

# Bullet Business

By Robert W. Thompson



*IF you want to live a long time, mind your own business. A private detective is paid to mind somebody else's business. Doug Collins was a shamus—who liked to earn his pay.*

**W**HEN the Boston bound bus stopped at Framingham, Kay Merrill felt a tingle of apprehension along her spine. She was looking out the bus window at the two men waiting for passengers to alight. One man was tall and fat-bodied, the other tiny and fragile-looking beside him. Both men were gazing straight at her.

She twisted her head away, feeling the hot flush of blood into her cheeks. Those men, watching her—detectives, probably. She felt her heart bound, thinking of the hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of stolen diamonds in her possession.

The fat man was coming along the aisle toward her now, the little man almost

hidden by his bulk. Kay Merrill's slim body grew rigid; her brown eyes locked with the fat man's expressionless gray ones. She was in the next to the last seat, her small brown traveling bag beside her. There were only a half-dozen other passengers, all in the seats ahead. The fat man walked straight to the girl's seat and stopped there, his face a malicious white moon above her.

"You're Miss Merrill, right?" His voice was flat, without emotion. The girl nodded, the slim oval of her face drained of color now. The fat man calmly scooped the traveling bag from the seat, handed it to his companion and said: "Hang onto it."

The little man said, "Gotcha," and slipped into the seat in front of the girl. He twisted his narrow sharp face, his eyes sliding over Kay's finely cut features, the soft brown hair, the rounded contours of the slender body. The fat man crowded in ponderously beside her.

"Babe," he said, "we don't want trouble. We just want the stones in that bag." He pushed his pocketed right fist against her side, and something hard and round made her wince. "A rod. One yap and you get it. Be nice and we leave you at Boston, see?"

Kay Merrill looked into the round white face, into the expressionless gray eyes. "I see," she said quietly. "I won't make any trouble; don't worry."

"I'm not worrying," the fat man said, and something in the flat tone made her shudder.

The bus lights went out, and they swung along the turnpike with an occasional roadside light slashing the interior for a moment and then vanishing. As they neared Boston, she relaxed somewhat: after all, these men weren't detectives, and she wasn't headed for prison—yet, anyway.

**T**HE BUS rolled into Park Square, and the fat man rose, leaned over and said: "So long, babe. Thanks for the little present."

Then he and the other man were going along the aisle, were alighting.

Before she climbed out, they had disappeared into the terminal. She stepped down, and a man in a light-gray topcoat approached her and said:

"You Kay Merrill?"

She gazed up into virile, high-boned features and probing blue eyes. He was a big, blond man, solidly built; his shoulder muscles rounded tightly under the coat when he doffed his hat. To Kay Merrill he looked a bit hard-boiled, a bit worldly wise, and—interesting.

"Yes," she nodded, "I'm Kay Merrill."

"My name's Collins." He wasn't looking at her now. His left hand was dug into the pocket of his coat, and his eyes swiveled over the crowd, into the terminal. "Doug Collins, Detective."

"Detective! You're—"

"Private dick," he said. "Louis Retner hired me to come around and see that you're not bothered. He wants you to come right to the apartment."

She breathed deeply. "I see. Did he tell you why he wanted me protected?"

"None of my business. A hundred bucks and no questions asked. Fifty in advance." A slight smile curved his wide mouth—a cynical smile, she thought. "I'm the kind of a guy that doesn't ask too many questions."

He touched her arm, piloted her to a cab, gave the address. She settled back in the seat beside him, waited until the cab was whirling out of the red glare of neon signs before she spoke.

"Two men got into the bus at Framingham and took my traveling bag from me. One of them held a gun on me all the way to the terminal."

"Know the guys?"

"I'd never seen them before. One was a fat man, the other one small and thin. They—"

"'Tubber' Norris and 'Pinky' Dryden,"

he said. "A couple of sweet rod boys. I saw them come out of the bus, and I wondered what they were doing traveling with decent people. Why'd they grab the bag? What was in it?"

