

# Phantom Billing

Once, she'd won a beauty contest. Now she was selected for star billing in a phantom's murder-mad scheme.

By  
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**A** FLICKERING street light cast its glare obliquely on the rooming-house doorway, outlining the girl and boy whispering their good nights.

A few doors down the street, Sam Walker took his eyes from their search of the neighborhood and watched the young couple.

They were such a well-matched pair, those two on the rooming-house steps, Walker thought; young and in love.

When the girl tilted her head for her good-night kiss, her face came sharply into focus—confident, childishly eager, saying without words that this had been an extra-special date, an exceptionally memorable evening.

It had been, Walker knew. He had seen it all, been with them the whole time, drifting close, never speaking, keeping his eyes moving, looking, searching.



Searching for whom or *what*, he didn't know. They hadn't been able to tell him. All they knew was that someone wanted to kill her. Someone had tried and failed three times—with a car, in the subway, at a crowded bus stop.

They didn't know him, or why he was doing it. That was why Sam Walker had been hired, for twenty-five a day and expenses, to be around, watching, looking, searching.

Just looking up there at her, Walker found a thing like that hard to believe.

She was slender and graceful in her dark-brown worsted suit and frilly white blouse, not beautiful, somebody's kid

sister. About her was an aura, an effulgence, entirely wholesome. You looked at her and said immediately, "Now there's a girl would make a hell of a good wife."

You couldn't conceive of her hurting someone so badly that he wanted to destroy her. You couldn't wish her harm. If anything happened to her, it would break your heart. That's the kind of a girl she was.

The boy bending down to kiss her looked like some lucky college's fullback. With his severe crew-cut, his regularly planed, open face, and boyish awkwardness, he was a perfect partner for that good-night kiss.

Only the background was out of whack, Walker thought; and the other thing, the sword hanging over their happiness ready to drop at any moment and kill something nice and clean, like a sacrificial lamb.

Walker turned his eyes to the street—a dingy street in the lower Forties, lined with cheap rooming houses—a drab, treeless New York landscape.

For them, Walker thought, it should have been the arbored doorway of a cottage in some small Ohio town, where she would be safe, secure.

**T**HE two of them were lost in that kiss when the rooming-house door opened. The two men standing there looked at them with dispassionate eyes and kind of tired faces.

Walker came out of his hiding place fast, his hand on his gun, and he strode the few feet to the steps.

The couple broke apart with little embarrassed looks and fidgetings, and turned to the two men.

"Margaret Baker?" one of the men asked. He was the larger of the two, red-faced, cold-eyed.

The girl nodded as Walker came up the steps. By this time Walker knew the men. Homicide Bureau, both of them.

"Let's go up to your room," the big man said.

Walker said, "What's the story, Marty?"

They all turned and looked at him.

"Lo, Sam," the homicide man called Marty said. "You on this too?"

"On her side," Walker said.

Marty and his partner looked at each other, then back at Walker. They didn't say anything, just looked, then led Margaret Baker and her boy friend up the stairs to her room. Walker followed.

It didn't take long, no time at all, then it was over and it left you numb and sick.

In the room the homicide dicks pointed to a little snub-nosed .25 which was lying on the bed.

"Your gun?" they asked her.

She nodded.

"You know Abe Winters, the booking agent?"

She nodded again.

"You go to his office late this afternoon?"

She nodded again.

"Had a quarrel with him?"

She nodded once more, bewildered, like a child.

"Okay, that's all," the homicide man said. "You're under arrest for murder. The law requires that I warn you anything you say may be used against you."

The boy friend, an incredulous shock in his clear blue eyes and a look of horror on his youthful handsome face, tried to get between her and the detectives.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Do you mean she murdered this—this Abe Winters? *Murdered* him?"

They didn't answer, they didn't have to, their meaning was obvious.

Walker put his hand on the boy's arm.

