

# **FOUL TRADE**

**BK Duncan**

# Chapter One

March 1920

May pressed the carriage return. The inquest report was finished but she couldn't let the coroner's concluding remarks be the last words the parents read; the mother had been present at the accident and the implication that she had been careless would haunt her long after she had accepted the loss of her child.

May re-read the previous paragraph and then starting typing. After eighteen months of working with him she knew Colonel Tindal's turn of phrase. If she chose her words carefully then he might not realise that he didn't actually say them. *In the absence of any medical evidence to the contrary, it is safe to assume that the amount of noxious smoke present would have rendered the baby dead before the flames reached him.*

She pulled the piece of paper out of the machine and placed it on top of the rest. Now she had to get the coroner to sign it. She pushed her chair back and slid through the gap between the desk and the filing cabinets. Poplar Coroner's Court had been purpose built to the latest designs but the architects certainly hadn't given any thought to the comfort of those who worked there – with the exception of the coroner. He had an antechamber behind the courtroom but the caretaker faced a cliff of a staircase to his room in the eaves, and May had to roast in the summer and freeze in the winter in a tiny space beside a window that barely held back the fumes and noise from the High Street.

Her sturdy heels echoed in the short corridor to the coroner's room. She hoped she hadn't over-egged it. She'd often changed some of his stuffy sentences for something an ordinary person like her would understand, but adding something she was sure he wouldn't have wanted to express in the first place was entirely different. If he noticed then he might demote her back to clerk. He'd appointed her temporary coroner's officer when Mr Philby had signed up. Now the poor man would be forever under French soil, the position was hers to lose. It was taxing taking on both roles but she was holding her own; no one could say she didn't work hard and hadn't fully

repaid Colonel Tindal's faith in her. Well, faith was probably going a little too far; in truth she didn't think her elevation had occupied his mind for longer than it took to realise he would be spared the effort of finding someone else. This pragmatism also went some way to explaining why he tolerated a woman in the role. So here she was: May Louise Keaps, a twenty-two-year-old, one-time cigarette factory worker, holding down a position of responsibility in the community. She'd never achieved top marks in night school at the commercial college but she had proved to be a natural coroner's officer with a nose for the truth and the tenacity to seek it out.

She rapped on the oak panelled door and waited for permission to enter. Colonel Tindal was a stickler for protocol and liked to remind everyone of his status by letting at least two minutes pass before calling out 'come'. It took slightly longer on this occasion. One look at his flushed face and May was reminded of the time she'd found him asleep at his desk after a Coroner's Society luncheon. Except now it was only mid-morning. She placed the report on the blotter. Colonel Tindal uncapped his fountain pen and signed the end page without even asking whose inquest it had been. He pushed the slim sheaf of papers back at her and stood up.

'I'll be in my club if anyone wants me.'

She had got away with it: this time.

He was following her down the corridor when May heard the street door open and close. Colonel Tindal said something under his breath she thought it as well she didn't catch. PC Collier, the constable assigned to the coroner's court, was standing by her desk. Eager and fidgety, in a uniform she assumed had been issued with an assurance that he'd grow into it, he filled the small room with the distinctive odour of the glue factory. That meant he'd come from Poplar Hospital. Having been born and brought up within walking distance of the busiest docks in the world, May could always tell which street someone had just been in by the smells clinging to their clothes and hair.

PC Collier shot her a smile of greeting before adopting what she knew to be his most serious expression. But it couldn't eclipse the puppyish excitement he always exhibited in her company. She might even have felt flattered by his crush if she thought he'd started shaving.

‘It has been my sad duty to accompany a deceased person to the mortuary.’ He pulled his notebook from his pocket and flipped over the pages. ‘One Clarice Gem. I was called to her lodgings last night being Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> February in...’ He cast his eyes down quickly. ‘Robinhood Lane. The house of a Mrs...’ again a glance sneaked at his notes as if to read them openly might lead to an accusation of cheating. ‘Harrison. Dr Swan attended and had the body sent to the hospital first off out of consideration for the lateness of the hour and your caretaker’s gout. All the known facts point to a drugs overdose.’

May winced. He’d been doing so well up until then; using the sort of official language they both knew the coroner liked death to be couched in. A wheeze at her shoulder told her Colonel Tindal wasn’t going to let it go.

‘Whilst in my court I would prefer that flat-footed lesser servants of the Crown kept their ill-informed opinions to themselves and preserved their scant wits for the undoubted demands of keeping louts from stoning cats.’ He tugged out his fob watch and tapped the dial. ‘This had better not take long.’