"Nothing. That is, nothing except a few things for an overnight stay."

"Uh-huh. They didn't get what they were after, then?"

She turned her face to him, catching his cool scrutiny. "I wouldn't know," she said easily. "It all depends on what they were after."

He smiled a little. "Okay, let's forget it. It's my job to take you to Retner and hang around for a couple hours while he does some business. I'll stick to my job."

They were silent then until the cab halted before a brownstone apartment house in a quiet Back Bay street. Collins paid the driver, waited until the cab had turned the corner, and said: "Nobody following. Let's go."

They went into a dim, small lobby and took the self-service elevator to the third floor. Collins rapped crisply on a door marked 302. A half minute passed; there was no sound inside the apartment. Collins gripped the knob, pushed inward.

The door swung in noiselessly. Collins motioned Kay into the room, followed her and closed the door. Ray's eyes widened as they took in the ripped-open chairs, the inverted table, the doubled-over rug.

Collins strode to the closed bedroom door, palmed it open. He said softly, without turning his head: "Retner had visitors."

Kay Merrill moved to the bedroom door, staring past him at the figure of Louis Retner. Retner lay on his back in the bed, fully dressed except for shoes and stockings. He was a small man, thin-faced; his eyes were open, unblinking. The smooth bone handle of a knife protruded from his heart. His bared feet were blackened, swelled with blisters. There were stubs of burned matches on the

bed and floor. Kay turned her face away with a little shudder.

Collins closed the door, strode to the phone stand and dialed police headquarters. When he twisted away from the phone, his face was taut, grim.

"I'm asking questions now," he said. "My client's been murdered. Tortured first—his feet burned like that. What was he to you and what's it all about?"

"I'm his secretary," she said quietly. "He was a dealer in gems. He came here to sell certain diamonds to a Mr. Norman—Martin S. Norman, I think it was. This afternoon he sent me a telegram, told me to come along here. He often did that—went out of town on a deal, hired an apartment for a week or so, then called me to do some secretarial work for him. I—I imagine that's what he wanted me here for this time."

There was a light, discreet tap on the door. Collins slid his left hand into his coat pocket and said: "Come right in."

A CHUNKY MAN entered the room, closed the door softly, and swept off his gray Homburg. He bowed slightly, his penetrating dark eyes moving from Collins to the girl. There was a suggestion of arrogance in his cool smile.

"I am Martin S. Norman," he said precisely, stroking a finger across his black sliver of mustache. "I am here to transact business with Mr. Retner. I hardly expected anyone else to be present."

Collins said: "I'm Collins, private dick. This is Miss Kay Merrill, Retner's secretary. He won't be seeing you or anyone else. He's dead."

"Really!" Norman's eyebrows lifted slightly. "And only this morning I arranged a meeting with him. I was to buy certain diamonds—one hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth, as a matter of fact. He seemed in perfect health this morning. Heart attack, perhaps?"

Collins smiled without humor. "You might call it that. He's in the bedroom with a knife in his heart."

"Ah," Norman said, "death by violence, then. Suicide or murder?"

"Murder. Tortured first, his feet burned."

Norman touched a fingertip to his mustache. "And you came here, Miss Merrill, to take notes on the proposed transaction?"

Kay nodded. "I imagine that's why he called me here. He usually did when he was on a deal in another town."

"And the diamonds," Norman asked, "are they here?"

"We haven't looked," Collins said. "That's a job for the police. Anyway, it looks as though some one ransacked the whole place. You'd better stay and explain about the deal."

"Surely." Norman's penetrating dark eyes gleamed. "I wouldn't think of leaving now. I must confess I'm interested in police procedure in a case like this."

Kay Merrill's lips drew together. The police would want to know where those diamonds were after they searched the apartment. They might have a matron search her. How could she explain the presence of those stolen diamonds, concealed on her person. . . .?

Captain Anderson from headquarters pointed a bony forefinger at Norman and said: "Listen, we know this Retner guy was one of the biggest dealers in stolen gems in the East—a big-time fence. How about it, Norman, was he selling you stolen stones or not?"

