

#4. Introducing Detective Stranger McKrayne

Apples in the Summer

It was 1981, in the autumn of the year, when Stranger McKrayne stopped off for a beer and some bar snacks after his beat. Stranger had just turned thirty. He was a curly-haired bloke of average height and not yet a private detective, just a humble bobby on a North London patrol. After stripping from his rather natty uniform and throwing on some trendier garments worthy of the early eighties realm, Stranger McKrayne very uncharacteristically wandered through the heart of Islington and out into the night.

Stranger was a good policeman, deserving of his badge and helmet. He was a reticent guy – quiet, but without the social awkwardness. He was born and raised in the murky overspill of Northern London, the first and only son of his corned-beef-sarnie-loving parents, Shandon and Veronica. Shandon McKrayne had always been madly in love with his son. As an only child, Stranger was the victim of being spoilt, but the McKraynes were blameless parents nonetheless. Shandon was particularly fond of the movies, and growing up Stranger was treated by his cinephile father to a routine Thursday showing of any film, whether worth seeing or not, at the cinema at the top of their road. This was a tradition that they both dared not break, even through the years of long working days and adolescent distractions. The two of them raided the pic 'n' mix stand far more times than was dentally healthy and sat through more bad performances than the autocue guy at the Oscars. As an adult man, Stranger's deep-rooted love for the high-budgeted Tinseltown delights never diminished. When times were tough, he had his father, and when times were good, he had the charismatic distraction of the cinema, and his father.

On the night that Stranger went out for his beer and bar nuts, he had previously arranged, like most every week before, to catch a bedtime flick at the same cinema with the same old man. *True Confessions* had just been released in the UK and McKrayne and McKrayne both had a date with De Niro. However, the plan had changed somewhat after Stranger had returned to the station from his mundane Thursday patrol to some more-than-welcome news. Stranger's eleven years in the force had not gone unnoticed (though he hadn't noticed the people noticing), but the noticers had been watching his career with a keen but unclean eye. Much to the utter delight and surprise of Stranger, he re-entered the station that evening as a detective: DS Stranger McKrayne. DCS Annette King and DCI Carl Gregory were the acting officers who had dubbed the humble Stranger, and as such they felt obligated to drag him out and wet the big baby's head. So Stranger, upgraded and chuffed to bits, retreated prudently back to his locker-room locker and switched his going home getup for his going out getup.

"...Hello? It's Stranger – are you there? Dad? Look, don't panic, but I can't make the cinema tonight. It's good news, I'll pop over tomorrow and tell you about it. I'm sorry to do this to you again, I'll make it up to you next week, tickets and sweets on me! Mum, if you get this first, tell the old man would ya?! All right, I love you both, bye."

The three detectives left the station in a happy left-right-left and headed up to the Little Fish Bar on Pentonville Road. They passed by the old cinema Stranger was boycotting for drinky-poops on the way, walking around corners with their unfastened trench coats swooping behind them, almost in slow motion, in the light breeze. As they edged closer to their destination, the discord of a half-hearted sound check could be heard. The dull *boing* of a flat

bass note tremored the pavement, and the rickety backfire of a warm-up snare drum rattled the windows of the high-street shops. Tonight was bands night and tonight's band was getting ready. Stranger, Annette and Carl arrived at the bar. There was a small crowd of drinkers and smokers standing outside the front, slightly blocking the way in, but not completely. Stranger, letting his two senior detectives slither inside first, had his eye caught by the chalkboard that was leant against the side wall – he could just about see it through the fidgeting crowd. He smiled widely. If there was one thing he loved as much as the movies, it was the harmonic sounds of eighties pop gods Daryl Hall and John Oates, and as luck would have it, the Little Fish Bar on Pentonville Road was hosting a night with none other than Philadelphia Crop, arguably the greatest ever Hall and Oates tribute band.

The frothy top of DCS Annette King's pint lapped the sticky sides of her glass as she led the way from the bar to the three-seater table near the side of the stage at the back of the room. The malty liquid threatened mutiny with every careless step she took, dodging past the sea of tiny tables dotted around the tacky barroom floor like a piss-head's armada. She took one sidestep too harshly, rushing to secure the table, and – *splat* – a big fat dollop of foamy lager was thrown overboard and landed with a wet slap onto a table of dressy couples who were waiting for the show to start. No bother – accidents happen – and after a few quick-fire apologies from DCS King and an offer from Stranger to get some napkins for the mess, all was forgiven and mostly forgotten.