May tried to restore PC Collier’s spirits with a raise of her eyebrows as she followed Colonel Tindal from the room.



The mortuary was out at the back, down a covered walkway. Tucked away so that the bereaved didn’t have to pass it when attending an inquest, it was devoid of the pomp of the mullioned windows, leaded lights and stone dressing of the main building. Totally functional in character it squatted in the bowels of the site behind head-height perimeter walls. Bodies were delivered via an entrance at the end of a passage off Cottage Street, the gruesome business of post-mortems taking place in the adjoining laboratory.

May held the door open for Colonel Tindal and then walked in behind him. The smell was always the first thing she noticed, even when it was free of occupants; the cleanliness had an edge to it that scratched at the back of her throat. She flicked the light switch and the bulbs in their wide white-glass shades flung out spots of brightness reminiscent of one of the better class of variety theatres. But there was going to be no curtain call for poor Clarice

Gem. She was lying on the furthest of the marble plinths used for viewing, her modesty and a modicum of dignity preserved under a mortuary sheet. How May wished it could remain that way but she knew once the inquest process started Clarice would be thoroughly exposed until there were no secrets of her life and death left. May felt as though she should apologise in advance.

They walked down the short flight of steps and along the length of the room. Colonel Tindal made a guttural noise. The moment before the sheet was drawn back was the one time May felt a deep empathy for him. Facing sudden and traumatic death was something you never got used to; it reminded you too much of your own slender grip on mortality. And that of those you loved.

He cleared his throat again. 'Let's get this over with.'

She was young. Ridiculously young. Not much older than Alice.

'Female. White. Seventeen or eighteen. Body fits with description in police report.'

May noted down his comments. The coroner's viewing was nothing more than a formality but it was a legal requirement. Colonel Tindal turned his back and began his ritual of taking a pinch of snuff. Although it was hardly necessary in this case; there was no odour of blood or disease. May couldn't help remembering the bodies that had been fished from the river or discovered in advanced states of decomposition. Clarice Gem was neat and tidy in death. May wondered if she'd been the sort of person to whom that would have mattered. Her own mother had admonished her from a very early age to not show her up in public; to do nothing unbecoming; never make a mess for others to clear up. Such a pointless waste of energy when it only ever ended up like this. But if Clarice had cared about such things then she wouldn't have liked the fact that her hair – which was thick and curly – had become matted on one side. Presumably from how she'd been lying before her removal to the hospital. May reached out her hand and gently swept the tangles back. There was a bruise on the girl's temple. Or rather a series of small ones that coalesced into a deep stain like that of squashed cherries.

'Colonel Tindal, will you take a look at this?'

He had begun walking towards the door.

'She might have been the victim of violence.'

‘When the decline of my faculties requires the intervention of my coroner’s officer, that will be the day I resign office.’

May had expected a rebuke but it was her duty to uncover everything she could about the circumstances of a death in order to help the coroner direct the jury. No. That was her job. Her duty was to ensure that no one’s death remained as enigmatic as their life. But Colonel Tindal did come back to stand beside her.

‘Contusions to the side of the head. You may note that down. This is clearly another in the long line we’ve had recently. Immoral girls who sell themselves on the streets should expect the manners of foreign sailors.’

May held her breath to stop from responding. Not every woman found dead in Poplar was a prostitute. And even if Clarice Gem had been, there was no excuse for dismissing what may have happened in her final hours so cavalierly. Colonel Tindal held values forged in the crucible of another age which included the unshakable belief that women received no better at the hands of men than they deserved. May felt a fleeting pang of pity for his wife, and thanked the Lord he had no daughters. Then she remembered his son and was sorry; the terrain on top of the moral high ground was always slippery and strewn with half-hidden rocks. She had no right to judge him, as he was in no place to judge Clarice Gem. Not yet anyway. He would in the courtroom, and then heaven help her reputation.

‘If there is nothing else to which you wish to draw my attention?’

May shook her head. She pulled the sheet back up.

‘Then you are to issue warrants summoning the family, and anyone else the police have already spoken to. Instruct Dr Swan to perform a post-mortem. I will hold the preliminary inquest the day after tomorrow. Make it morning.’

May noted down his instructions as he began to puff up the stairs.

‘Jury list three.’

