

Killer's Promise

Pop Stevens

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For seven fearful years one man tried to rub out Pop Stevens, the little gray Treasury Department dick. Until, at last, a woman's frantic appeal for help, a crisp new five-dollar bill and a bullet-torn body lured Pop into the teeth of the trap—to test out a killer's promise!

THE drab furnished room was in darkness, except where the glare of a black-shaded lamp beat down upon an oblong bit of green-printed paper over

whose surface a magnifying glass moved slowly. The edge of the light-beam barely illuminated the features of a little man whose gray eyes narrowed with the intensity of his concentration.

Shirt-sleeved, collarless, feet thrust into frayed slippers, he might have been an aging bookkeeper whiling away lonely evening hours with, say, stamp-collecting. But there was a black, snub-nosed automatic on the table, almost invisible in a pool of shadow, and the slip of paper he scrutinized was no unique specimen of philatelic skill. It was a Federal Reserve note for five dollars, crisp and fresh from the press.

The lens drifted to the lower left-hand corner of the bill, hesitated, paused. The little man seemed to be counting, soundlessly. Then he sighed. "They always come back," he breathed. "They never learn it's a losing game." Wearily he laid the glass on the table, leaned back in his chair. A faint smile hovered about the thin lips under his drooping gray mustache, a vague shadow of a smile in which there was no humor.

The bill was perfect, he ruminated, except for that infinitesimal slip-up. One too many tiny lines in the cross hatching to the right of the E, seventeen threadlike dashes instead of sixteen in that space only five thirty-seconds of an inch long. Yet it was enough to stamp the bill as false. More than that. The infinitesimal error was a signature, a sign-manual which he could read as plainly as if the engraver of the plate had inked his thumb and left the impress of its whorls on the corner of the note. There was one man, only one man, who could have done the job. And seven years ago that man had sworn to take the little man's life.

The smile grew grimmer. Well, he thought, since then there had been lots of others who had shown every intention of saving Joe Lane that trouble. They hadn't found it easy... The little man snatched up the gun, twisted out of his seat, whirled to the room-door behind him and slid away from before the light to the outlying shadows in one swift motion. "Who's there?" his tense voice snapped. "Who is it?"

"Me, Mr. Stevens." The door-muffled voice was shrill, feminine. "I thought you was out. This letter just come for you, special delivery."

The little man relaxed. "Thanks," he called. He looked at the pale gleam of the rectangle on the floor, but when he moved it was to the table. He put down the gun and shifted the lamp so that its light fell full on the letter. Only then did he go to it. He knelt, and bent over.

It was an ordinary white envelope, business size. The printing in the upper corner identified it as having been bought at a five-and-ten, but there was no name or address on the dotted lines left for that purpose. The writing on it was done with a thick lead pencil, but the letters were neatly formed. They said, *Mr. Malcolm Stevens, 496 West 84th Street, New York.*

Pop Stevens frowned. He was using his own name, but he had only been in the city for three days and he was sure that no one knew where he had taken a room. He reached out one hand and pushed it across the letter, pressing. He felt folded paper inside and nothing else. He picked it up and took it to the table, laid it there. Then he got a handkerchief out of his back pocket. He crossed the room to the stained dresser and pulled the cork from a bottle with a red label. He doused some of the liquid in the bottle on his handkerchief, and knotted it around back of his neck so that his nose and mouth were covered by the drenched fabric. A

pungent, hospital smell filled the room. The little man pulled gloves of thin surgical rubber on his hands and went back to the table.

Malcolm Stevens, special agent of the United States Treasury Department, was a man-hunter. But he was also a hunted man, hunted by individuals infinitely patient, infinitely ingenious. He played a ceaseless game in which death was the stake and infinite precaution the wage of safety.

THE sound of tearing paper ripped the silence. Stevens pressed the ends of the envelope lightly; its mouth gaped and two slips of paper fluttered to the table-top. One was oblong, green-backed. It was a Federal Reserve note for five dollars, crisp and fresh. It was exactly like the one he had been examining, beside which it had fallen. Exactly. Even to the green-printed number on the side from which Lincoln looked sadly out.

