listen, copper"—the man spoke in a loud voice—"I don't know what you're talking about. Give a guy a break, will you? Tell me what the charge is."

"We'll iron that out later," Conway said. "When we get downtown we'll—"

Suddenly, Conway's prisoner hurled the wet towel. It hit Conway full in the face. He grabbed it away and started to bring up his gun. Then he knew why his prisoner was so confident. A gun muzzle whizzed down against the back of Conway's neck! It was a paralyzing blow, meant to stun rather than knock him out. His gun was yanked from his hand. The crook with the blue-stained chest let out a raucous laugh and started to get dressed.

"This guy is pretty hot stuff with a roscoe, but not so strong on brains. You heard me talking nice and loud, eh, Slim?"

"I heard you," the dapper, slender crook answered. "We better give this copper the business fast. Maybe he knows too much."

"Take it easy." The other bent down and tied his shoes. "We'll tell the boss what happened. And I got a swell idea on how to get rid of this Boy Blue without sticking our necks out too far. Keep your gun on him."

Conway didn't move. The crook called Slim matched the appearance of the man who had jumped out of the

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burning, wrecked car and darted down an alley. He was a shrewd, alert little rat and quite ready to blast Conway wide open!

The other man walked into the next room and dialed a number. "This is Rama," he announced himself. "Things went a little sour on us, boss. That copper with the medal for being the champ sharpshooter picked up our trail somehow.... Yeah—he's O. K. now. Slim's got a gun pointed right at his belly.... Put him away ? Why not. It's gotta be done, but listen to this—that copper must be in a lot of trouble trying to explain what happened, Suppose they find him dead, a suicide ... Yeah—it's easy."

Rama stopped talking for a moment or two and then he said: "You can go right ahead with it, boss. There's a big star on the left shoulder blade.... Blue.... Yeah and don't forget —the left shoulder blade."

Rama hung up, came back to the bedroom and eyed Conway coldly. He searched him, took away his cuffs and keys. Then he hooked one cuff to Conway's right wrist and led him down— stairs, through the kitchen and down another flight which led to a basement garage. He pulled Conway over to a steam radiator and fixed the other cuff around the pipe.

"that'll hold you," he gloated. "Anyway, even if you do get free, you'll be as safe as if you were in Sing Sing. This house was used a long time ago for gambling. The equipment was hidden down here. Them doors are made of steel, and the door to the kitchen is made of the same stuff. You can yell your head off, too, because it's soundproof in here. Come on, Slim, we'll pick up a nice shiny buggy some place, In the morning they'll find the copper dead in the back seat. There'll be a hose from the exhaust, no marks on him and they'll say he took the easy route,"

Slim was doubtful. "I think one of us ought to stay here and watch this bird. He's too quiet, and a guy who can shoot like him can't be all dumb. Those three slugs of his came close to me."

"How can he get away?" Rama argued. "Come on; it's O. K. And, anyhow, two guys can swipe a car better than one. I need a lookout."

They locked the upstairs door first and went out by way of the garage doors. Conway heard a powerful lock snap shut as the doors closed. He waited about one minute before he tried to worry the handcuff over his wrist. It was an impossible task. He tried to break the cuff by putting all his strength and pressure on it. That failed, too. Then he studied the radiator itself. It was a big job, but it carried steam and was hooked only on one end to the supply pipe.

Conway knew that these radiators could be lifted slightly and swung around, away from the wall. He tried this and it worked. Even though the heat seared his hands, he took a firm grip on the radiator and pried it off balance. The connecting pipe cracked and a jet of steam hissed out. He let go, cooled his inflamed hands for a moment, then went to work again. This time he succeeded in cracking the radiator completely away from its connecting pipe.

He disengaged the handcuff link, moved away from the steam that shot out of the broken pipe and found a small can of grease on the workbench, He rubbed this into the burns on his hands. It alleviated the pain considerably.

Then Conway went to the double doors and examined them. Any hope which might have arisen in his heart, was blasted, now. Nothing short of an oxyacetylene torch would open the doors. He ran up the stairs to the kitchen door and encountered the same impossible barrier. Rama and Slim would be back soon. Stealing a car was an easy task for those two crooks. His only hope, then, seemed to lie in rushing the pair as they entered. The chances were pretty good that he'd stop a bullet, but Conway was determined to die that way rather than be turned into a suicide set-up.

In the garage once more, he looked around for some kind of a weapon. His eyes lighted on an old tire propped in a corner. He pulled the inner tube free of the tire, located a knife and slit the tube along its entire length.

There were two cars in the garage, parked side by side, but with about two feet of space between them. Conway hurriedly tied both ends of the inner tube with strong cord and fastened it between the cars, using the bumpers as the handiest place to rig up his homemade weapon.

Conway wasn't only a crack shot with a pistol, but he knew every weapon ever invented since the beginning of man. He'd studied catapults, sling shots, maces and flintlock pistols. Therefore, he wasn't exactly an amateur at arranging his trap.

