

## [Transcript] Strangeland / Ep 12 of 14: The Payoff

We have a lot of reasons for wanting to track down Deepa Ajit.  
Remember, we first found the name Deepa Ajit in that letter Sasi Nara wrote to her brother before she was murdered.  
She alleged her husband Hanu and Deepa were having an affair.  
Since then, we've collected eyewitness anecdotes from the Nara's neighbors.  
Thurman Jennings told us that most mornings while he was driving home from work, he'd see Hanu with a tall, thin Indian woman.  
He later saw that same woman helping Hanu clean out the apartment just days after Sasi and Anish were killed.  
And Crystal White, I deeded a woman by the same description at the scene of the crime on the night of the murders.  
Deepa Ajit could help us understand a lot about this case, help us confirm or debunk things we've learned so far.  
So that's why Tinku and Betsy have staked out a luxury home in Westchester, Pennsylvania and now followed a Lexus SUV until the driver pulled into a Wawa convenience store parking lot.  
Could this be the Deepa we're looking for?  
We enter the parking lot right behind her.  
I get out and go over to what we think is Deepa's car and knock on the window as she remains seated in the driver's seat.  
Hi there.  
Are you Deepa?  
Finding a chance?  
What happens next unfolds quickly and over the course of just a minute or two.  
I try to explain who we are and get Deepa to talk to us.  
There's a tussle when Betsy approaches to try and snap a picture.  
We have to make a hasty exit.  
We got it.  
We got to go.  
We got to drive my phone.  
Oh yeah.  
Oh really?  
Yeah.  
Let's go.  
I got her picture.  
Did you get one?  
I got a video.  
Something.  
We rush back to the car and quickly drive into a nearby neighborhood.  
We're both a bit rattled and trying to unpack what just happened.  
Just coming down now from an adrenaline rush after confronting who we think is Deepa.  
I told her who I was and that I've been trying to get in touch with her.  
But Deepa said she did not want to talk.  
She was polite.

Definitely, you know, she didn't raise her voice.

She was talking very softly and she had a small smile on her face as she was talking to me which then started to disappear.

And when we mentioned Sasi and Anish by name, she didn't bat an eye, didn't seem surprised by the question.

She didn't ask, well, who are they?

She didn't pretend to even not know what I was talking about.

She right out said, no, I'm not interested.

But also, we needed to get a photo of her so that we could try to confirm whether she was the woman who showed up at Honu's house the night of the murders.

The woman who Crystal said went into the prime scene.

She said, you can't take a picture of me, you can't take a picture of me, and I handed her the picture that had Anish, Sasi, and Honu on it.

And I said, do you know any of these people?

And she crumpled up the paper and threw it at me.

After Deepa crumpled up our flyer, Betsy was able to snap a photo.

When we send it to Thurman and Crystal, they confirm this was the woman at the scene of the crime.

She was the woman helping Honu clean out the apartment.

But we still don't know if she was involved, to what extent or why.

But being here in wealthy suburban Pennsylvania has helped us see some things about this case in a brand new light.

In fact, a million things.

I'm Tinkoo Ray.

And I'm Ben Adair.

This is Strangeland, Season 2, Murder in Maple Shade.

After seeing Deepa's big new house, we realize she has gone through a huge lifestyle change in the six years since the murders.

Her name's on the deed for her mansion in Westchester, and two other properties worth over \$800,000 combined.

For Honu's part, we know about the million dollar life insurance policy that he tried to collect in May 2017.

We also know that he left Fox Meadow and Maple Shade just after the murders, even while he continues to fight in a New Jersey court to collect Susie's estate.

We know a few other things too.

Back when we first started reporting the story, we spoke with former Maple Shade mayor Nelson Wiest, and he told us something that we didn't know quite what to make of at the time.

He talked about a donation that Honu made to the Maple Shade Food Bank back in 2021, a few years after the murders.

He told us Honu wanted to present the check himself at a Maple Shade township council meeting.

It was arranged via a local Indian American politician named Upendra Chivakula.

He said he did not kill my wife and child, and I want to clear my name.

Upendra is originally from Andhra Pradesh, and he's also a former mayor of a town near

Maple Shade.

He said I'm willing to do anything to clear my name, so that way I can move on with my life.

But I'm in such a situation that I cannot let it, you know, the hardship and emotional hurt, everything is there, and I cannot put it behind me, and that is what he told me.

Upendra says he hadn't met Honu before the request, but they do have a friend in common, a man named Ravi Patluri, the same friend of the family that Honu called the Night of the Murder, before police and paramedics showed up.

He had reached out to me and he looked at this happening in Maple Shade.

This is my friend.

Police don't have anything against him.