Martin S. Norman smiled up coolly and arrogantly from the comfortable depths of a ripped chair. "Now, captain," he said precisely, "you know I wouldn't buy stolen property. That would make me liable to a prison sentence. It's exactly as I told you. I met Retner about two months ago here in town. I told him I'd like to buy the Haskins

diamonds. I'm something of a collector of gems, you know. Now, the Haskins diamonds aren't stolen property, are they?"

"No-o," Anderson said grudgingly. "He bought them from the Haskins estate. Probably one of the few honest deals he ever made. Got them cheap enough to make a neat fifty grand on them."

"Exactly. So Retner came into Boston a few days ago to arrange a sale with me. I agreed to come here tonight, sign a check for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and take the diamonds. Retner wanted time to look me up thoroughly. I'm sure he found everything satisfactory. I own quite a trucking business, you know."

Kay Merrill watched Anderson nod wearily. Collins stood beside her in the living room, topcoat over his arm, his blond hair slick and shining in the light, Kay was pale, her lips compressed.

Anderson turned to her and said: "Okay, miss, you can go now. You too, Collins. I'll want to see you both again later. Call and tell me where you're staying when you get a room, miss, understand?"

She nodded, slipped into her coat, adjusted her hat. Collins smiled down at her. "How about a bite to eat, lady? You must be hungry after that bus ride."

"I'm famished," she said. "I forgot about it during the excitement, but now—" She laughed a little, looking up into his eyes. No hardboiled worldliness in them now; a seriousness rather, a warmth.

Collins slanted his hat on his head, took her arm and strode out with her. Anderson's doleful tones floated after them:

"Hell, the boys went through the whole dump and couldn't find any stones. I'm telling you, Bert, this thing is getting me sore."

UP THE STREET, after they had battled through reporters and photographers, Coiling said: "On Retner's murder, lady, I have a few theories. I'll tell you what they are

over coffee. And I know a pippin of a coffee shop over on Huntington. . .”

A car crawled up beside them like a huge black bug in the quiet street. The rear door swung open; a figure spewed from the car’s interior. Collins twisted, left hand plunging into his coat pocket. But the man who had leaped from the car gripped something in his hand that made a dull shine in the night.

“Easy,” he said flatly. “Easy, or the babe gets it.”

Kay Merrill stared at the fat-bodied figure, into the round face. “Tubber Norris!” she whispered.

Collins’ hand came up slowly out of his pocket. To shoot, he knew, would mean the girl’s death. He said tightly:

“Okay, Tubber, what’s the idea?”

“Inside, and find out,” the fiat voice said. “You first, dick.”

Collins walked across to the ear’s door. Tubber’s weapon prodded his side, and his gun was dug from his pocket. He slid into a corner of the rear seat. The driver turned toward him, holding a short-barreled revolver. Collins said:

“Hello, Pinky. Looking for a reason to go back to Charlestown for a stretch?”

Pinky scowled at that, but said nothing. Kay Merrill climbed in beside Collins, and Tubber rested his fat bulk beside her. Pinky shot the car away from the curbing. Tubber said:

“No tricks, dick, or the babe gets it. I’ve got a rod in her side. One funny move and it’ll be too bad.”

Kay Merrill felt the gun bore through cloth, felt its round hard outline against her side. Her heart was a live, bounding thing inside her. She looked at Tubber and shuddered.... Collins’ square, strong hand gripped hers, and she felt strength flow into her at the contact.

The black car rocketed across town, past the Public Gardens and the Commons,

into Washington Street and through a maze of short dark streets to a district of warehouses, factories, and abandoned tenements. Pinky braked the car before the high blank face of a warehouse, jumped out, unlocked sheet-metaled doors.

He climbed under the wheel again, piloted the car into blackness. A moment later the doors clanged shut. A bar slammed into place, and a great overhead bulb exploded white light.