Stranger filtered back through the crowd to the bar, where a pile of double-ply napkins were neatly spiralled and ready to be snatched. He made it over to them easily enough, but when he reached out to nab a handful, he instead latched onto another hand, also in quest of the papery stack. The hand was soft, moisturised and warm. It was delicately reassuring. Clearly, this wasn't a man's hand. Stranger looked up, and he saw her for the first time – his tormented love. For now, they were just two strangers, affectionately watching each other: one warm-handed and open-faced, the other hungry-eyed and love-struck. Stranger pulled his hand back and allowed the lady to take her serviettes first, but she was quick to retake his hand and turn it over, palm facing the damp, cracked ceiling.

"You're a Virgo," said the woman.

"That's very clever," said Stranger.

"I'm Elsie. You've good hands..." Elsie gestured at him with a curious look, coaxing his name from him.

"Stranger... McKrayne. Stranger McKrayne," answered the detective.

"Well, Stranger McKrayne Stranger McKrayne, are you gonna buy me a drink or do I have to play with your hands some more first?"

Stranger ordered Elsie a drink, a Cinzano and lemonade. It came with a star-shaped cube of ice and a little cocktail-stick umbrella, though neither of them really knew why. They talked, and they laughed, and then they drank some more. Elsie pulled Stranger's hands out from the inside of his sleeves; they were a little clammy, but in fairness to him, the room was very warm. She inspected them for the second time that evening, this time a little more thoroughly.

Elsie had a sort of gypsy vibe about her and she was into palm reading. There was a gentle sass to her, enough to stand out from the rest but not so much as to brand her a bitch. She had big brown eyes that sparkled like camera flashes at a pop concert. Tenderly, she ran her fingertips along the inside of Stranger's hands, her freshly decorated nails softly grazing his skin.

“So, Mr Virgo, you’re some sort of guard, or watchman... If your eyes weren’t so friendly I’d say you was into heavy security,” said Elsie, looking up from his hands to his eyes.

Stranger furrowed his brow and twisted his neck slightly to the side. “Hmm, not quite, but that’s close. Very close. Well, I suppose...” He was cut off.

“Funny. I’m never usually wrong.” Elsie flipped his hands over, the stickiness of the bar temporarily pasting his palms to it. “Well, you’re definitely not a builder. I think you’re Old Bill. Jesus, you’re not a traffic warden are ya?”

“No,” said Stranger with a chuckle. “But I’m a pretty good dancer.”

They danced the rest of the night away, pirouetting uncontrollably around the crowded barroom floor to the harmonious melodies of Philadelphia Crop. Together, they were victims of the night, of circumstance, of coincidence... everything was perfect at that moment, except for the lager spill on the table that never got cleared up. They fell madly, abandoning their parties and choosing to spend the evening in each other’s arms. They stood and awed at the godly renditions of ‘Rich Girl’ and ‘Kiss on My List’, tapping their feet and jiggling their hips uncontrollably. After a couple of quick drinks more they danced a little to ‘I Can’t Go for That’, becoming trend setters of the dance movement for the evening; the crowd all followed once Stranger and Elsie hit the floor. Eventually, when the night calmed, they slow danced to ‘Sara Smile’, the closing song of the epic forty-five-minute-long set.

The dance floor was half empty, or half full depending on how optimistically you view your boogie space. Stranger twirled Elsie around and then flicked her out towards the table where DCS King and DCI Gregory were sitting, watching in amazement at the shy detective’s apparent self-assurance. Elsie twisted back into his arms and then out again the other way. Her dress swished towards the table where her friends were sitting, watching in equal amazement, as the light gust of her gown fanned an empty packet of crisps on the table, lightly sprinkling them all with ready-salted dust.

The music transitioned from the band’s fading final notes into the jukebox’s scratchy tunes. Elsie was in the bathroom while Stranger was outside, using the payphone to call his father.

“Dad, it’s me again, are you in?” Stranger waited on the line for an answer. There wasn’t one.

Elsie appeared from the bar, standing in the doorway and looking for Stranger. She saw him, his back facing her from inside the phone booth. She headed over to him.

“You get hold of him?” Elsie asked through the glass door.