“Easy, kid,” he said. “There’s plenty of time.” To Marty he said, “She’s my client. Can you tell me about it?”

“You’ll have to see the lieutenant,” Marty said. “Our orders were just to pick her up.”

“Just the background,” Walker said. “Anything.”

Marty shrugged. “I guess it’s all right,” he said reluctantly. “She was seen entering his office about six o’clock and leaving about six-fifteen. At seven, the cleaning woman went in and found Winters shot in the head. The elevator boy knew her and that’s how we got a line on her. We’ve been waiting here all evening. There was enough left of the slug. That’s the gun there on the bed. She says it’s her gun. She admits she went there. She admits she had a quarrel. That’s it. Anything else you’ll have to get from the lieutenant.”

And that was it. It was over in no time and she was gone. The boy friend—his name was Rex Martin—had tried to go with them but the homicide men had said no. If he wanted to see her he could see her later, at headquarters.

Then she was gone and Rex and Walker stood alone in the kind of pathetic little room with its yellow ceiling and absurd flowered walls. And inside Sam Walker was a little leaden ball of futile anger and a growing awe at the skill of the phantom who wanted to destroy this girl called Margaret Baker.

**R**EX MARTIN went over and sat down on the bed. His boyish head was supported by his big hands, his breath was working raggedly through his lips.

Walker looked at him for a minute, knowing how he must have felt, but knowing also that something had to be done, fast. Once the D.A.’s office got going on the preparation of their case against her, it would be almost impossible

to stop the tide, even with a fairly good case against someone else.

He went over to the bed and dug his fingers into Rex Martin’s shoulder.

“Come on, now, kid,” he said. “Pull yourself together and fill in that sketchy background you gave me in my office. Everything you can think of that might help.”

Rex Martin looked up, a childlike optimism flushing his face. “You think he did it?” he asked. “Instead of killing her, he decided to let the State do it for him?”

Walker nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “For some reason he switched like that. Now give.”

Their story, her story really, was short and one of those eternal clichés life dishes up to generation after generation with a sad, unimaginative regularity.

She came from Ohio—Niles, Ohio, population ten or eleven thousand. She’d won a beauty contest out there and got a short night-club contract in New York. Along with it, a gratuitous build-up from Abe Winters, the agent who handled the contract.

She invaded the big city, did the job, a little singing, a little dancing. A five-minute spot, deep in the floor show. So deep that nobody noticed, nobody cared especially; they just clapped politely because she was so fresh and pretty—and then forgot about her.

**T**HE old story. The job completed, nothing else for her. No smashing success, no beck from the moguls of show business. Disillusion, letters from home: “. . . come home, don’t be a little fool . . .”

Pride and her father’s stubbornness kept her from returning. She wanted desperately to go home—but not until she’d had some success, not until she could quit as winner, not loser, not utterly defeated.

Rex had come on from Niles, where he was the son of the richest family in town, where he had been the guy he'd thought she wanted to marry. He'd come to New York to try to persuade her to return.

But no go. She wouldn't even let him get her a decent place to live. So, the cheap room, the cheap food, keeping good clothes on her back with what she should've eaten or spent for a decent, more comfortable apartment.

Rex had hung around, waiting for her to come to her senses, doing the little things she'd let him do for her, hanging around like big, tired, hurt dog.

She had everything for success in show business. A dancer's slender, lithe, strong body. The fresh beauty. The singing and speaking voice. And that aura, that incandescence of youthful loveliness, impossible to put into words.

And during all this, three attempts had been made on her life. Something out of a serene summer sky—an ugly stroke of lightning. Not once—that could've been a mistake—but three times, straight at her, and barely missing.

Rex had suggested the private detective and they'd picked Sam Walker's name out of the phone book. Sam had seconded their motion that she carry a gun—just in case—and they had all laughed together, really unbelieving, thinking the whole thing incredible.

She hadn't even carried the gun after Sam Walker had got her the permit. Afraid of it, she'd told Rex, she had always left it over there in the bureau drawer.