The other paper was white. Pop flattened it out with the careful tips of finger and thumb. The writing on it was smudged a bit where it had been rubbed but it was neat and somehow feminine. The writing said:

Mr. Stevens:

I need help terribly. If you are at the corner of Front and Water Streets from ten on tonight, Wednesday, I shall try to get to you. But if you are not alone I will not dare. The enclosed—He is coming. Oh, please—

Ann Lane

THE little man stared at the letter. Joe Lane, once the best plate-engraver in the government service, had had a wife, he remembered. She hadn't known her man had gone wrong; he could call to mind now the hurt, despairing look in her eyes when the jury's verdict had come in. Her straight, slim form had wilted, and her full red lips had twitched with agony...

That agony was implicit now in the tortured, short phrases of this note. Stevens re-read it slowly. "...if you are not alone..." A vague sixth sense sounded warning within him. No, that girl was straight, she would never lead him into a trap. Besides... there was the counterfeit bill. She hadn't had time to write it, but the message was clear. If he answered her summons the case would be broken, the flood of those well-nigh perfect notes would be stopped. Pop shrugged. One had to take chances in this game...

THE little man tried to pull himself further into the doorway of the darkened shop. Wind tugged at him insanely, turned and lashed him with fine particles of icy rain, whipping them in horizontally from the empty street. Pop shivered within the thick wool of his soggy overcoat. His eyes searched, for the hundredth time, the battered, paintless warehouses and empty pier-housings across the street. Their blank fronts stared back at him, inscrutable. He tensed at a faint sound from around the corner, a slithering, hesitant footfall.

Stevens started out from his doorway, halted and whirled back into protecting shadow. Had one of those black blots moved over there across the bumpy brick paving? The little man froze, slitted eyes questioning; one hand slid into a pocket of his overcoat, and a gun snouted the thick cloth.

Someone plucked at his sleeve. Pop whirled again, to confront a wizened, shrunken creature with a pinched, pallid face of misery. The dim illumination of a wavering street lamp struck across the derelict's eyes, and the red-streaked whites, the bleary pupils shifted in short, stabbing jerks with fear-struck wariness. "Yeh waitin' fer a dame?" the vagrant whined.

"Yes," the little man said softly. "Where is she?"

A white tongue licked cracked lips. "She said there'd be a fin in it fer me."

Stevens was puzzled. "There will be when you give me her message. Come on, talk!"

The flicker of rat-like courage died before the brusque demand. "Guess she's in a jam. 'Tell him to come here quick,' she says. 'Tell him it'll be too late by mornin'.'" "

"Where is she?" Pop snapped. "What's happened to her?"

The little man squirmed inside his drenched, frayed jacket.

"I dunno. I dunno nothin' 'cept I'm comin' in from clammin' an' she raps on a winder. I stops an' she buzzes me. 'Listen,' she says. 'Yer want to earn five bucks?' 'Lady,' I says. 'Fer a V I'd spit in a cop's face.'

"Then go to this corner,' she says. 'There's a man waitin' there. Give him this.' An' she shoves a bit o' paper at me wid this address.

"Jest then a guy yells *inside* an' I beats it. Some one busts out th' door and bangs at me wid a roscoe but I scrams an' gets loose. Now, does I git th' scratch or does I?"

Stevens' voice was low, icy. "Where is this place? Where..."

Gun-crack smacked across the words. There was a tiny black hole under the fellow's left eye. The impact swung him around and he was a crumpled heap on the wet sidewalk—and Pop was down in the wet too, blazing back at orange flashes in the gloom across the street. Once, twice, the body shielding him jumped as lead ploughed into it. Stevens' gun kicked in his hand, spitting toward a crouching form hugged against a building.

Pop slipped a new clip into his automatic. The only sound that broke the stillness was a window being raised, somewhere, and a burbling moan from the messenger. The little man thrust his head close to the glistening red mask that had been a face.

"Where is she?" The drooped eyelids flickered. A carmine bubble formed at the smeared lips, burst.

"Get—the double-crossing—Lampton Stree..." The syllables plopped out, were cut short by twisting agony.

A police siren wailed in the distance. Pop Stevens snatched up his hat and was gone.

ON the seaward rim of Staten Island, Pop crouched in the shadow of a splintered billboard. The rain had stopped some time during his interminable trip across the Bay and out viscid roads, and a rising moon was struggling through driving, tattered clouds.

