

Last night's televis on

SARAH HUGHES



The human faces behind espionage and intrigue

» **Hunting The KGB Killers** Channel 4, 9pm
» **Big Little Lies** Sky Atlantic, 9pm

On 23 November 2006, Alexander Litvinenko, the former agent with Russia's FSB security service who had become an outspoken critic of President Vladimir Putin, died in University College Hospital, London. He had been poisoned with the highly radioactive metal polonium-210. Two fellow agents, whom Litvinenko met in London, were suspected of the crime, which they were thought to have carried out with Putin's approval. A decade later, no one has been charged over Litvinenko's death.

The slow-burning anger and frustration felt by everyone over that failure was the driving impetus behind **Hunting The KGB Killers**, a detailed look at the events leading up to and following the poisoning. Featuring interviews with Litvinenko's family and the police officers in charge of the case, it methodically laid out the case against the two agents, Andrei Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun, and by implication, Putin.

The ins and outs of that investigation were fascinating: Litvinenko was probably poisoned after drinking a cup of tea, yet this method was so haphazard and dangerous that traces of polonium were found days later both in

the Mayfair restaurant where Litvinenko had eaten and in the soil pipes of the hotel where the Russian agents had stayed.

Along the way there were eye-opening revelations, most notably the surreal experiences of former detective inspector, Brian Tarpey, part of a Scotland Yard team which went to Russia to investigate further, only to be given the runaround and worse.

"We were offered tea and I had no hesitation in saying yes, so we had the tea and I left... then I started to feel uncomfortable," said Tarpey. "Not to put too fine a point on it, I had the s***s. I have no doubt in my mind that we were probably poisoned. I think there was a deliberate ploy to weaken us physically."

Interesting though this was, the film's real power came from the interviews with Litvinenko's wife, Marina, and son, Anatoly. The

latter heartbreakingly confessed that he had never really believed his father would die while Mrs Litvinenko bared her soul about the handsome, vital man she had loved, allowing us to see him not as the suffering patient slowly dying in a hospital bed but as a family man: funny, tender and surprisingly soft-hearted. "You have this person

in your heart," she said. "And they leave and your heart has a big hole." Her grief almost burned through the screen.

Over the past six weeks, Sky Atlantic's outstanding dark comedy-drama **Big Little Lies** has gone from soapy excavation of glossy privileged lives to furious indictment of the violence that men do. While last night's penultimate episode still featured plenty of the former – the fantastically awkward lunch date between Madeline, her current husband, her ex and his new wife being a perfect example – the storm clouds are gathering, blowing apart relationships in their wake.

"Sometimes that's the essence of a happy marriage – the ability to pretend," said Madeline's husband Ed, but by the end of the episode the comforting lie behind that statement had been brutally exposed. The final scene saw Nicole Kidman's seemingly perfect Celeste, still trapped in an abusive marriage, silently howling in an empty beach home. Few dramas this year will make so powerful a statement without words.

Twitter: @sarahjphughes





Mrs Litvinenko
bared her soul about
the handsome, vital
man she had loved



The former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned in London with radioactive polonium-210