That was all. Pathetically little. And after it was told it sounded bare and arid of hope.

Sam Walker knew a little about show business. He knew a little about everything, that's what made him the kind of dick he was at thirty-one years—comfortably successful.

He knew that a girl with everything Margaret Baker had should've gotten a break somewhere along the line. She had the guts, she had the talent, she had the hungry desire for success. How come no success at all? Just negation. A blank wall. There was the starting point—finding out why.

THE girl who answered the knock on the apartment door was pretty in a hard, experienced way. She opened the door a foot, stood blocking it, and looked Sam Walker and Rex Martin over carefully from shoes to hats.

Finally she said, "Yeah?" Cautiously.

Walker showed his identification and she said, "Yeah?" Coldly.

Walker put his hand on the door casually and shoved. She stumbled back into the room and they entered. Walker closed the door.

"I'm working for Margaret Baker," Walker said. "She was one of your boss's clients. You're Abe Winters' secretary, aren't you?"

She said, "Yeah." Once more frigidly. She put several different connotations into the word at once.

"Who paid him off to keep her out of work?" Walker said curtly.

The girl jumped a little and she said, "Yeah?" She reached behind her, got a cigarette and lit it with a steady hand.

Rex Martin stepped forward, his boyish face smiling, his eyes earnestly on hers.

"We don't want to get you in wrong," he said. "We're prepared to—to pay you well for the information, then forget where we got it."

The girl's voice changed a little, warmed a little. "Yeah?" she said.

"A thousand dollars," Rex said.

Walker sighed. It must be nice to have that kind of dough to toss around, he

thought.

The girl snubbed out the cigarette. "Let's see the color of it," she said, proving that her vocabulary wasn't as limited as it seemed.

When the transaction had been made, the girl said, "The guy said he was acting in behalf of the girl's father—the father didn't want her in show business and thought it best not to demand that she return home, but that she be discouraged. He paid Abe off, plenty, and told Abe to forget he'd ever seen him. I heard it all, naturally, since I was sitting just outside the door and the door was open. The man didn't leave a name. Just walked out and we never saw him again."

"What did he look like?" Walker asked.

"A skinny, well-dressed, middle-aged man. He had on silver-rimmed glasses and he carried a cane." The girl wrinkled her nose thoughtfully. "He wore a Homburg hat—a black one. That's all I remember about him."

Walker looked over at Rex. The look on Rex's face was one of puzzlement. He lifted his shoulders and looked helplessly at Walker.

Outside, Walker turned to Rex. "Don't get discouraged, kid," he said with an optimism he didn't feel. "It's late now—go home and get some sleep, I'll pick you up at your hotel tomorrow and we'll go see her and the lieutenant."

Rex stood on the dark street, his face working, his big hands opening and closing in helpless anger. Then he turned and strode wordlessly away. Walker watched him go, shaking his head.

**B**ACK at his apartment, Sam Walker climbed into pajamas and robe, mixed a strong drink, and sat listlessly beside his radio—then giving with soft, late-at-night dance music—and tried to keep his mind

on the problem. .

But he couldn't. This was more than just another case. He thought more of that girl, Margaret Baker, than he'd realized. Maybe he was in love with her. A fine thing for a hardboiled, former homicide dick. Falling in love for the first time at his age, and falling in love with a dame being held in the pokey for murder.

*For murder.* That kid. Like everybody's dream girl. The kind you want to marry after you've sown your oats.

Damn it, don't think like that, Walker told himself, you're a dick and she's your client, keep your mind on the case, not on her personally.

The music came into the room, soft and dulcet, like Spring, like the dreams a guy has when he's alone and kind of tired of fighting all the time.

Walker got up, tilted the glass, took a couple of turns up and down the room.

Then he went over and sat down at the little desk on which the telephone rested. He looked at the phone for a minute, as if he hated it, then he picked it up and asked for long distance.