Pop gazed at what is ironically called Lampton Street on the city maps. He saw a tottering walk of old boards, never more than two feet wide, staggering across a mud-flat on gaunt piles that leaned this way and that as if tired of their burden. A

hundred feet away, at the far end of the teetering path, a dimly outlined shack was propped on twisted poles. Yellow light gleamed from its one visible window.

Beyond, flashing glints showed the open waters of the sea. Over all this lay a miasma; an almost palpable odor compounded of the effluvia of decaying fish, of green ooze on stagnant tidal pools of human debris.

There was light in the skewed structure out there. That meant waking eyes, watchful eyes. On the long, clattering trestle he would be an easy target, exposed to even the most inept fire from those in the dilapidated hut. But he had to get out there, had to get there unobserved... Pop's eyes peered into the shadows under the wooden path. The tide was out; only a thin scum of water covered the mud underneath.

He flitted across the road, squirmed under the rotted boards. The ground fell away rapidly, and after a yard or two of noisome crawling he could stand erect under the rickety bridge. His progress was slow; the black, semi-fluid sucked at every step with a smacking sound. Seaweed dragged at Pop's legs; and once, as he reeled past a black pile, he felt the touch of the greasy, cold slime that coated it. Now the muck was above his ankles. Then there was grit under Stevens' shoe-soles, grit that slid away and gave no footing.

Pop turned, pulling out one leg with an effort. But the other sank deeper. His scalp tightened. Quicksand!

He had just passed a pile, it was only feet behind. Pop lunged for it, but his legs wouldn't move. Thin scum of black water was up to his knees, was crawling rapidly up his thighs.

The trapped man stood still, thinking. The quaking sand would not bear his weight concentrated at one point. But if it were spread? Pop threw himself prone, arms outstretched, head forced back so that his nostrils were out of the water. He wasn't sinking any longer. Then he tried to worm forward. But even the tiny first movement of that effort had sent him down an inch.

His legs and feet were numbed, and his head was swimming with dizziness with each gasping breath. There was a ripple in the water and a bit of wood that had been floating motionless just beyond his bulging eyes started a slow progress toward the shore. For an instant that didn't convey anything, then its meaning flashed on Pop. The tide was rising! Held by the relentless sand, it would be a matter of minutes only before the water was over him.

He could see the black column that was almost within reach, that could he reach it might yet save him. A board, anything that would serve to spread his weight a bit more, might give him purchase enough to inch forward the small distance that was the difference between life and death...

"That's it," Pop ejaculated softly.

With infinite care he wriggled out of his waterlogged overcoat. The inevitable motion sent him down somewhat further, but that didn't matter—if his idea worked. If it didn't, it wouldn't matter either. The thick cloth free at last, he worked it around in front of him, spread it out. It sank through the covering liquid to the half-solid stratum beneath.

Gradually, very gradually, Pop got his arms out in front of him, over the coat. Then he pressed down with his palms till he felt the sucking gravel give slightly;

inched forward. He rested, pressed down again, made another infinitesimal gain toward his goal.

A HALF-HOUR later Pop Stevens' head poked up over the edge of the boardwalk. He hoisted himself wearily up and rolled over on his back. A black pool formed about him but he lay motionless, utterly spent. Clouds had thickened again and there was no longer any moonlight. The light in the shack had gone out; it was a formless black bulk at the trestle end. Dully, Pop thought, "Ten minutes' rest and I'll go on."

The wood under him shook, and running foot-thuds came toward him from the shore-end. Pop's eyes jerked open and he saw a huge form plunging at him in a bull-like rush, saw a vague arm upraised and something metallic glitter in a fisted hand. The knife arched down at him as its owner took the last few steps...

Pop's knees bent, his feet swept up, his legs straightened and the shoes plunged into the attacker's midriff. The man's wild rush carried him up at the ends of Pop's now stiffened legs as they pivoted at hips solidly supported, its momentum carried him up and over Stevens' prostrate body. The great bulk sailed through the air like some vast, black bird, then a splash sounded from below and stinking brine spattered in Stevens' face.

The little man rolled over painfully and peered over the path's edge at the foaming commotion below. The knifer had plunged straight into the quicksand!

"Get up on your feet!"