He got a heavy hammer, knocked off the head and prepared to use this as a missile. He lay prone between the

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two cars, inserted the hammer head into the folds of the inner tube and pulled it back experimentally. Satisfied this might work, he arose, climbed to the top of one car and darkened the garage by unloosening the single bulb in a swinging socket. Conway received no warning of the crooks' return, for the garage had no windows and the door was solid. Only the clash of a key against the lock indicated the time had come when he must stake his life on a makeshift weapon.

The door opened a crack. Rama said: "He's put out the light, That means he must have got loose. Stay in the doorway, Slim. Keep your gun ready. We know he hasn't a gat, so there's no- thing for us to worry about."

Rama stepped into the garage, his gun ready for trouble. He stood still for a moment, trying to locate his prisoner.

Conway slowly pulled back his sling shot, aimed it and let go. The heavy hammer head hurtled through the air and hit Rama squarely on the chest. He gave a choaked cry, doubled up and fell, his gun skidding across the cement floor.

Conway didn't wait for Slim to recover from his surprise. He ran lightly through the darkness until he reached the wall adjacent to the doors. Side-stepping swiftly, he approached Slim, who seemed to be torn between a desire to start shooting or running.

Conway leaped. One hand smashed down on Slim's gun, the other hit the crook full in the face. He let out a squeal and tried to duck away; but Conway grabbed him by the vest, yanked him into the garage and went to work.

Slim was none too brave until he realized that he was cornered. Then he fought like a wounded tiger. Slim knew all the ways of fighting, especially the dirty ones. Conway took several severe blows, but he gave them back at a two-for-one rate. Finally, Slim risked everything on a jump for Rama's gun. With the garage door open, enough light entered to turn the blackness into a deceptive gray.

Conway jumped into the air and at the same time lunged forward. He hit Slim, knocked him over and seized the gun. He sat there on the garage floor with a satisfied grin on his face.

"Don't move, Slim," he warned. "It wouldn't bother my sleep if I plugged you."

Slim had his hands raised. He turned around under Conway's orders; then the patrolman hastily examined Rama. The man was badly hurt. That heavy missile must have cracked his ribs.

"he'll keep," Conway grunted. "O.K., Slim, we're going upstairs. You open the door, and if you put more than four feet of space between us, I'll send a bullet to catch up with you."

Slim finally sat down behind a desk, and Conway shoved the phone toward him.

"Contact the man you call 'boss,'" Conway ordered. "Tell him everything is finished—that I'm dead. Say it's O. K. to get busy with the rest of the job. That's all you'll say, too, and I'm not fooling!"

Slim lifted the phone and dialed with a finger that shook badly. He reached his party and said exactly the words which Conway had indicated. Then he hung up. Conway pressed the muzzle of his gun against Slim's temple. The crook talked at a furious rate.

Conway stepped back a pace, reversed his gun and knocked Slim cold. He tied the crook up securely, gagged him and rolled him into a closet.

Then he went to the garage again and found Rama groaning and half conscious. This man needed attention. Conway put him in a car, drove out and proceeded to the nearest hospital. Rama was placed under the watchful eyes of two husky orderlies. Then Conway drove sedately to the morgue, parked and went inside. He kept his right hand hidden because the handcuffs still dangled from it. He hadn't taken time to search Rama for the key.

"Did a corpse come in tonight—or maybe today—a man whose features were chewed up badly and who has a tattooed star on his left shoulder blade?"

The attendant nodded. "He came in about three hours ago. We reported it to homicide and the missing persons' bureau. They were going to send around tomorrow."

"Never mind them," Conway declared. "I'm taking charge. Pretty soon somebody will call about that corpse. I'll be inside. Don't let on you know a thing; show the caller to the right slab and let him make his identification. Then get away as fast as you can."

Conway strode into the morgue proper, grimaced at the rows of cabinets and selected an autopsy table to hide behind. The chill of the place got into his bones. Once, the attendant entered and signaled everything was in hand.

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The men from the morgue wagon rolled in a corpse. It was deftly tagged and filed away.

Then Conway heard voices. Two men walked in behind the attendant. One was Jim Bowker, burly, brutal, but trying to hide it under a perfectly fitted Tuxedo and an expensive top– coat and hat. The man with him also wore a Tuxedo and, unless Conway's eyes were going bad, a shoulder–holstered gun.

The attendant hauled out one slab, raised the sheet and Bowker peered intently at the corpse.

"How about it, Shady, is this your cousin?"

The other man just wetted his lips and nodded. Bowker stepped back a pace.

"No question about it. The tattoo mark tells the whole story. They fished him out of the river, Shady. Looks like he'd been caught in the propeller of some boat. Want me to take care of the details?"

The attendant saw Conway's uniform cap arise from behind the autopsy table and he quietly moved away.

"Bowker," Conway said grimly, "suppose we let the law take care of the details—you included!"