Stranger shook his head and opened the door, his eyes painted with silent questions.

Veronica McKrayne was a humble housewife. Her house was never untidy and her oven was never empty. Rarely did she leave the house past six in the evening and certainly not on a Thursday. Shandon McKrayne worked in the print for the *London Evening Standard* down on Fleet Street. He was as hardworking a man as any before him, and more so than most after him. He spent most of his time with the boys from work but would be home every night for tea with his wife. Thursdays he kept free, however, as Thursdays were always movie night.

Stranger was disconcerted: *where were they?*

SLEAZY DOES IT

It was half past eleven when Stranger McKrayne glanced across at his bedside alarm clock. His eyes, slightly wonky from the last glass of wine he and Elsie had shared, adjusted to focus on

the smallish face of his clock. He was suddenly hit with an idea. He turned his head away from the alarm clock to face the other side of the bed. The side where Elsie was lying.

The cinema on Upper Street, where Stranger and his father spent most of their Thursday evenings, had a tradition. On the opening day of a movie the schedule ran a back-to-back showcase of whatever film had been released that day. The first showing ran from 10:00 am, playing right through until the last at midnight. This little quirk in the cinema's listings was usually wasted on the McKraynes' customary routine, but since Stranger had dumped his dad and missed the seven o'clock showing of *True Confessions*, the thought of the midnight showing lit up his face with the hope of a back-row blowy.

"Elsie," he said, "would you like to come with me to see *True Confessions*?"

Stranger's face knotted as a burp made its way up from his booze-lined gut and fizzed through his teeth. Elsie giggled as he apologised. All of the embarrassment, all of the alcohol and all of the sex rushed to his cheeks with an explosion of rouge. Elsie, turning in bed to face Stranger, looked admiringly at her late-night lover.

"Yeah, I think I would. That'd be nice". She paused to see Stranger smile. "I'm free Saturday...?"

Stranger sat bolt upright in his rumpled double bed, his hair roughed up and his socks still on. Excitedly, his smile widened.

"Nah nah, now. It's playing now... at the Green on the Screen. The Green, Screen, the Scree... the picture house down the road. It's opening night, it starts in about half an hour!"

He took a breath. The hot bedroom air rendered still as Elsie grinned at his boyish excitement. There was a short moment of romantic peace in Stranger's stuffy bedroom.

"I'm sorry, we don't have to go, we shouldn't go. It's just that I go every week with my dad and now you're here, I have a new job and I'm not thinking all that straight..."

Stranger was interrupted. "You betta shut up and get ready if you want us to make it." Sure enough, Stranger stopped talking. "Let me get dressed, get my stuff and we can go," finished Elsie.

Elsie got out of bed, her slender frame caressing the covers as she swivelled free from their shelter. Stranger watched her in delight. She made her way to his en-suite bathroom, picking up her scattered clothes as she went. At the bathroom door, Elsie turned back to Stranger, still cooling down in bed. She was relaxed, but her eyes were heavy with mixed emotions.

"You know, it's a good thing you're handsome, 'cos otherwise you'd just be lovely, and that'd never work." Her comment was sincere, though her tone seemed repentant.

Stranger wasn't all that handsome, but he was lovely. Elsie seemed blinded by this and to her he was as handsome as he needed to be. Some might say that it was a sure sign of true love. Some.

The slurred tunes of distant drunkards sang their way down Upper Street as Stranger and Elsie walked with their hands tangled together inside Stranger's coat pocket. The weather had turned, and a chill now filled the spaces between them. As they walked, they spoke of all things new to one another. Each step they took drew them closer to the cinema, and to each other. A house on fire would've struggled to match the sparks that flicked between them. However, at the corner of the road where they stopped to let a fire engine turtle from its station like a bloody stool, Elsie seemed off, as if suddenly hit by a devastating blow of intolerable conscience. Ironically, there had been a house fire not far from the Little Fish Bar, and the shrill screams of the fire truck had broken the romance just long enough for Elsie to blurt out what was troubling her:

“Stranger, I’m a prostitute.”

The romance zipped away with the swirling gust left by the fire truck. Half in bewilderment, and half because of the remaining wails of the siren, Stranger asked:

“Sorry, what was that?”

“I’m a prostitute,” Elsie said once again. Stranger sniggered almost mirthlessly, but Elsie was dead serious.