Pinky opened the rear door, motioned Collins out with his revolver. Tubber slid out the other side. Kay Merrill followed him, standing on a cement floor, under a low, beamed ceiling. Her eyes quested over the bareness of the small garage room, with its tow-rope and tools in one corner, and sleeping cots and table in the other. Tubber said, almost in her ear:

“Over to the corner, babe, and take a seat.”

She walked to the corner, her high heels clicking sharply. She sat on the edge of a cot, hands clenched on her knees. Collins moved to the corner with long strides, sat stiffly in the cot opposite her, a few feet away. Pinky held his revolver within inches of Collins’ head. Kay looked up into Tubber’s face. His lips were drawn down, his gray eyes slitted. He said flatly:

“You pulled a phony on us back there, babe. We thought we were getting the stones, and you let us think so. Look.” He backed to the car, pulled something from the front seat.

It was her brown traveling bag, ragged and slashed. Tubber held it in front of her, opened it wide so that she could look down into it. The lining was ripped open. “Nothing in there, babe,” Tubber said. “Nothing but your silks-”

“So what?” Collins’ voice had a sharp edge. “What’d you expect to—”

“Shut up,” Tubber said. “One more peep out of you, dick, and Pinky’ll smack in that head of yours.” He slid the bag under the

cot. "Now, babe, we know you had the stones. We know you were carrying them to Retner. Where are they?"

Kay Merrill shook her head. "I don't know. I came to Boston to do some secretarial work for—"

"Can it"

**T**UBBER slapped her with his free hand. Her head rolled; tears stung into her eyes. Tubber hit her again, with his closed fist. Sparks leaped into life in her brain. Her eyes couldn't focus. Tubber was a mountain with a pitted white moon suspended over its crest...

Collins' voice sliced through her foggy mind: "I'll get you for that, Tubber, so help me!"

Then she was looking up into Tubber's face again, her eyes clear. She said through clenched teeth:

"I never had any diamonds. I never—"

Tubber lifted his big left fist again, then let it down. He said softly: "You got guts, babe, but you'll talk, you'll talk."

Kay Merrill looked past him at Collins' rigid figure. Collins sat bent forward slightly, his face drained white, jaw muscles knotted. Pinky's eyes slid over Kay's body, and he licked his lips. He said shrilly:

"Why don't you take off her shoes and stockings, Tubber? Give her—"

"Yeah," Tubber cut in. "That's a swell idea. Take off your shoes and stockings, babe."

Kay Merrill stared up at him. She knew what this would mean; she remembered those burned matches at Retner's apartment, the blistered feet.

A sliver of ice seemed to slide along her spine. She *could* tell them where the diamonds were; she could even give them to Tubber now. But that would mean death for her and Collins. It would mean torture this way, and death too, but it would give them time. And time might give them a chance...

She removed one high heel pump, then

the other, dropping each with a little click on the floor. She peeled silk from slim, smoothly rounded legs. Pinky's breath made a sucking sound in the silence. Tubber changed the gun to his left hand, took a small package of matches from his pocket.

He scraped one, held the flaring stick before her face, then blew out the flame. His emotionless gray eyes bored into Ray's. She watched him flip the burned matchstick away, watched its flight, watched it land on the cement floor. A scream caught in her throat; she pressed her lips together.

"Want to talk?" Tubber asked. "Or do I have to make you talk?"

She said nothing. Tubber scraped another match; it flared. He stooped, pointing the gun at her stomach. He moved the lighted match closer to her bare feet. She closed her eyes; she could feel the heat of the flame. Closer... Then Collins' voice ripped the silence:

"Damn you, Tubber! I'll tell! I know where those stones are."

Tubber rose, dropped the match and stepped on it. "Ah-ha," he said softly, "I knew one of you'd come across. I had an idea the babe told you where the stones were, dick."

Kay Merrill opened her eyes, slowly. She looked down at her smooth, unblistered feet. Her eyes swivelled to Doug Collins' white face. Collins didn't know where those diamonds were; he couldn't know. His bluff would be penetrated in a few moments, and then—

"Okay, dick," Tubber was saying: "Where?"