Bowker jerked around. His companion hauled a gun from beneath his coat so fast that the action was just a blur to Conway. The gun started to blast! Conway pulled trigger just once. The gunman reeled a few steps to the right, his gun sagged in his grasp and he curled up on the floor.

Bowker elevated both hands. "Don't shoot, Conway" he cried. "I know how good you are with a gun. There's been some mistake. We can fix this up."

"Sure we can," Conway came around the table. "Easy, too—just by calling the wagon."

Bowker didn't move until Conway was no more than four feet in front of him. Then his right hand jerked down. Conway saw the gleam of a large gold ring, and then a gun exploded! It must have been hidden in Bowker's sleeve and controlled by that ring finger,

The roar was terrific, and a heavy slug smashed into Conway's side! He bent over with a groan. Bowker spun, started to run and Conway made a grab for him. He managed to seize Bowker's right ankle. The gambler tripped and fell. Before he could squirm away, Conway swung the free loop of the handcuff at the gambler's head, Bowker sat up and started to tug. Then the flailing handcuff caught him on the temple. He fell back into unconsciousness.

Conway, weakened from shock and loss of blood, passed out. Half a dozen men rushed into the morgue. Bowker came to, shrilly protesting his innocence.

Conway awakened, found that he was lying on a very uncomfortable object and realized it was the autopsy table. A doctor was bandaging his side.

"Not a bad one," he said hopefully. "We'll fish the bullet out in the hospital."

Conway propped himself on one elbow. "Where's Bowker?" he shouted. "Where's the rat?"

"Now just relax," Lieutenant Johnson stepped over to the table. "Bowker didn't get away. He swears this is all a mystery. How about letting us in on it?"

"Send to Bowker's house. There's a mug called Slim tied up and locked in a closet. Another gunman named Rama is at East Hospital. They're in on this thing, too. Bowker killed Weldon Somers because he found out Bowker's system for cheating gamblers at his roadhouse. Somers put the trick into reverse play and cleaned up. Bowker couldn't say a word or else he'd give away his crooked play to the regular players. Somers got drunk. Bowker helped put him in his car. Witnesses saw that, but they didn't know a couple of Bowker's men were hidden in the car. Somers drove away, and they killed him in a quiet spot."

"But why did you trap Bowker here? Why did you run away from the spot where Somers' body was found?" Lieutenant Johnson asked.

"Because Bowker arranged that little job neatly. He hates cops, so he selected me for the frame. He knew I was a crack shot. One of his men, Rama, pretended to be hit by bullets fired by Slim from Somers' car. I thought it was a murder because they waited until I showed up to begin their play. I fired at the car. Slim had a dead man behind the wheel by then. He just leaned over the seat, twisted the wheel and sent the car crashing into the wall. He set off a fire bomb which started the car burning like mad because it had been doused with gaso– line. Then Slim jumped out and got away, while I was busy at the fire, Rama got up and disappeared, too."

"O.K."—Johnson wagged his head—"sounds good so far, but what about the morgue and that body which Bowker identified?"

"That body on the slab is Weldon Somers. The man in the car was some poor stooge whom they murdered, battered up so he couldn't be recognized and with enough evidence planted on him so he'd be identified as

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Somers. In that way, Bowker knew that Somers' death would never be connected with him. If Somers had been found dead, any cop with an ounce of brains would have spotted the tie-up; and Bowker didn't have a decent alibi. He had the motive, too. But he still had the body of the real Somers on his hands. To get rid of it without leaving a clue, he had the face smashed up beyond recognition, had one of his men tattoo a figure on his shoulder, and then came here with one of his gamblers and identified the body as the gambler's cousin. It would have been easy to get a release, bury the corpse, and the whole thing would have been over with."

"So that's it," Johnson grumbled. "Well, he forgot to take care of the fingerprints we can get off the corpse. There'll be some at Somers' home to check them against. Nice work, Conway. Working from scratch, you handled the thing very well."

Conway smiled grimly. "Not exactly from scratch, sir. You see. Rama is a professional tattoo artist. He needled that figure on Somers' shoulder blade. Then, when he fell down pretending to be a dead man, a bottle of tattooing ink broke. I saw the stain on the sidewalk and I knew what it was. My kid brother joined the navy a month ago, and the first thing he did was have a dancer tattooed on his chest. Darnedest thing you ever saw—life-like, you know. Anyhow, my mother got sore and told me to take him somewhere and have it removed.

"I talked to twenty tattoo artists, and I know all about the business. It gave me a lead, and, combined with the newspaper stories of Bowker and Somers, I guessed a few things. Slim told me the rest."

Lieutenant Johnson looked at Bowker. "Take him away," he ordered. Then he looked down at Conway again.

"You haven't heard the end of this yet, Conway. A swell piece of business. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"There is," Conway grunted. "Two things. Get me out of this place. I don't like the surroundings. Then take that sleeve pistol away from Bowker and let me have it. Never saw one of those things before. I wonder if I could hit a bull's-eye at a hundred paces with one if I practiced long enough—"

THE END.