The *suicide list*. When she had first taken on the coroner’s officer role, Colonel Tindal had handed her various rotas of names to be summonsed. Although not strictly in the spirit of the law it was perfectly acceptable practice; all inquests needed a jury and panels of local men standing by was the only way they could be held promptly. But list three. May knew it hadn’t been a random

selection. Colonel Tindal liked to have a verdict reached that coincided with his own views. And he had evidently already made up his mind about what had happened to Clarice Gem. He must've taken more notice of PC Collier's remark than she'd realised: drug taking was always an act of slow self-murder as far as he was concerned.

May watched his shoulders heaving as he held onto the stair rail and fought to catch his breath. She couldn't help wondering if he ever saw his own face staring into the bottom of a brandy glass in the same way.

## Chapter Two

The working day finally drew to a close. May slipped her arms into her coat and pulled on her green felt hat. It had been something of an extravagance at the time but had served her well. There was a bit of moth under the grosgrain band but it still looked reasonably smart. She held her gloves in her hand as she went around making sure all the lights were switched off. Alf Dent, the caretaker, was another beneficiary of Colonel Tindal's lax approach to hiring and firing. The only duties the old man could be trusted to perform were to take care of the mortuary, keep it secure, and to receive bodies – although PC Collier had on more than one occasion to fetch him from the public bar of the White Horse in order to do just that. May locked the street door behind her, dropping the ring of keys into her messenger-boy style shoulder bag before heading up Cottage Street. It had been Alice's seventeenth birthday at the weekend and they were going to pick out material for the dress that was to be her present.

Her sister was waiting for her on the corner by the Methodist Chapel, sharing a joke with three girls dressed in school uniform. May felt one of her bands of tension relax a notch. Alice had finished at George Green School in the summer; suitable positions for a bright but restless and spirited girl proving hard to find she'd endured a stint as a temporary shipping clerk before starting in the box office of the Gaiety Theatre two months ago. It wasn't the sort of job May would've chosen for her sister and she'd been concerned Alice's new-found status (in her own eyes at least) would result in her shunning all her old friends to take up with a racier crowd, but it seemed Alice had more sense than she'd given her credit for.

May threw her a wave as she crossed the road. Alice detached herself, her broad grin showing sparkly-white teeth. She arrived at May's side and linked arms.

'You'll never guess what happened today.'

'I'm sure you're going to tell me.'

'Don't be a spoilsport. Come on, guess.'

'A lion escaped from one of the acts and ate the manager.'



Alice chortled. ‘That would’ve been such a scream. He’s such an old woman, coming down every hour and getting me to recite the programme from beginning to end to check I know what’s on. It’s a wonder I’ve any voice left.’

‘Now that would be remarkable; ever since you learned to talk I’ve never known you stop chattering.’

Alice punched her lightly on the arm. ‘But you’re nearly right. Except it’s about elephants. Stinky Sid came in at lunchtime—’

‘Don’t be unkind.’

‘Well he does smell.’

‘So would you if you had seven brothers and sisters and no running water.’

‘We manage to get to the bathhouse and he lives closer than we do.’

‘It costs money and his parents don’t have any.’

‘I haven’t got any parents but I’m still clean.’

This was familiar – but dangerous – territory which Alice trod whenever she felt she was being unjustly criticised. May could feel the melancholy of the day returning. She patted Alice’s hand.

‘So, what’s this about elephants?’

‘There’s a show opening at the Hippodrome that’s got them in. Stin... Sid knew all about it. His dad works in the printers where they do the posters and the man who books the acts let it slip. He told him not to tell anyone but that’s just a trick because advance publicity is worth at least a hundred tickets.’

May was impressed at how quickly Alice had picked up an appreciation of the theatre business. They had been back under the same roof for nearly two years but she was still discovering new depths to her sister. They had arrived at Chrisp Street. The market took up the entire length, the canvas tilts of the closely packed stalls jutting out to all-but cover the roadway. It was at its most crowded in the evenings – at pub-throwing-out time you were as likely to get your thoughts jostled from your head as drop a penny without the space to bend down to pick it up. May enjoyed Chrisp Street best when it was up to the full-scale riot proportions of a Saturday night. The shriek and babble of languages fresh off the ships; the joy of the conquest as she snatched exactly what she’d been looking for from under the hand of a less determined bargain-hunter; elbows in ribs, crushed toes, and sometimes a glancing blow to the side of

the head; the welcome respite of a plate of whelks and a cup of tea at the stall on the corner of Carmen Street before doubling back and doing it all again on the other side. But even a Tuesday late afternoon was never dull.