They cannot prove anything, but they are keeping him as a suspect because he had a lot of issues with their in-laws, and their in-laws are in India.

Upendra says he was willing to go through with the request, but it wasn't easy.

Getting the Maple Shade Town Council to accept the money took some convincing.

The township mayor, I mean, the council, they were hesitant.

I told them, look, you know, he lived here, and he's doing well, and he wanted to give something back to the community, you should not have any problem.

And of course, staff advised him, and we also know photographs, because he's a person of interest.

The mayor was very, in spite of the opposition he was getting, so he agreed for that.

I had trouble not taking it a next step to see if it was okay to do that.

This is Nelson Weist again, the mayor of Maple Shade at the time.

He says he was skeptical of an ulterior motive, but still, it's hard to turn down money for a good cause.

And I reached out to the police department, and they didn't see any reason why I shouldn't do that, but with cautions.

So I went back the same chain that had reached to me and said, with these stipulations, yeah, we're good.

I'm just curious, did you get the sense that he was like trying to make good, or like improve his standing with Maple Shade?

There had to be ulterior motives that were not positive, if that's the nice way of beating around that question.

Can we take a?

Sure, absolutely.

Nelson has to take a break at this point, and when we come back, he's changed the subject.

But Hanna was pretty clear about his reason for making the donation, at least according to what Upendra just said.

He said, I want to clear my name.

I'm willing to do anything to clear my name so that way I can move on with my life.

We scour the minutes from past township council meetings, hours of reading fine print and details of small town life.

There's a lengthy debate over allowing backyard chicken coops.

A man named Lefty Grimes talks about bringing a cannabis dispensary to town.

And the council celebrates over Maple Shade winning the award for the best tasting water in New Jersey.

And then we find it.

In the minutes from a meeting held May 13th, 2021, the entry reads, presentation, a former resident from Maple Shade presented a donation to the food bank.

We also find a video of this meeting and hear Hanna back in Maple Shade addressing the town council.

We will now have a presentation by Mr. Anak Naran with regard to our Maple Shade food bank.

That's next, after the break.

My name is Fanunara.

I lived in this neighborhood for nine years, so I had to do what happened to my family in Park Meadows apartment back in 2017.

I left my wife and son.

Mr. Weiss says Hanna flew to Maple Shade to present his donation in person.

When Hanna showed up at the meeting, he had a small entourage in tow, five people, all of them Indian.

And when Hanna started to give his presentation, it quickly veered into a plea for justice in the murder case.

My life has been destroyed completely.

I'm looking for what happened to them, but I'm going to see a closer for my family.

We are not finding that.

And we want to know what happened, Mr. Naran, if I may.

Then Mayor Weiss interrupted.

That's not why you said you were coming here, and this is not the forum for this.

It's an ongoing investigation, so we cannot talk about it, and we really shouldn't publicize it.

We're trying to talk with you and your attorneys are stopping that, so you cannot talk about that.

Mayor Weiss says he was concerned that Hanna wasn't talking to police, and he didn't want this presentation to become a forum for Hanna to declare his innocence.

The police officers tried to talk to him, but he refused.

My understanding was that police asked them if he had a few minutes, and he apparently had a plane to catch.

So no, he didn't.

Even if a sizable donation to charity could clear a person's name in a murder case, how much would that be?

How much would Hannu be willing to spend?

We call the Maple Shade Food Bank.

They check their records from the time of Hanna's visit, May 2021, but show no evidence of a donation from him, then or ever.

So we reach out to the Maple Shade township to see if they have any documentation of Hannu giving money or any notes on how much it was.

In turn, they require us to submit a public records request.

So we do.

And this is the clerk's response, quote, the donation you reference was made to the Maple Shade Food Bank, an organization separate from the township.

The township does not have records that identify the amount of the donation.

So there's no record of a donation at the township, no record of a donation at the food bank.

Where did the money go?

With no record of any donation, was it ever really made?

But you know who did write a check to the food bank that month?

Ravi Patlori, in a puzzling amount of \$716.21.

Was he bankrolling Hanna's donation?

And we have another question about timing.

Why was Hannu trying to clear his name at this point in time, May 2021?

Well remember that New Jersey slayer statute?

That's the law that bars a killer from inheriting assets from their victim.

So when Hannu tried to file the claim for Susie's life insurance, he was denied the payout.

The insurance company cited a letter from Burlington County which stated Hannu had not been cleared as a suspect.

Then the money got tied up in lawsuits between Hannu and Susie's family.

It still is.

Maybe Hannu thought if he cleared his name, it could have implications for him.

In court.

According to his legal filings, Hannu says he's entitled to the insurance payout because he's the surviving spouse.

He says he's never been named as a suspect in her murder so the slayer statute doesn't apply.

