

NINE HIDDEN LIVES

WHO KILLED ALAKA JHA?

*Unsolved mystery of murdered journalist still
haunts Haddley residents thirty years later*

BEN HARPER

18 September

Thirty years ago, an unknown killer bludgeoned to death *Richmond Times* journalist, Alaka Jha. The case remains unsolved today.

Late on a Friday evening, Alaka stopped her car in a small layby on Haddley Hill, a little more than two miles from her home in Oretton. She switched off the engine, removed the keys from the ignition and slipped them into her jacket pocket. Later, police found no mechanical fault, but for some reason Alaka climbed out of her Nissan Micra.

Concealed in the woodland at the side of the road, her killer was waiting. When the killer struck, Alaka fell backwards, through the open driver's side door, into the front seat of her car. She died from blunt trauma wounds to her head, most

likely inflicted by a wrench or tyre jack. Despite extensive searches, police never recovered the murder weapon. Her purse was found with her body, its contents apparently untouched. There were no indications of sexual assault.

Alaka was thirty-five. She was survived by her husband, Professor Manish Jha, and their daughter, Uma.

This week, on the thirtieth anniversary of her mother's death, I met with Dr Uma Jha, at the offices of the *Richmond Times*. She is still seeking answers to the many questions that remain about her mother's death.

'I will never give up hope of finding the truth,' she told me. 'After so many years, I want this to be the moment I find justice for my mum. I believe, even after all this time, that somebody must know something. Thirty years ago, it might have been difficult for them to come forward but it's never too late to do the right thing.'

Sam Hardy, the paper's editor, joined us. 'Alaka worked for the *Richmond Times* for eleven years, winning numerous awards and rising to become the paper's senior reporter. In the year before her death, she shone a spotlight on the case of Fiona Nicholls. The killing of the former naval recruit, at the hands of her long-term partner, Evan Littlewood, sent shockwaves across our southwest London community.'

Convicted of murder, Littlewood died two years later in a prison knife fight.

‘After the case, Alaka found herself inundated with heartbreaking letters from other women who lived in fear of their partners,’ Hardy continued. ‘When Alaka came to me and said the most dangerous man a woman encounters is her husband, I was shocked. The tragedy is it’s still true today. Alaka resolved to champion women whose husbands governed and regulated their existence. She gave voice to lives lived in silence and fear.’

Alaka conducted a pioneering series of anonymous interviews with women who were suffering abuse and coercive control at the hands of their partners. The articles she wrote received national attention. On the afternoon of her murder, she conducted one final interview with an anonymous Haddley woman.

Uma Jha is urging anyone with any information to come forward. Did a family member arrive home late unexpectedly that night? Or did a friend appear dishevelled and distracted? No detail is too small and may help to shed light on a case that has baffled police for thirty years.

‘It terrifies me that my mum may have sacrificed her life in her efforts to help other women,’ said Uma Jha. After living much of her adult life away from southwest London, Dr Jha returned with her husband, Edward, early last year to help nurse

her ailing father. ‘Growing up without a mother affected me enormously. Her murder thirty years ago impacted not only me but also countless other people. Time and again, I ask myself if a witness has knowingly or unknowingly concealed the identity of my mother’s killer for the past three decades. That idea still tortures me almost every day. I feel certain that same secret must torment other lives.’

One

Uma Jha

*'To Uma it felt as if nothing existed for
him outside of his study, not even her.'*

She stood in front of the bathroom mirror and pressed the gentle lines that lately had appeared at the corner of her eyes. Next month she'd be thirty-five, the same age as her mother when she died. Did she have lines like this? Uma struggled to remember. Her father might know, and if Manish Jha had been a different sort of father, Uma might have asked him. Throughout her childhood, Manish had struggled to even speak his wife's name. Consumed by grief, he'd retreated into an academic world where he found his only solace. To Uma it felt as if nothing existed for him outside of his study, not even her. Her only comfort came from the time she'd spent with her Aunt Hema, helping her to raise her two youngest cousins.