Long distance finally clicked on and Walker said hoarsely, "I want to place a call to Niles, Ohio. The name is Baker. Yeah, just Baker, that's all I know."

It was an interminable wait, long as forever, long as death. Then the man's voice, firm and deep. "Mr. Baker speaking . . ."

And Sam Walker, sweating, wanting to break something into a million pieces, telling him with as much control as he could the exact situation, telling Margaret's father that his daughter was in an impossible jam, telling the truth with as little brutality as possible.

Then the first reaction of shock transmitting itself halfway across the continent, and finally the disciplined

gripping of emotions by a man accustomed to adversity, and the words Walker had waited for:

“What can I do, what can I tell you that will help?”

“Did you pay to keep her out of work? Pay the agent?”

“Of course not. I wished her every success.”

**P**POINT ONE. Then that man in the Homburg hat—that sinister figure carrying a cane and wearing steel-rimmed glasses — he must be the phantom, the killer, the strangely twisted maniac.

“There were some people here who thought she was foolish to go East,” Mr. Baker said, “She could’ve married Rex Martin at any time, and his family is rich. But I guess she had her own ideas, I never interfere with my kids. They’re people, too, with their own lives to live. What they want to do is fine with me, I just wish them all the luck in the world.”

“Anybody out there hold anything against her?” Walker asked.

“She never hurt anybody in her life,” Mr. Baker said. “Never held a grudge. There was a little mixup some time back, a tragedy. A boy she was going out with got drunk at a country club party and on the way home—she was in the car with him—he struck a man, killed him, and kept on going. He was arrested later and charged with manslaughter. She stuck with him all the way through but he finally got fifteen years and died in jail. She went to see him every week during the three years he lived even though she had never really loved him. I’m telling you this just to show you what kind of stuff that girl is made of.”

Telling me? Walker asked himself. You don’t have to tell me. I know already, without any proof, with nothing, with just a look at her.

“Some people criticized her, said she made the boy act wild, things like that. Absolutely untrue,” Mr. Baker went on. “What happened later, of course, bore that out.”

“What happened?”

“She took up with Rex, fell in love with him and is going to marry him. Rex was his brother—Rex was in the army then, overseas. She’s a fine girl and they’ve just made a mistake, that’s all. I know they’ll straighten it out.”

Walker gave the phone a look. “Sure,” he said softly, “sure they’ll straighten it out.”

A few more reassuring words and Mr. Baker saying that he would fly to New York immediately. Then Walker hung up and went back to his chair beside the radio, to another drink, another cigarette, and the soft music like lovers’ sighing.

**S**OMEHOW, in the morning sunshine it didn’t seem so bad. Walker and Rex had coffee together at the hotel, then went to police headquarters.

Rex had already retained a high-class lawyer for her and the way was paved for an interview with the lieutenant.

They sat in a bare little office buried back in the huge, impersonal building. The lieutenant at a little desk, Rex and Walker in straight-backed, varnished chairs before him, like schoolboys in the office of the principal.

The lieutenant was a small man for a high police officer, small and dainty and immaculately dressed. He told them in a dispassionate voice everything they wanted to know, subtly giving the impression that no matter what he said, or what they said, nothing would change the immutable police machinery which was grinding out a case against Margaret Baker.

"We're working on the motive," the lieutenant said in his even, uninflected voice. "So far it looks like she just became enraged at the agent for not getting her work. Motives are sometimes like that—small, petty. Sometimes it's hard to believe that a person would kill for such little things."

Walker's hand on Rex's arm restrained the boy from lunging at the lieutenant.

"Somebody paid Abe Winters off to keep her out of work," Walker said evenly. "Yes?"

"Yes, a man who said he was working for her father. That was a lie. I talked to her father on the phone last night. There's your murderer, lieutenant. A slim man, well-dressed, middle-aged, steel-rimmed glasses, black Homburg hat."

"Height and weight?" the lieutenant purred.