“Oh for fuck’s sake! Wha...” Stanger huffed. “Why?”

“What d’ya mean why?” snapped Elsie.

“I mean – why?” Stranger emphasised the *why* a little more compassionately this time.

“I don’t know. I just... am.” Elsie looked deep into his eyes. “I sleep with men, sometimes women. I make money from it... it pays my rent.”

Stanger was stupefied, and his face showed it. “I never paid you. You’re not expecting money are ya? This is... this is such a strange joke.”

Elsie looked at him with such an expressionless face that he knew this was obviously not a joke.

“I just don’t understand, El.”

“That’s— not my name,” interjected Elsie.

“All right. Elsie. I think my shortening of your name is the smallest of concerns at the moment!” Stranger forgot he was a bit drunk and regained full awareness of the situation.

“No, my name’s not Elsie. That’s my work name – it’s safer to use. My real name—” she looked down at the floor before looking back up again at Stranger— “my real name is Sindy. Sindy Spreadum.”

“What?!”

Elsie laughed. Then she stopped.

“It’s just a joke. Well, the last bit was. The rest is true. My name’s Sara, and I’m sorry.”

Sara looked surprisingly calm for a woman who had just confessed to her date that she was, in fact, a prostitute. Stanger did not look so calm.

“Elsie, Sara, or whatever it is your name is... I can’t be sleeping with call girls, Jesus. I’m a newly promoted DS now as well! Not now, not in my position, not in any position, would this ever be okay!”

“There were a few positions you seemed okay with half an hour ago...”

“Why are you so jovial about this? You just conned a policeman into sex! I knew something was off – no normal girl has ever enjoyed herself as much as you did.”

“Normal girl?!” Sara’s smile faltered. “What’s a DS?”

“It means Detective Sergeant.”

Stranger paused to ponder briefly the potential complications of his actions, staring out into the night. “Oh God,” he muttered, still with his gaze unbroken, “I can just see it now, at the city’s annual fundraiser... ‘Introducing DS Stranger McKrayne, the boner-boy bobby with this month’s hussy.’”

“Oi!” Sara lost her cool, her finger held rigid and pointed at Stranger. “There’s just as many with a dislike of you little piggies, you know! So enough with the insults.” Sara dropped her condemnatory finger, as well as the other ones, back down to her side.

Stranger rubbed his eyes as he stood trying to process what had just happened. He was suddenly very aware of where they were and what was being said. Their public display of aversion was in full show of the Thursday night Upper Streeters. This was his neighbourhood. *This*, he thought to himself, *could be bad*.

"I've told you this as a precaution, even to help you, not so that you can have a dig, all right?" Sara continued despite the detective being slightly absent minded. "I really like you, Stranger, honestly I do..." In the wake of the news, Sara's promiscuousness became more identifiable, but her words seemed to ring true enough. "I've not tried to hurt you. I am as I am and all I wanna do is to finish the night with you, at the cinema, just as you asked me to."

"Oh, and I suppose you want me to pay?" remarked Stranger.

"Only for the popcorn, I can cover the rest."

Stranger turned to face the other way with a scratch of his head; the bright neon shop front of the off license across the road burned his weary eyes as it caught his look.

"I liked Elsie, it's a good name. It suits you, well, the you I've spent the night with so far. It's not illegal what you do, Sara, it's just highly unsanitary." He checked his words and he suddenly remembered something odd that Sara had said. "What did you mean when you said, 'as a precaution'? What're you helping me with?" said Stranger, spinning his head around to address Sara, his body still facing the street.

"Oh come on, Stranger, you're a big boy, you know what sort of risks come with mixing with my kind."

"Are you talking about my job? Because I thought I'd already made it clear that I can't take... *this*, any further."

"No, I'm not talking about your job, I'm talking about my job. My job and my boss."

"Your boss?" Stranger's body now turned to match the way he was facing.

"Yes, my boss. My agent – my pimp!"

"You have a pimp?" Stranger's tone switched from defensive to inquisitive.

"Yes, I have a pimp – prostitutes have pimps. Not all of them, but a lot of them. Keep up, McKrayne, I'm trying to play ball here!"

"Prostitution may not be illegal, sweetheart, but pimping definitely is. They're nasty work. What are you doing knocking about with those fellas?!" Stranger was battling to forget the attractive woman he had met at the bar, but every time she caught his eye, he was reminded of her charm.