Collins rose slowly, took a stride forward and picked up the two shoes Kay had dropped. Tubber watched him with narrowed eyes. The gun jutted from big flat, aimed at Collins' chest. Collins said quietly:

"They're in the heels, Tubber. You screw out the heels like this..." He put one of the shoes under his arm, held the other out close to Tubber, and gripped the high heel

with his free hand.

Tubber leaned forward slightly; the gun dropped an inch or two. For the first time, his eyes gleamed with interest, with avarice.

Then Collins swept the shoe up. The heel clicked against Tubber's chin. Tubber squealed; his gun blasted. But Collins had smashed a fist against his gun arm, and the down-slanted gun sent a bullet drilling into the floor. Chipped cement spouted upward. Collins brought up a knee, rammed it into Tubber's stomach. Tubber's breath made a sudden *shoo-sh* of sound, and his gun dropped to the floor,

**A**T THE FIRST upward movement of the shoe, Kay had leaped forward, straight at Pinky. Pinky took a step toward Collins before he became aware of the slim body hurtling at him. He snapped a shot. The bullet barely missed the girl's side, and smashed the brick wall.

She was on him then, sending the revolver skidding across cement. Her small fists beat into his face. He lashed out, cursing shrilly. His right fist caught Kay on the jaw. She reeled, sagged to the floor.

Collins whirled, knuckles skinned slightly where they had contacted the fat man's face. Tubber lay on the floor, wheezing, blood running from his mouth and nose. Collins hit Pinky once, a hard-driven smash to the mouth.

Pinky staggered back against the small table and slid slowly to the floor, clutching at the table's edge. Collins picked up the two guns, took his own from Tubber's pocket, and helped Kay to her feet. She tried to smile up at him.

"You all right—Kay?"

"All right. The police'll be here. Those shots—"

Collins said: "I don't think so. This place must be soundproof, or nearly so. If they were afraid of noise Tubber would have gagged you."

Kay put on her shoes, stuffing her stockings into her coat pocket. She held a gun over Tubber and Pinky while Collins tied them with tow-rope. There had been no sound of police whistles.

When Tubber and Pinky were bound, Kay said: "Now what? Want me to get the police while you—"

"Not yet." Collins shook his head, slowly. "There are a few angles I want straightened first. About that diamond business—do you or don't you know where those stones are?"

Kay looked at him a long minute before replying. She'd tell him the truth later, she decided, when they were alone. She couldn't say anything in front of Tubber and Pinky. They'd relay the information to the police, and that would mean prison.

"No," she said, "I don't know where they are."

Collins' eyes became cynics: then. "Okay," he said, "if that's the way you want it."

Kay said: "These two—they killed Retner. I'm sure of it."

Collins nodded. "I figure they went up to Retner's earlier, held him at gun-point and ransacked the place. When they couldn't find the stones, they tortured him. He must have told them you had the stones and were coming in with them on the bus, that they were in your traveling bag. Then they knifed him, rode out to Framingham, probably in an out-going bus, waited there and got into the bus with you. When they didn't find the stones in the bag, they waited outside Retner's and grabbed us."

"And the man behind the whole scheme," Kay said, "is Martin S. Norman."

Collins' eyes glinted. "How do you figure that?"

"It must be Norman. He was the only one, outside of Retner and myself, that knew about the deal. These two knew about the diamonds only because some one told them. That some one had to be Norman. He was

certain Retner had the diamonds in the apartment, so he went up with Tubber and Pinky. When they tortured Retner, he had to tell them something to make them stop. So he told them I had the diamonds in my traveling bag. When Tubber and Pinky got off the bus, they probably went right through the terminal to Norman, and ripped the bag open right away.

“Norman decided to go up to Retner’s then. He had to cover himself, because the police were bound to find out he had a deal on with Retner; I knew about that. And he had Tubber and Pinky wait outside to grab us. How’s it sound?”