Walker shook his head.

"All right," the lieutenant said, "I'll tell you—five feet seven, one hundred forty. If you don't believe me, take a look in the morgue. He's there."

Walker stared at the lieutenant, his teeth tight together.

"Of course," the lieutenant said, "I may not have the right man. This one was a lawyer. Timothy Shane. We looked into it late last night but I'm sure it was an accident. Worked late, fell down a flight of steel stairs in his office building. Our reconstruction of the case was that he didn't know the elevator was running and was going to walk down the three flights. His neck was broken.

"His wife tells us he got a call, late last night, to come down to the office immediately. She didn't know who it was or why. But she guesses it was an important client because Shane went right down. He lives over on Lexington Avenue.

"There was nothing in the office to

point to a homicide, no notes on the night session with this client. Nothing. We did find a couple of pages torn out of a day-book which listed cash receipts. Nothing else. Certainly no evidence of foul play anywhere. He died accidentally."

Walker got up. "Well, I guess that's it, lieutenant," he said. "You're wrong and you think you're right. We're right and we know we're right. Thanks, anyway. And could I have the address of Mrs. Timothy Shane?"

The lieutenant looked straight into Walker's eyes. "Your license," he said, "doesn't give you the right to interfere in police business."

Walker's jaw jutted a little and a knot of muscle squirmed back along his jaw. "And your badge doesn't give you the right to persecute an innocent girl," he shot back. "Keep the damned address, I'll get it myself."

THEY had a short talk with Margaret Baker. Walker didn't stay through it all. He wanted Rex and Margaret to have a few minutes together. She looked pale and tired and bewildered.

"I told them everything — the truth," she said. "And they don't believe me. What else can I do?"

"Just keep your chin up, honey," Rex said. "We're doing everything we can."

Walker got her story then. Abe Winters had been very much alive when she'd left his office. She'd raised hell with him about no work for a few minutes, then walked out. He was sitting there, red-faced, angry, but breathing—breathing.

Walker turned to Rex, "I'll see you at my office," he said, "in an hour."

Then he went out, angry himself, much angrier than Abe Winters had been, angrier than he had ever been in his life, and bitterer . . .

Rex Martin came into the office and

slumped into a chair. He took the drink that Walker had mixed for him, sipped it once, then put it on the floor near his chair. His head sank down until his chin rested on his chest and he looked like the picture of utter dejection, complete defeat.

Walker sat at his desk, watching Rex and shaking his head. The minutes ticked by. Finally Walker said, "I talked to Mrs. Shane. She was evasive, as if she was afraid. She knows something, something she won't tell because of fear."

Rex didn't even look up. His boyish crew-cut stared blankly at Walker. His shoulders sagged. He gave no notice that he had even heard what Walker said.

The telephone rang and Walker lifted it. He talked and listened, then hung up. He got to his feet. "Kid," he said jubilantly, "here's our break. Mrs. Shane has decided to talk. Her husband was working for somebody, just as I figured, and now she says she can describe this guy."

Rex Martin's head came up slowly, incredulity spreading from his eyes into his face.

"Really?" he breathed. "She says she can?"

"Sure," Walker said. "Come on, kid, let's get over there."

**M**RS. SHANE answered the door. She was a tiny woman with graying hair and eyes that were still red from weeping. "Please come in," she said.

Rex and Walker entered.

The three seated themselves in a comfortable, old-style living room.

The woman was sitting on the edge of her chair, clad in black. The two men faced her, their faces eager and glistening with sweat.

"You said you could identify the man who hired your husband to pay off the booking agent, Abe Winters, is that right,

Mrs. Shane?" Walker asked.

"Yes, that's right," Mrs. Shane said, obviously exerting an effort to keep her voice under control. "You've brought him with you, Mr. Walker."

She was looking directly at Rex Martin.

Rex stared at her for a moment; then a boyish, sheepish grin crept over his good-looking face. He looked sideways at Walker and lifted his shoulders.