As usual, the first hawker they came to was a man selling pots, pans, and white china. He rattled a wooden spoon in a zinc bowl in a half-hearted effort to attract her attention but both of them knew it was merely a rehearsal and he expected nothing to come of it. But May did stop at the fruit stall spanning the frontage of the chemist shop and bought some oranges, refusing to let the stallholder select them in case he sneaked some rotten ones into her bag. Alice was skittish beside her. The girl had so much energy it made May tired to watch so she switched her attention to wondering if she should splash out on some brazil nuts. The smell of vanilla toffee was making her mouth water. She paid for her purchases and drifted on.

They were at the eel stall now and May had to stop. Not only to rest her feet. The tanks of writhing fish had always held a grisly fascination. The stallholder pulled one out by hooking his fingers under the gills.

‘Get in ’ere closer, mother, I’ve got a right tight grip—’

The woman next to May shuddered but stepped forward.

‘—or so my old lady says. And if he does slither out it’ll be no more worse than that trouser-snake I reckon you know how to ’andle.’

Like a veteran of the boards he waited for his audience’s laughter to reach its peak and then lifted his cleaver to shoulder height – twitching his wrist a little so the metal glinted – and brought it down at the same time as releasing the eel. Whack. The blade severed the head, the wriggling body sliding in its slime off the marble slab and into a pail. The fishmonger had never missed in all the years May had been watching, and neither had any corpse.

Alice was no longer by her side. May looked around for her but could only see middle-aged and elderly women clutching shopping bags. She walked on to where the haberdashery stalls were sandwiched between a collection of thrown-together furniture, looking for all the world as if the bailiffs had just completed an eviction and dumped it there. She was fingering a bolt of cotton printed with tiny sprigs of flowers when her sister finally joined her.

'You reckoning on wearing an apron?'

'I thought it'd make a charming dress.'

'What? And have everyone in the theatre wet themselves laughing?'

'You used to like patterns like this.'

Alice rolled her eyes. 'When I was a kid.' She reached across and unfurled a garish concoction of yellow and black. 'How about this?'

'It's silk. You know I can't afford that. And besides, why would you want to go around looking as if you're covered in squashed wasps?'

'Reckon I'd rather do that than have people think I work in an undertaker's.'

May found herself pulling the edges of her coat closed to hide the offending white blouse and charcoal skirt. Alice was going through a phase of thoughtlessly sharpening her tongue, turning everything – even what was supposed to be a treat – into a skirmish. But May was tired and really couldn't be bothered to fight.

'This one then?' Bright red poppies on a buttermilk background. Surely Alice couldn't be afraid of blending into the background sheathed in that?

Alice shrugged. That was as much approval for her choice as May was going to get. She attracted the stallholder's attention and ordered three yards.

'Is it all right if I go to Elaine's now? I mean, you don't need me for anything else do you? Her ma'll give me supper.'

'Go on, then. But don't be in late. Remember you'll be working the evening shows for the rest of the week.'

Alice gave her such a *don't fuss* look that May cuffed her lightly on the shoulder before elbowing her way into the gaggle of women surrounding the tripe dresser.



'You should've heard him. Making out like I ought to be grateful that he would even consider a shiddach with a cripple.'

Sally's shears slid through the material without a stutter. May's closest friend, she was a thirty-year-old dressmaker who lived and worked above her father's tailor shop. She had a mass of blue-black wiry hair, brown eyes, and downy olive skin. Born with one

leg shorter than the other and a spine that resembled a drooping flower stem, she was destined to be forever making pretty clothes to drape figures more perfect than her own. But pity was the last thing May ever felt in Sal's company; they shared too much for her ever to allow herself to do that.

'You want another cuppa? Help yourself.'

May did so. Sally drank her tea the Russian way, black with a slice of lemon. It had all the restorative qualities of a magic potion.

'You could make a good match if you stretched to the effort. All those professionals you see in court, one of them will make an offer if you'd agree to meet them at least halfway in the game. With time, even a bear can learn how to dance.'

May picked up a spoon. She clattered it against the china as she stirred. 'I'm perfectly happy as I am thanks. You know you asked me if I could do something about that chair of your grandmother's, I saw a broken one in the market and it'd be easy to swap the legs over; I've got all of my brother's tools in a box under the stairs.'

May caught Sally looking at her from under her frizzy fringe as she hobbled to the end of the worktable.

'It's not good to be alone, even in Paradise.'

'Just as well I've got Alice then.'

'What makes you think she'll be staying around here for any longer than she has to? Got grand notions of herself, that one, and any day now we'll all be coated in the dust she kicks off her heels.'