"Someone's always watching me, do you understand?! I'm surrounded by the people I'm trying to escape. Always. I fell in a long time ago and now I'm trying to drag myself back out. There's no P45 in my line of work, you're either in or you're out. Then you're done and finished either way..."

"Much like the men who pay for you then..." joked Stranger this time, though again in an untimely fashion.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!"

"Me? What the fuck is wrong with you?! Stop trying to victimise yourself, you're the one who preyed upon me. I was supposed to be at the fucking cinema with Dad, God knows where he is. I didn't even wanna go for a drink, I just got pushed out the door and bundled into the bar regardless!"

"See. Not so easy when it's not you that's making your own decisions, is it?" Sara quipped.

"Ohhh... Go away. I don't need this, I don't need you."

"Well I need you."

"What does that mean? You've only just met me! This is all too much, you're acting as if we've been together for years!"

"Well, so are you!"

The street fell into silence. Fewer and fewer people dotted the pavement as Thursday night neared Friday morning. Midnight was creeping and neither Stranger nor Sara was budging an inch. It was as though both were searching for an impossible resolution, an answer to their own agenda. If it was an unsuspecting man Sara wanted, then there were more than enough scattered drunkenly throughout the chilly streets of London – ones that were more forgiving and less caring than Detective Stranger McKrayne. She was after him and only him. Similarly, Stranger was well within his rights and in an easy enough position to walk briskly away and shake loose the demons of the night. But he hadn't. He cared. Stranger had smelt, beneath the floral perfume, the vulnerability of Sara, and he couldn't bring himself to up and leave a desperate woman. Plus, there was a story here, and the detective in him wanted to press for more.

"Please, Stranger, just one date, one normal night and I promise I won't bother you." Up until now Sara had been so good at making him believe in his own control of the night and of its outcomes.

"Why me, eh? Why out of everyone in the bar did you latch onto my hand?" Stranger's eyes narrowed with realisation. "You knew me. You knew who I was before you met me tonight, didn't you? That bullshit palm-reading crap, that was just a ruse to give me the horn, wasn't it?! Who are you?"

Sara was caught between a rock and a hard-on. Playing innocent would only lead to Stranger's eventual dismissal, and owning up would open up a whole new can of worms. Worms aside, she spilt the beans.

Sara had heard her pimp talking about a new policeman on his radar, some old hat who was honest, young and had come up through the ranks to be a newly promoted DS. It was in any pimp's interest, as well as his girls', to take note of their area's law enforcement officers and any new developments in their safety and wellbeing. Sara, belonging to a less than eager ilk of call girls, rarely paid attention to the word on the street. Truthfully, sometimes she wanted to be caught, to be out of her dirtied shackles. But it was the only life she knew, the only home she had.

However, one night, whilst taking a moment in the rest area of her pimp's brothel, she overheard an almost routine conversation. The talk was between her pimp, 'The Captain' (as the sign read on his door at the back of the rest area), and a bent North London copper. Sara's ears pricked as the squalid police chief sat chatting to The Captain, explaining to him that he was about to promote a keen young policeman to a DS rank. Stranger McKrayne – the subject of the conversation, a good man with a dozen years of experience already in his locker.

The police chief and The Captain sat talking for a while about how to treat this news. Naturally, Stranger had to be promoted sometime soon otherwise some questions would've been asked and some unflattering queries would've threatened the illegalities of the police station. The problem lay in Stranger's honesty: an unbent policeman with every intention of remaining that way. But then again, as The Captain himself remarked, they always were.

The two men agreed that in time Stranger would most likely succumb to the deviant ways of The Captain and his bent police chief puppet – they had ways of making a man abandon his moral stance. The usual cocktail of sex, money and power eventually got the better of all the top brass. The Captain and his associates were indeed the puppet masters and they could make things happen and unhappen, appear and disappear, if they so wished. Ashamedly, Stranger, innocent as he may have been, would've also involuntarily fallen under the underworld's wicked spell. Although what the two villains did not expect was that one of their own would be slumped in a sweaty heap of self-loathing outside of the office door,

awaiting the chance to save herself from an eternity of misery, and to save another from the coaxing finger of evil.

"I came here tonight to save you. To drag you away from that bar and tell you all this," Sara proclaimed.