Walker said, "You mean Rex Martin, this boy here, is the one who hired your husband?"

Her voice was positive. "I'm certain he is the man. My husband pointed him out to me once at the theatre. He was with a little, brown-haired girl, a pretty girl."

Rex found his voice, "This is crazy, Walker," he said. "If it were true, then I'd be the guy who stopped Margaret from getting a chance—"

"And tried to kill her and finally framed her and then killed Timothy Shane," Walker said softly.

Rex swung around until his face was looking fully at Walker, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"You believe her?" he asked. "Is everybody going nuts?"

Walker let that hang for a moment while his eyes clawed into Rex's and held them with iron strength.

Then Walker drew a long, ragged breath and said, "No, you are the one who is nuts, as you put it. Only you, Rex, with a terrible kind of insanity—the desire for revenge.

"Let me give you it the way I've got it together. Remember your brother, how she was with him that night when you were overseas? How she got him drunk and then made him drive the car, and he killed a man? Remember the sting of the letters you must've got—you were overseas at the time and you had to take it all second-

hand — remember how you loved him, your brother, how much he meant to you.”

Rex rose slowly to his feet and stood by his chair in a kind of animal crouch, staring at Walker, his boyish face tired and drawn.

“Did you vow, overseas, to avenge him? Is that where you swore it, that as soon as you got back you’d destroy her, stamp her out? Not openly. Oh, no—accidentally.

“And when you got home, you went to her acting smart, telling her you understood, didn’t believe what they had said about her—and all the time hating her. Did you try to kill her out there ‘accidentally’? Did you fail there the way you did here in New York?

“You blocked every chance she had for success—you wanted her to flop, miserably. And then you stumbled on the idea of a murder frame-up. You brought her to me, a private dick, so that she could get the gun, then you used the gun and put it back in her room where they’d find it. You wanted them to get her for murder, for her to die in the chair or in prison like your brother did.

“And your helping me afterward was just a cover-up while you gloated over your success and steered me to Timothy Shane, drawing a red herring across the trail.”

**R**EX cut in then, softly, but with poison in his voice, a terrible, deadly poison. “Yes, Walker, yes,” he said, his eyes burning. “I guess there’s not much use denying it. I’m your boy, your phantom. You can’t hurt me, Walker. I died a long time ago, when my brother died—in prison, because of her. Her and her phony innocence! She fooled most of them but not me. Not me, Walker.”

He had a gun in his big hand and he held it like one who knew how to use it.

He backed toward the door and Walker and Mrs. Shane watched him silently. A big, good-looking fullback, taking the part of murderer, villain, in a school play. Pretty soon the curtain would drop and reality would come back into things and he would smile and say, ‘*How’d I do, folks? Did I scare yuh?*’ But it didn’t end that way. It ended as things like that always end when they’re real.

The two dicks came out of the closet where they had been listening to Walker’s last play, his last gamble, and they fired across the old-style living room at Rex.

Rex fired back and one of the dicks caved to the floor. But there were two bullets in Rex. Walker’s gun spoke too late. Rex was out the door and down the hall to the street, carrying the bullets.

Walker and the remaining detective gave chase.

Rex ran blindly into the traffic of Lexington Avenue. A taxi caught him head-on, lifted him and dropped him under the wheels of another car. . . .

Margaret Baker sat quietly in the little booth with Sam Walker.

He shoved the drink across to her. Straight whiskey. “Drink it down,” he said wearily. “What I’ve got to say is going to hurt, kid—hurt like hell.”

He watched her drink it down. She made a face, gagged. He groped for words, looked at her, listened to the faint music drifting over from a radio behind the bar, like lovers whispering, like breath, like Margaret.

Then he told it straight, like the whiskey, and told himself that the other thing could wait until after the shock, the tears. It could wait. Waiting wouldn’t hurt it. Waiting would mellow it.