Uma turned away from the mirror and walked into her bedroom. Hidden beneath the bottom of the window blind was the gold key used to wind her ornate antique clock. Each morning, she carried out the ritual of seven turns, until the clock was fully wound. With its vibrant colours and hand-painted face, the family heirloom came as a gift from her aunt, following her marriage last summer. There had been no note with it, no other acknowledgement of the ceremony that her Aunt Hema hadn't been invited to. After a decade together, neither Uma nor Edward had desired an elaborate celebration. From her family, she invited only her father. When she briefly contemplated a larger gathering, the idea of a party with aunts, uncles,

cousins and their various offspring terrified her. A week after receiving the gift, she penned a handwritten letter to her aunt, but in the year since she'd not heard from her again.

When she'd lived away from London, it had been easy to forget about her past – her childhood, her family, her mother's death. At eighteen, Uma had fled from her hometown. After studying in Edinburgh, she'd spent two years as a newly qualified doctor at a practice in the highlands of Scotland. With Edward, she'd moved to his hometown of Leamington. But then, at the start of last year, her father's cancer diagnosis had arrived, and Uma's family loyalties proved surprisingly strong.

She turned the small, gold key over in her hand. Returning to London to help care for her father, she'd slowly tried to fill the gulf in their relationship. At the same time, she'd discovered a new resolve to face up to all that had gone before. With that came an intense determination to uncover the truth about her mother's death, whatever the truth might mean.

FRIDAY

CHAPTER 1

‘You don’t think it’d be easier if we went into your office?’ asks Sam, leaning over my shoulder as we sit together at my small kitchen island.

I raise my eyes from my laptop but say nothing.

‘Nobody expects you to be the tech guy, Ben,’ he continues.

Lying on the old sofa at the back of the room, my girlfriend, Dani, laughs. ‘Leave him alone, Sam. He’s doing his best.’

‘I’m perfectly capable of uploading an article onto the site.’

‘As long as you’re sure. We don’t want anything to go wrong while you’re running the show.’

For the next two weeks, I’m managing the UK’s biggest online news site. Last week, my boss and Sam’s daughter, Madeline Wilson, checked herself into the Priory hospital for a period of treatment. After drinking a bottle of Yamazaki Japanese whisky in a single day, she recognised her life was spiralling out of control. She left with a warning not to make myself too comfortable in the boss’s chair.

Managing multiple deadlines throughout the day, and sometimes through the night, I've already realised there's very little chance of that. And with Dani about to give birth to our first child, I'm already counting the days to when I can hand back the reins.

'Don't worry, everything's under control.' I enter my security code, upload the article, and click to publish. 'If you look on your phone,' I say to Sam, 'you'll see it's live.'

'Already?' he replies, refreshing his screen. 'You're right, it's there. You're amazing.'

'When you're the boss, things happen very quickly.'

Dani laughs again. 'Sam, don't let the power go to his head.'

'Look, it's really there,' he replies, holding up his phone before passing it to her.

'The *Richmond Times*'s very first global story,' she says.

Sam is the owner and editor of our local newspaper, a position he's held for over forty years. He's an old-school journalist and his desire to tell the very best story has never waned.

'We do have our own website,' he tells Dani.

'Of course,' she replies, glancing in my direction, 'but this is the first *Richmond Times* article on Madeline's site.'

He smiles at Dani and whispers loud enough for me to hear. 'I never think of it as real journalism unless you can hold it in your hands. This is a decent article, but it definitely needed to begin its life in print.'

Two days ago, I wrote a front-page story for the *Richmond Times* on the murder of the paper's senior reporter, Alaka

Jha. Three months ago, Alaka's daughter, Uma, contacted him asking for his support in using the thirtieth anniversary of her mother's death as an opportunity to seek new evidence in the crime. Sam, who has always said he will one day uncover the truth of what happened to his close colleague and friend, agreed. He asked for my help, and as our news site's main investigative reporter, I was happy to take up the challenge. Having spent many hours with Uma in recent weeks and seen her determination to seek justice for her mother, I now share in her and Sam's commitment to uncovering the truth. Our hope is that the publication of the article, first in the *Richmond Times*, and now globally on our site, will bring forward new witnesses to the crime.