Pop twisted to the gruff command above him. Blaze of a flashlight was in his eyes, a revolver muzzle glinted in the beam. From behind the glare the voice came again. "Get up!"

Pop staggered to his feet, held his hands high. From beneath a yell came: "Joe! Joe! Pull me out. I'm stuck in the mud and the tide's coming in."

The man kept his torch in Pop's eyes so the little man couldn't see him, but his tone was calmly curious. "Can't you manage to get out yourself?"

"No." There was a quiver of premonitory panic in the voice from the water. "You've got to help me. I'm stuck tight."

"Then stick and be damned. Here you, get ahead of me, get up to the house." The gat poked at Pop, the fingers curled around its butt were long and slim and white. "Snap to it."

"God, Joe! Don't leave me here to die! Joe!"

"Right. Makes one less to cut in—Get going, you, or I'll send you down to keep him company."

Pop got going. The tramp of feet on the reverberating boards was like a funeral march. Just as he reached the un-painted door of the shack the cries from behind bubbled into silence.

"Wait." Cold metal pressed against the back of Stevens' neck as a hand passed lightly over his body, frisking him. The flashlight beam showed damp-smearred walls, an oilcloth covered kitchen table in the center of a bare, splintered floor. A chair edge was shoved against the back of his knees. "Sit down, Stevens."

Pop's eyes narrowed. "Stevens!" The man knew him, expected him. It *was* a trap, then. What a fool he had been to rely on his memory of eyes that had been honest seven years ago! Fingers gripped his raised wrists, jerked them down and

back, hurting. He felt cord lashing them behind the chair-back, and cord lashing his ankles to the wooden legs. The light blinked out and dank darkness closed around him. His captor chuckled.

It was a trap. But why hadn't the trap been sprung back there at Front and Water Streets? The man in the shadows had been a dead shot, why had he blasted down the little messenger first, taken a chance on Pop's escape, on just what had happened? Groping footfalls moved through the darkness. Why had the man with the knife been left to die in the quicksand? What did Joe mean by saying, "Makes one less to cut in"?...

A match scratched, its spurting flame moved, and light ran around the cylindrical edge of a lamp-wick on the table. The wick flared up, smoking, and a glass chimney clamped down over it. Pop's eyes lifted. Joe Lane's sharp, ferret's face was older. But his agate eyes were just as shrewd, his thin straight lips as cruel. Those lips scarcely moved now, convict-fashion, as Lane gloated, "It's been a long time, Pop Stevens—but I promised you we would meet again."

"They didn't teach you anything at Atlanta," Pop said, evenly. "They didn't teach you that you can't win this sort of game, that Uncle Sam plays with marked cards and always comes out ahead."

"They taught me only one thing there." Little lights crawled in the man's steely eyes. "They taught me hate. That's all I needed to win the game. I was too soft before, I let you take me without a scrap and I played square with my pals. I was no killer. But I'm not making those mistakes this time!"

POP'S mouth tightened. Then he said, carefully, "You can take me; there will be plenty left. The boys will keep coming at you; they'll keep coming at you till you're licked. They'll get you, there isn't a corner in the world dark enough to hide you. Better throw your hand in and take your loss."

The other man laughed. "The hand is almost finished now, Stevens." He moved a little so that Pop could see past him to the table. There was a suitcase on it, open, and it was crammed tight with currency. "These are my winnings, the real McCoy. It was to be split four ways, but now it's all mine. Now I'll end you and take the pot."

Pop's brain raced. That was the way of it, then. Lane had played a shrewd game with his mob. The little messenger was the straightest; he had thought his job was to toll Stevens out here. The man in the shadows was to get the blear-eyed one first, and then try for the Treasury man. Lane had whispered to him how that would cut one out of the payoff. But the gunner was marked for death too. If Pop didn't take care of him the fellow with the knife would do the job when he was out on the trestle, unsuspecting. If Stevens won out the knifer was ready for him.

But that one wouldn't get far after his job was done. Lane himself would slug him as he came along the propped-up walk lugging a logy corpse, and there would be only one left to split the take. The hand hadn't set up quite the way it was planned, but it had worked out just right anyway... just right for Joe.