Stranger was in total shock. "So, you're telling me that you work for some almighty pimp that parades around half of London, doing what he pleases, and using the police force to get away with it all?"

"It's true, I promise you it's all true. They'll make you one of 'em, Stranger, truly they will, they're all corrupt, every last one. He was there, The Captain, he was at The Little Fish Bar tonight. He... he sent me to you."

Stranger looked back at Sara in motionless amazement. His words were far from him now; the night was lost to total despair. Sara was to do the talking from now until the resolution, if indeed there was one.

"After I heard them talking in his office, I knew I either had to hide, or seek. 'Who shall we send first then?' he said, your bastard chief of police. I could almost hear The Captain shrug – it was a pointless question, he doesn't care. He's never cared. He's won over almost everyone he's ever come into conversation with, but I know what he really is, there's no hiding behind that crooked smile... He'll do almost anything to get what he wants, to win. He's a powerful man, but he's a scared man, too."

Sara stopped herself for a second before continuing.

"I made an excuse to see him. I knocked on the door, said that I was thinking of going away for the weekend. He wasn't listening, I knew he wasn't listening, I just had to be the first one they saw. I was. So they asked me the 'favour' that I was after, but of course, they had no idea. He's a clever man though, Stranger; nothing much goes over his head. He's never trusted me fully – he knows I'm not happy. That's why he came, that's why he sent the other girls down with me, in case I didn't do it."

"So, what now?" Stranger's voice was flat and monotone. "You've saved me as much as you can, right? The jig is up, I'll keep an ear to the ground and an eye on my colleagues. If this goes as deep as you say it does then I'm hardly going to bust it wide open, am I? At least not right now."

"Well what about me, huh?" Sara said with a tear in her eye. It was clear now that Sara was fragile, she was afraid.

"What about you?"

"Now you save me." She nearly trembled as she spoke now. "I knew you were a good man, Stranger, but I didn't expect to like you as much as I do. I came tonight for me, but now I wanna help us both." Sara meant every word she said. Tears spilled down her cheeks. "Keep me close, Stranger. As long as I'm nearby, they'll think we're both innocent... nobody else has to get hurt."

"Who..."

The detective stopped his sentence as if his voice were sliced with a blade. His head lifted and his vision tunnelled; fixed on a point beyond Sara's frame. He felt a cold shudder of dread tingle from his head to his toes.

"Mum and Dad." Stranger whispered his terrified words, but in the still night air they echoed hauntingly loud.

"What? No. They wouldn't, not just..." Sara's response was cut short by a happy, high-pitched voice behind her.

“Hello, darling. What are you doing out here?” The voice addressed Stranger. Sara did not turn around to greet it.

“Mum, Jesus. What are you doing out here?”

“That’s a new one. I’ve not been called Jesus before,” said a male voice in response.

“Dad. What’re you doing?” Stranger asked his father, who was arm in arm with his mother, Veronica.

“I believe your mother asked you first. Are you all right, bud? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Shandon McKrayne turned to look at Sara standing a few feet away from him. “Hello, darling, I’m not sure I know you, I’m Stranger’s father...”

“Oh God.” Stranger was agitated.

“Well it’s closer than Jesus, given that I made you,” Shandon joked, “but it’s still not right. And it certainly wasn’t a virgin birth, was it, V?!” Shandon joked again as Stranger grimaced at his dad.

Sara introduced herself to Stranger’s parents, though in another attempt to retain anonymity, she did so as Elsie. Before Stranger had the chance to conjure up a cover-up, Sara claimed herself to be his girlfriend.

“So this is what you’ve been up to the last couple of weeks, is it? Why so secretive, Stranger? She’s a lovely girl!”

“I know, Dad, it’s not what you...”

“You know, I had to go and see *Chariots of Fire* all on my own last week. You missed a good one though, bud, cracking film! Not sure about the music though, to be honest, thought it could’ve been catchier. Easily forgotten.”

“Dad, I’ve been so busy with work the last couple of weeks, they’ve really dumped everything on me.”

“You should take it easy, sweetheart, you have Elsie to think about now as well.” Veronica McKrayne, as ever the caring mother. “Your father’s dragging me along to this one tonight.” She turned to Sara. “I’d never usually go out at this time, but I couldn’t let him go out alone in the middle of the night. Plus, that de Niro is a handsome man, isn’t he?”