“Good,” Collins said heartily. “The thing to do now is to get Norman and put the screws to him.”

There was a sudden scraping sound at the other side of the garage. A voice clipped out: “Oh, no, Collins.”

It was Norman; he’d come from another section of the warehouse, through a little door in the brick wall. There was a blue-steel automatic in his fist. He fired, running forward. The first bullet whammed into Collins’ right shoulder, whipped him halfway around. He brought his left hand up, fired.

The shots blended in a deafening, rattling barrage. Norman stumbled; his automatic jumped out of his fist, skated across cement. He dropped to his knees slowly bent forward until he was flat, face-down.

Collins winced, looking at the blossoming stain at his shoulder. Kay said, white-faced: “Doug, you’re shot!”

“I’m all right,” he grinned wanly, “This isn’t the worst I’ve had. You’re—all right?”

“All right, Doug.”

**I**N the small white-walled hospital room, Doug Collins sat propped up with pillows, and smiled at his visitor. Kay Merrill sat in a little chair beside the bed, smiling back at him. Her face was bruised; there was a square of

adhesive tape on one cheek. She said after a moment:

“Norman’s dead, but the police have signed confessions from Tubber and Pinky. Captain Anderson said it wouldn’t have been any trouble convincing a jury, anyway. The only thing the police can’t figure out is just why a nice girl like me would work for a man like Retner—whose reputation wasn’t very good.... And by the way, the warehouse belonged to Norman. He must have had it prearranged with Tubber and Pinky to come there after he left Retner’s.”

“Uh-huh,” Collins said. “And how about those stones?”

Kay drew in a long breath. “I couldn’t tell you about them back there. Tubber and Pinky would have heard and told the police. I’d have been arrested for handling stolen property. You see, it was Retner’s idea when he made an out of town deal—to be sure everything was on the level first.

“When Retner made sure of Norman, he called me in—told me to take the diamonds with me, that the deal was going over. But even then he wasn’t certain Norman was all right, so he called you into it; the first time he ever hired a private detective. Follow me?”

Collins nodded, and she continued: “Retner did that on all out of town deals—made sure of his man, then called me in with the gems. Three or four times he was slugged and robbed of gems by would-be customers. Last year he just missed being killed by a bullet when one of his ‘customers’ tried to shoot him to get a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of pearls.

“Naturally, he couldn’t kick to the police because the gems were always stolen property. So lately he had me work with him on every out of town deal. I usually stayed overnight at a hotel; he always hired an apartment—not so conspicuous, he claimed. I couldn’t tell the police about the stones. I had to tell them I was merely working as Retner’s secretary, and that Retner told Norman and the

others I had the stones to stall them off. You see?”

Collins scowled a little. “But why’d you do that—be a messenger like that for a crook?”

She said quietly: “My brother Al once escaped prison in a small western town. He was serving a life term for murder. Al’s a respected citizen under another name—family, business, all that. Exposure would ruin him. Somehow, Retner found out about his past. He held it over him, said if I acted as his agent, carried gems for him like that, he’d keep quiet. Retner wanted some one he could trust, preferably a woman. I had to work for him, for the sake of Al and his family.”

Her brown eyes were bright and level on Collins’. “Al swears he wasn’t guilty, that a band of killers framed him. I know that doesn’t sound, well, just right. But if you

knew Al, you’d have to believe him.... Now do you—do you understand why I did what I did?”

“Perfectly,” Collins said warmly. “But the stones—what about them?”

“I didn’t know these were the Haskins jewels and that Retner had bought them. I thought they were stolen.”

“But where the devil are the stones?”

“While they were taking the bullet out of you, I saw Captain Anderson. I’d just as soon not think about it, let the law handle the law’s business.” She moved over to the bed, straightened the pillow. “He has them now.”

Collins grinned. “That’s the right idea, Kay. Always let everybody handle their own business.” He pulled her toward him, kissed her lips.

“This,” he said, “is going to be my business.”