'No more than a *decent* article?' I ask Sam.

He holds up his hands. 'It's pretty good, I'll give you that, but let's see what kind of response it elicits. Madeline reckons we might see a response pretty much as soon as we publish.'

'She does, does she?'

He sits on the arm of the sofa. 'I might have mentioned it to her last night when I was visiting. Only in passing, no more than that,' he quickly assures me.

'You know the rules: no work chat with Madeline. Your visits are meant to be a time for family support, not an opportunity to talk news.'

Six months ago, Madeline suffered at the hands of a brutal kidnapper, who held her hostage for over seventy-two hours. Sam and I worked desperately during those hours to free her. After her escape, despite her initial bravado, insecurity and fear seeped into her life; alcohol became her only way

of operating. And although he would never admit it, his daughter's suffering has had a lasting impact on Sam. He's begun to slow down. He's seventy-five, and still passionate about his work, but I've seen how tired it now makes him. Still, he refuses to take a step back.

'Maddy likes to know what's going on,' he says. 'She lives for her work.'

'She's not the only one,' I reply. As I do, Dani closes her eyes and grimaces. Twisting onto her side, she presses her hand against her lower back. I jump to my feet. 'Let me get you another cushion.'

She waves me away. 'A couple of kicks, nothing more. The baby will settle down in a second.'

'Yes, stop fussing, Ben,' adds Sam, with a wink.

'Don't you try and change the subject.' Estranged from my own father for as many years as I can remember, I've gradually adopted Sam as my surrogate dad. He gave me my first job more than a decade ago and we've stayed close ever since. In Madeline's absence, I feel like it's up to me to look out for him.

'It's all right you telling me no more work chat,' he says, 'but what am I supposed to do when Madeline starts quizzing me about what's happening?'

'Tell her Ben has everything under control,' replies Dani.

'I'm glad someone believes in me.'

There is a knock on the front door of our house. 'I'll go,' says Dani, pushing herself up onto her feet. Our first child is two days overdue. While both of us are nervous and excited in equal measure, Dani is now desperate for the baby

to put in an appearance sooner rather than later. 'I need to stretch my back,' she continues, crossing the kitchen with Sam following behind her.

'Where are you going?' I ask him.

'You come as well,' he replies, with a glint in his eye. 'I have a feeling this might be for you both.'

Dani opens our front door to be met by Madeline's driver, Vlad. Sam nudges me in the ribs. 'Maddy said I could use him whenever I like; otherwise, he'd only be sitting at home all day playing *Mario Kart*, or out moonlighting as an Uber driver.'

Vlad carries a shiny new pushchair into our hallway. He heads back outside, only to return with a carrycot, car seat and even a matching rucksack.

'It's from us both,' says Sam. 'Me and Madeline. She paid for most of it, but then again, she can afford it.'

Dani hugs Sam and kisses him on the cheek. 'It's too generous but thank you.'

When he steps back, I drop my arm around his shoulders. 'You shouldn't have, either of you, but give Madeline a hug from me.'

He turns away, wiping his hand across his eyes. 'It's the least we could do. Without you, she wouldn't be here today.'

I carry the boxes through to the kitchen, and Sam's head is buried back in his phone. 'When do you think we'll see any comments?'

'I only posted the article five minutes ago.'

'Every time I see Maddy, she tells me she has over thirty million readers.'

‘We do, but they don’t read every article the second it’s live.’

Sam’s shoulders drop and he slips his phone into his pocket. He’s kept in touch with Uma throughout the last thirty years. I know how much this means to him.

‘We’ll get something soon,’ I reassure him, ‘but you have to give it a bit of time. We all want to know what happened, but there are no guarantees. There are a lot of crazy conspiracists out there. It’s not impossible all the article does is bring them out of the woodwork.’

Sam nods slowly. ‘As long as we try. I owe it to Uma. And Alaka.’