Which, to be fair, as far as we know, the Burlington County Prosecutor's Office has never said Hannu's a suspect.

They've just refused to say that he isn't.

Susie's family, in their court filings, says Hannu's heavy drinking contributed to a troubled marriage, that he was having an affair with a co-worker and that the murder investigation is still pending.

After the initial suits, Susie's insurance money was put into the hands of a court-appointed administrator.

And it seemed like the only way to sort all this out would be a settlement between Hannu and Susie's family.

Years pass.

Negotiations continue.

I know it's starting to look like a settlement was going to happen.

But whatever the status of that donation, or non-donation, Hannu and his lawyers, and the lawyers for Susie's family, are now back in a New Jersey court.

I'm standing in front of the old courthouse in Mount Holly, New Jersey.

It's a beautiful old colonial building.

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It's August 2022, and I'm here to sit in on one of the latest hearings in the battle over Susie's estate.

The case is in front of Judge Paula Dow, a New Jersey Superior Court chancery judge, which means she handles things like divorce and probate cases.

She's been dealing with Susie's estate for a while now.

I came in person for the event, but since COVID, most hearings take place on Zoom, with attorneys calling in from their cars, getting frozen on screen, and having audio dropout.

Are we hearing some echo?

I'm on mute.

Are you hearing an echo now?

This case has traveled a long and winding road to get here.

At one point in time, the issue is being heard in both federal and local court, with judges in each jurisdiction making a different decision as to who should oversee the estate, Hannu, or Susie's parents.

This is the first in a series of hearings over the coming weeks, and Hannu could be on the precipice of a large inheritance.

How will the court decide?

That's coming up right after the break.

Sir, will you please state your full name and then spell it for the record?

Mr. Hannu Manthara Thoreo.

I'm going to ask you just to pronounce it a little bit slower.

Help me out here.

H-A-N-U-M-N.

Zoom Court is back in session.

Hannu and his lawyers are up against Donald Brown, attorney for Susie's family.

The hearing today is over a proposed settlement.

According to Donald, both sides have reached an agreement.

Hannu was set to get Susie's jewellery and 70% of the net estate.

Her family would get the remaining 30%.

This may be why Susie's family didn't want to talk to us or a reporter in India.

Maybe they didn't want to risk the settlement.

But Susie's family's lawyer says when it came time to sign the paperwork, Hannu refused.

He couldn't abide by a percentage split.

He wants the inheritance divided up in exact dollar amounts.

So negotiations come to a grinding halt.

On one side is Donald and Susie's family.

We're asking the judge to enforce the settlement they say Hannu had previously agreed to.

Hannu's lawyers at his behest say they never signed off on anything.

Good morning Judge Jack Venturi for Hannunara.

Michael Sonema for Hannunara.

I don't like too tagging a counsel, who's going to be the lead counsel on this matter?

At this hearing, the judge is trying to figure out exactly what happened with the settlement.

According to court filings, Susie's estate is worth approximately \$1.2 million.

That includes the \$1 million in life insurance, \$100,000 in a savings account, \$60,000 in

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investment accounts, and about \$30,000 in jewellery.

For at least, that's what Susie's family and their lawyer thought.

After negotiating for almost two years, they said here's an E-Trade account we never told you about, and we want to settle, but we want the E-Trade account.

Here again is Susie's family's lawyer Donald Brown.

He says that Susie had an additional \$50,000 to \$60,000 in an E-Trade account.

But Hannu's team didn't disclose the account until after the list of assets had already been divided.

When Judge Dow learns of this, she accuses Hannu of sitting on information.

I mildly say that's disingenuous as to his actions and the reliability of his actions and raised questions to me as the credibility of him, particularly when the other clients are located out of the country, and I'm sorely put aside if the facts support that he mysteriously discovered this substantial extra asset when he was required to provide all the information.

That's Judge Speak for WTF.

This hearing ends with the judge still not satisfied with what's going on.

She sets a final hearing, and it sounds like Hannu plans to testify, an unconventional move in this type of case.

Typically, estate cases are straightforward and bureaucratic.

In this case, though, both sides are going to be allowed to submit evidence, setting up a type of mini-trial for the judge to decide if the settlement stands or if negotiations must continue.

I'll swear everyone in at once.

The petitioner, Mr. Hammond Narrow, could you turn on your camera, please?

Sure.

And I ask you to keep it on.

It's a week later, and the final hearing slash zoom call about the settlement is getting underway.

I'm taking note of Hannu's appearance and mannerisms.

He's dressed in what looks like a branded underarmour exercise shirt, while others on the call are wearing suits and ties.

Mr. Narrow, I remind you that we're in a courtroom, albeit virtually, you've already been sworn in, you are under oath.