'Not if I have my way she won't. I'm biding my time until the novelty of being surrounded by stardust wears off then I'm going to persuade her to take an office job with normal hours and go to night school. She needs some professional qualifications if she's ever going to get anywhere in this world. Everything else is too stacked against the working classes for the likes of us to break out of the patterns of poverty.'

As May said it she could see her father thumping his fist on the kitchen table. He'd been a staunch Communist but she hadn't realised how much some of his views had become her own until this moment. But she didn't want to think about him.

'What do you want for all your efforts, thanks? She's just seventeen. At that age we all think our elders and betters know nothing. It takes time for us to realise that the tapping on the door is not a call to arms, but wisdom. And it's unfair of you to expect

Alice to be any different. You want a life that is yours to control? Then do as I suggested and get a husband. And don't even bother to tell me you are still mourning over that Henry Farlow because I won't believe you. I happen to know that you weren't really in love with him.'

'We were extremely fond of each other. From what I've seen of many marriages around here, that's more than most can say. And it would have worked; we were suited.'

'Cloth can be cut one way or the other and made to fit. If you persist in refusing to even take the measure of a man, then the few still around will be snapped up and you'll only have a lonely old age to keep you company.'

'There's never any guarantee against that; three-quarters of the women down my street expected to have their husbands by their sides forever before the Great War came.'

'That's as may be but you could at least not throw the bolt across the door yourself. Stop treating every man like a brother. Also try acting a little helpless once in a while. With such big sea-blue eyes and thick dark hair for which a wigmaker would gladly pawn his grandchildren, you should have no trouble having the luxury of picking. And that would be true even if you weren't blessed with a figure most of my clients would have to starve themselves to get. Just because you have a man's job doesn't mean you have to hide your feminine charms; it's only throwing it back in God's face to be so wasteful. Not to say rubbing it under the nose of the likes of me.' Sally wasn't smiling.

May refused to let the airing of her faults prick her. Sally meant well, she just had a very different view of life. One based on marriage and babies as being the most natural and noble state for women. It pained May to realise how keenly her friend must feel it was something she would never attain.

Sally had resumed her cutting. 'You could do worse than taking a tip or two from Alice; she knows already how to use what God saw fit to give her.'

'Why do you think I worry about her so much? She thinks she's a woman but in reality she's little more than a child.'

'That has nothing to do with her age. She'll be just the same when she's thirty. Your sister is a flirt who knows the precise extent of her power and how to use it to be granted anything she wants.'

The sooner you realise that, the easier a time you'll have of it. Stop trying to change her nature and wise up to her instead; if she's bucking against the reins now, she'll be off looking for soft hay to roll in before long. You mark my words.'

May had to stop from asking Sally what she knew about it – with five brothers it was probably a damn sight more than her.

'I happen to think she'll come good. All she needs is a bit of sense drummed into her and a little steering in the right direction. Like getting this dream of hers about being an actress out of her head. Seems it's what she's... *wanted for ever and ever...* which is strange as she'd never so much as mentioned it before she'd started at the theatre.'

Sally interrupted her cutting with a sort of hiccup of the shears on the table.

'Why would she choose you to share the secrets of her heart? She is not the uncomplicated girl who waved you off when you boarded the ship to France, and you are not the same sister who came back. Life and circumstances have changed you both. Get to know the person she is now before she surprises you with something that will cause you both more pain than choosing a profession you think not good enough for her.'

That hadn't had the lightness of loving mockery. May took a sip of tea to stop from leaping to her own defence.

'It'll be altogether too racketsy a life.'

'And you and I know each day where the next month's rent's going to come from? My aunt played the Yiddish Theatre in Commercial Road for years and she always had food in her mouth and a bed to fall into at night. Even managed to bring up four children who no one could say were any more wanting than the others in the street, despite uncle never lifting a finger over the shock of having to leave the shtetl.'

Sally was trying to turn it into one of her jokes about the hopelessness of all Jewish men but May couldn't raise a smile. She knew Alice would be more susceptible than most to the temptations the theatre world had to offer. After a life touched by so much grief – eighteen of her schoolmates killed in a Zeppelin raid; losing her mother to influenza; her brother now no more than a name on the Roll of Honour; and finally... finally... having a suicide for a father – what young girl wouldn't be spurred on to taste every experience

on offer out of fear her time on this earth could be cut short at any moment?

No, for as long as they were living under the same roof May was going to make sure her sister set her feet on the right path. And, one day, Alice might even thank her for it.