Lane bent and did something on the floor. A square of wood hinged up beside the table, a trap-door, and the swish of water against wood-piles came up through the hole. The man fumbled inside and pulled out a rope that seemed to be tied to some heavy object. He drew it in and it came up with a small press such as artists

use to strike off etchings—artists and the makers of false money. Lane got the press on the table and bent again.

A bundle of grayish paper, ready cut to bank-note size; color-daubed cans of ink, joined the press. Then Lane brought up two plates of copper with fine lines graved on their surface.

As he put them on the table he stroked them, regretfully. "You didn't find these," he said, "when you sent me up. They were still where I left them, and I hadn't forgotten how to use them."

Stevens looked at the plates wordlessly. Lane arranged the things as if they were in use. Then he opened one of the ink cans, dipped a wad of paper in it, and moved around behind Stevens. Pop felt cool grease brush over his left thumb.

"When they find you here it will be easy to figure." Joe's suave voice murmured on, "You cached those plates and dug them up when I was out again. You figured on a quick clean-up. Then you'd frame me and be the fair-haired boy of the Secret Service once again. But there was a scrap out here and someone plugged you, skipped with whatever swag you'd gathered in." He came around in front again. "That will be nice publicity for me, the repentant crook gone straight." He grinned. "Maybe I'll open a bank!"

The door behind Lane opened silently. Pop saw a woman framed there, a woman shapeless in some vague garment. Lane whirled. His gun jerked up, then dropped to his side. "Good morning, Ann," he said. "I didn't mean to wake you. But you're just in time to help me."

The once clean oval of her face was somehow blurred, and the corners of her mouth drooped wearily. Her eyes, lifting slowly to Lane's, were somber pits. "What more do you want of me?" she asked in a flat, dead voice.

Her husband's tones were silky, taunting. "No more letters, my dear. Our friend here is a slippery cuss. I've got a couple of things to clean up outside and an accident might just possibly happen. You will be good enough to take this gun and see that it doesn't. But remember I have another."

Pop tugged at his bonds. Then he stopped as he caught a tiny flicker, quickly veiled, in the woman's eyes. Sudden hope rose in him, even though her response thudded dully. "Very well, give it to me."

But Lane had seen that flicker too. "You won't double-cross me, my darling wife? I'm taking the brat with me. And if Stevens is loose when we get back..."

"YOU rotten devil!" Now at last fierce passion struck fire into her voice. "Why don't you kill me and let the child alone?" Her hands came out, claw-like, and her body tautened.

"Steady, Ann." Lane's tone hardened. "The kid will get it too if I have to pump lead into you." Despair dropped a curtain over the woman's face as her arms dropped flaccid to her sides.

"Bring him out," Joe Lane snapped.

She turned and went back into the room from which she had come. A small boy's cry from inside, "It's night yet, Mother. I don't want to get up." And the mother's softly urging answer, "But your father wants you to go fishing with him, Joey."

"Fishin'! Where's my pants? Hurry, or he'll go without me like he always does."

And ten minutes later the sturdy seven-year-old who went out, holding the extended hand of a father who would kill him if it suited his purpose, was all his mother; the same oval face, the same frank brown eyes, almond shaped; the same white forehead.

"A grand little chap," Pop murmured to the tortured woman who sat with a gun twisting in her hands.

"Better if he had never been born. If I thought he had any of that devil in him..."

"He hasn't. I can see that."

"He came six months after his father went away. I've had all the training of him, and I hoped that when Joe got out we would go away somewhere and start over again. But..." She gestured hopelessly.

Pop had to know one thing. "He made you write the letter to me?"

Ann's mouth twisted. "Yes. I refused and he told me he would blow out Joey's brains if I didn't. What could I do?"

"Nothing. There was nothing else for you to do. He is your son."

There was silence in the room, through which the water rippled coldly, audibly beneath the house. After a minute Pop said, quietly, "If Joe Lane went up for twenty years you would have Joey to yourself. Even if he has some of his father in him you could train it out."

There was a gleam in the woman's eyes. Then she slumped. "You heard what he said. He'd do it. He'd be glad of the excuse." Her gun jerked up and her finger tightened on the trigger. "Don't move," she shrilled hysterically. "Don't dare move."

The government man hadn't moved. "It's the boy's only chance to be decent. You owe it to him."

"I can't—kill my son," Ann moaned. "If he comes back and finds you loose it will be the same as if I had killed Joey."