Hannu's lawyers are here, the family's lawyer, the judge, a few other assorted officials, and us.

Judge Doh, I request the press to be, I don't know, I don't, I know press is in the, in the meeting.

I just want any information to be confidential.

I see the new names here, whether they sign...

Mr. Narrow, are you, are you addressing that to me?

Yes.

We are the press he's referring to.

Hannu's not happy that we're listening in.

Normally you work through council, but is there something, a question you had about the press?

I thought I heard you say that.

I just want to make sure that there is a confidentiality agreement, they're not regarding the information,

they're not forwarding the information out.

Hannu wants to keep the information shared on the call private, but it's a public hearing and we're not budging.

Hannu's attorney jumps in to try and smooth things over.

The judge does not appreciate it.

In other words, I think he's asking, is this a public record judge?

The reason being is that there was an underlying investigation, a criminal investigation concerning the homicide of his wife and son.

We feel he's been treated unfairly in regard to that because he was never a suspect.

He was never charged.

He provided a clear alibi with a dozen...

If this is a talking statement in order to get it before the press, I'll note this.

That matter on the criminal investigation is not before me.

To the extent, counsel want to indicate that this chancellery court, which is chancellery slash probate, has treated petitioner unfairly as a result of that investigation.

I did not see that in any of the paper submissions and I'm not going to allow that as a surprise avenue of attention today.

It should have been addressed in the paper.

I don't know where you're getting that from, Judge, respectfully.

I never once said that this court or any of the courts were biased against Mr. Nair because of the...

Actually, Mr. Venturi, that's what I just thought I heard you saying.

It seemed correct, Judge.

If I misspoke, but I think I was very clear, I was just directing the remarks to the press being unfair, not this court.

Absolutely not.

While being questioned by his own attorney, Honu repeats his position, he never would have agreed to a settlement without a complete audit of Sussey's estate.

But then, on cross-examination, the family's lawyer quickly zeroes in on what the heck happened with that missing e-trade account.

Mr. Nair, did your wife maintain an e-trade account during her life?

Objection immaterial.

Your Honor, this was discussed at the last motion, and part of the issue here is that there is no updated accounting because one of the assets was not disclosed for a year and a half.

So it's relevant to this discussion we're having today, Judge.

It was disclosed prior to the settlement, and it was part of the settlement.

Your Honor, Mr. Venturi should not be testifying why I'm questioning a witness.

Well, you made statements of fact, not disputing that.

Mr. Venturi, no, if you say one more thing I'm going to have you removed, you're not on the stand, this is a courtroom, you're not testifying, if you want to have argument outside we can have that, but you don't get to answer or even to suggest an answer for

your client, we all know that.

After Honu's attorney is thoroughly chastised by the judge, Donald continues his line of questioning, and Honu quickly goes on the defensive.

Did you first learn about this account before or after her death?

I was the one maintaining her account.

I knew all along and I communicated all along to my attorneys.

Honu says that he knew about the account even before Susie died.

So you knew about the account, the E-Trade account before your wife died, is that correct?

Yes, I, being part of the marriage, that's what you do too.

Don't you, don't you, don't you know what your wife maintains?

In case it's not clear, Honu said, being part of the marriage, that's what you do too, don't you, don't you know what your wife maintains?

It's a tangent, but it also seems in line with everything we've learned about how finances were handled in the NARA family.

Regardless of the reason for Honu's response, Judge Dow does not let it slide.

Mr. Nara, you're on a witness stand and in the court proceedings here, you don't question the counsel.

You have learned counsel who can raise objections.

I am disallowing your questions and I instruct you not to do so.

Susie's family's lawyer asks a few more questions.

He's trying to hold Honu's feet to the fire over this E-Trade account.

Then, both sides make their closing statements.

All right, thank you.

I anticipate getting out the ruling before the end of the week and then we can move on from there.

Thank you, counsel.

And after all is said and done, it looks like Honu is about to inherit hundreds of thousands of dollars.

As we wait for the judge's ruling, we revisit any other potential leads in the case.

And number one on our list, finding the possible eyewitness to the murders that Thurman Jennings told us about a few episodes back.

Craig had to be about in his late 20s and Craig was basically what you call a part-time hustler.

He was never, never in the house.

Thurman said Craig was always hanging around outside the apartments and Craig told Thurman that, on the day of the murders, he saw Sasien Anish arrive home with an unidentified man.

So, we spend the next few days tracking down Craig, and when we finally do, it's well worth the wait.

There's more to this story than what y'all think it is, but I'm trying to tell y'all he had something to do with it.

I said that to them at that time.

Craig tells us what he saw on the day of the murders, and gives us a brand new lead on a possible suspect on the next episode of Strange Land, which starts right now.