Sara smiled and laughed politely.

“That’s where you’re going? To the Screen on the Green, for the midnight showing?” Stranger was puzzled by his parents’ spontaneity.

“Well, I got your message and I thought I’d take your mother out for dinner. We ended up being at the restaurant far longer than we planned, didn’t we, V? We bumped into my old boss at the *Standard* and his wife, Indian fella, lovely, lovely man. We went down that new Italian place ’round the corner. Your mum had chicken and chips – chicken and chips! Can you believe that? Nicest Italian in Islington and she has chicken and chips!”

“Oh, I can’t be doing with all them funny foods, it gives me gut ache it does! What was it your boss’s wife had?”

“Carbonara,” answered Shandon.

“Car-binera. Just the sound of it puts me off. There was bacon in it as well, I didn’t think they could eat bacon...”

“No, it’s beef they don’t eat, it’s sacred, and besides it looked lovely! I was nearly gonna order myself one to take home for tomorrow, but your mother’s already made me corned beef sarnies. ’Ere, it’s a good job Mr Raschid’s not at the *Standard* anymore, ain’t it? They’re some pretty sacred sandwiches you’ve made me, V.”

“Oh no,” Veronica laughed, “you don’t think they could smell it on me, do you? I never had time to shower before we came out. I mean, I washed my hands after I made them, but they might’ve been able to smell it on me still, mightn’t they?”

“Mum!” Stranger was getting embarrassed.

“Ere, did I ever tell you about when I went to their daughter’s wedding and one of the bridesmaids slipped me a mickey?”

Stranger shook his head. Sara looked confused; she didn’t quite understand.

“You know, a Mickey Finn... she drugged me, Elsie, can you believe that?!”

Veronica, once again addressing Sara, continued her husband’s story. “Yeeaah. Oh, you should’ve seen it, Els, I’ve never seen him in such a state. He was on the toilet for hours, I thought we had a leaky pipe! I still think it was all that dodgy stuff you ate at the reception.”

“It was a curry, Veronica, me and the boys go out for one every Tuesday! It was the bridesmaid, she slipped me a mickey, I’m telling ya!”

Stranger rubbed his face irritably; in his life so far he was yet to feel such levels of discomfort. Sara was laughing. Stranger finally interrupted them.

“You’re gonna miss your film, ain’t ya? It’s getting on for midnight,” he said.

“Oh God, yeah, look at the time, V? We better go. Anyway, what are you two up to? We saw you from away back there, looked like you was having a barney.”

Sara took this as her time to strike. “Well, funnily enough, we were just talking about going to the cinema too. I want to go but Stranger doesn’t, he’s not feeling up to it all of a sudden.”

They all looked at the detective collectively, though each had a different expression on their face. Shandon McKrayne had a look of dulled shock. He’d never known his son to turn down a cinema invitation, least of all on a Thursday night. Veronica McKrayne had a maternal look on her face, one that showed unconditional love and understanding, her presumption being that her son must’ve been too weary for the excursion.

“He’s tired,” she said, “he’s been working too hard, that’s what it is. How about I buy you a nice cup of coffee from that little stall inside the cinema, yeah? That’ll do the trick, won’t it? You can sit next to me, sweetheart.”

“Why would he want to sit next to you when he has this beautiful young lady with him?!” Shandon and Veronica seemed to have an answer for everything the other one said.

Sara had a familiar look of sass etched all over her face – a look Stranger recognised from their talks at the bar earlier that night. Sara was going to get her way at last, and they both knew it.

“Anyway, he’s tired? Too tired?! What a load of old—” Shandon was stopped by his wife.

“Ah! You watch your language in front of this young lady, Shandon McKrayne. Come on, my love, you come walk with me. We’ll let the boys talk on the way to the picture house.”

Stranger knew that between the three of them, he was not going to break free from the night’s inevitability, so instead he surrendered. He gave in to the untimeliness of it all and walked with his dad, like almost every Thursday night he could remember, down Upper Street to the picture house at the top of their road. Shandon enthusiastically prompted the usual movie talk they always shared on their journey, though this time Stranger was far less engaged than usual. Veronica was walking with Sara a few steps behind them, asking her own questions, harmoniously unaware of how greatly their lifestyles differed.

“So, Elsie,” began Stranger’s mother, “what is it you do for a living?”