"No. Listen to me." As much excitement as Stevens' voice ever showed sounded now. If only—but all youngsters had them. "Listen!" He talked on urgently in a low voice...

AFTER a while a childish treble came from outside. "Mother!" The door opened, father and son came in. "Mother, we didn't go fishin'; Daddy said the tide wasn't right. But we're going for an auto ride, a long one, and we're not coming back. Isn't that great?" He ran to her, tugged at her garment. "Put on your coat, quick, Mother. Hurry!"

Ann's arm went around her son and she lifted from the chair. "Come, we'll go in the bedroom and get our things together."

"Wait," Lane grunted. "What's the matter with the lamp?" It was dim, almost out.

His wife's tone was expressionless. "Oil's almost gone. I forgot to fill it."

"It'll last as long as we need it," Lane grunted. He turned to Pop. "You won't worry about being left in the dark." He grinned, but his eyes were suspicious. He went behind Pop and pulled at his wrist lashings. They were still tight. He prowled around in front of Pop again, moving catlike. "What's the idea of the badge on the lapel? How did that get there?"

"I asked her to take it out of my vest pocket and pin it on. I wanted to remind you what you're up against."

Lane grinned again, evilly. He nipped the gold badge with a contemptuous finger. "Thirteen," he read the cut-out numbers. "Very appropriate."

"May I go now?" Ann's voice was flat, sullen. "There's lots to pack."

The lamp guttered lower, it was almost completely dark in the room. "It might do you good to watch," Lane murmured. "But we want to get away quick. Go ahead." She gathered the boy to her and went into the inner room, closed the door.

Lane squeezed between the table and Pop's chair. A muscle twitched in the little man's cheeks, but his eyes were masked. Lane's gun was in his hand. "All set, Stevens?" he purred. "Here's the end play."

Pop looked into the other's minute, glittering pupils, leaning way back to do so, he was that close. "Get it over with," he said evenly.

The gun started to come up. Pop's elbow jerked close to his side, as though he were tautening to take leaden death. And a fine liquid stream spurted out of his badge through the space between the one and the three. It reached out and sprayed over Lane's forehead, his eyes. His face was a sudden mask of black.

The man bellowed. His gun crashed, but the aim was wild. Pop's feet came away from the chair legs as the loosened ropes gave way—he planted them squarely on the floor and lunged, chair and all, against Lane. The vicious impact drove the killer back against the careening table. Pop, the chair clinging to his behind like a shell to a new-hatched chick, lunged again. Lane, pawing at his eyes, staggered back—and vanished. Water splashed, the sound oddly plain in the room, and metal thudded against wood.

The door to the inner room opened, and a wild-eyed woman surged out. A knife caught light in her hand. She lunged for Pop as he bent over the dark, square hole in the floor from which Lane's bellows were coming. The knife sliced through the ropes binding Pop's wrists.

Stevens scooped up the gun Lane had dropped as he fell through the opened trap-door under the table. Hands appeared at one edge of the hole and Pop tapped them with a sharp toe. "You better stay there, Lane," he said in a grave voice. "The water isn't deep enough for you to drown."

"I'm blind," the trapped man squealed. "Let me up, you devil! I can't see!"

A humorless smile flickered over the little man's face. "No, Lane. You're not blind. That's only ink in your eyes."

Ann turned up the lamp-wick, but the light that came back in the room was no brighter than her eyes. "It worked," she said. "I didn't think it would."

"Mother," the little fellow piped from inside. "I can't find my water-squirter."

"It's here, son," Stevens called. "Mother will bring it to you in a minute." His free hand fumbled under his jacket, pulled out a rubber bulb and a long rubber tube. He jerked at it and a cloth rose-bud pulled out from under the badge on his lapel; bedraggled, ink-stained. "I used to play with these things when I was a kid," he said to Ann. "But I never thought that one would save my life." He tossed the toy to her, gave her a telephone number. She went out the door and presently there came the sound of a starting car.

From the bottomless hole at his feet came Lane's voice, threatening, cursing, pleading. But Pop Stevens said nothing as he settled in the chair, holding the gun. Lane's seven-year promise to end Pop had come so close to succeeding; but it

would be forever unfilled. The gray little federal agent smiled tiredly. He knew he wouldn't have long to wait...

