

CASE FILE 2026/117-VH · HILLCREST DIVISION — HOMICIDE

THE LAST BOTTLE

UNSOLVED CASE FILE · PRINT & SOLVE

A storm, a hillside house, and a dinner that was meant to celebrate twenty years of Vance Records.

At 21:12 the power dies. For fourteen minutes the house is completely dark. When the lights come back, Adrian Vance is face down in his study with his own award on the rug beside him — and all four guests have an answer ready.

One of those answers is impossible. The file in your hands proves it. Nobody will tell you which one.



4 SUSPECTS · 8 PAGES · 1–6 INVESTIGATORS

SOLVING TIME: 45–60 MINUTES · DIFFICULTY: MEDIUM

THE SOLUTION IS PRINTED IN MIRROR WRITING ON PAGE 08

This is a case file, not a role-playing game. Nobody plays the killer. You are handed everything the detectives collected — scene report, forensic summary, exhibits and four interrogation transcripts — and you work out who did it, exactly as you would from a real folder of paperwork.

The murderer is one of the four people interviewed on pages 05 and 06. Every one of them is lying about something. Only one of them says something that is **physically impossible**, and you can only see it by holding two different documents side by side.

What you need

- These eight pages, printed single-sided on A4. Black and white is fine.
- A pen, a highlighter if you have one, and a blank sheet for your own timeline.
- A mirror — or your phone's selfie camera — for the last page.
- 45 to 60 minutes. One to six people. No app, no account, nothing else to buy.

How to work it

1. **Lay the pages out.** Page 08 goes face down and stays there until you have written a name on the answer form.
2. **Read pages 03 and 04 first.** These are the objective facts of the case: the scene, the times, the forensics. Nothing in them is a lie.
3. **Then read the four transcripts.** Mark every claim that can be checked against a document. Those are the only claims that matter.
4. **Build a timeline of the blackout** on your own sheet — the fourteen dark minutes are the whole case. Write down where each suspect places themselves, and what would have had to be true for that to work.
5. **Fill in the answer form on page 07** — name, method and the two documents that prove it. Then hold page 08 up to a mirror.

TWO RULES THAT KEEP THE CASE HONEST

- **People lie, paperwork does not.** Anything in the scene report, the forensic summary or the exhibits is true. Anything a suspect says is only a claim until a document backs it.
- **Everyone is hiding something; three of them are hiding the wrong thing.** All four suspects had a motive and all four have a secret. Three of those secrets are ugly, embarrassing and completely unrelated to the murder.

Contents of the file

PAGE	DOCUMENT
03	Crime scene report, victim file, timeline, floor plan
04	Forensic summary and exhibits A–C (note, phone log, receipt)
05	Interrogation transcripts 1 and 2 — Vance, Brandt
06	Interrogation transcripts 3 and 4 — Iyer, Pike
07	Suspect board and the investigator's answer form
08	Case solution — mirror writing, do not read early

NOTE

Every person, company and event in this file is fictional; any resemblance to real people or events is coincidental. Suitable for ages 13 and up. Free to print and share for personal use — please do not resell.

SCENE	Vance House, 4 Hillcrest Lane — ground floor study
VICTIM	Adrian VANCE, 47, founder and sole owner of Vance Records
REPORTED BY	Cass IYER, 21:34, from the house landline
FIRST UNIT ON SCENE	21:52 — road blocked by a fallen line
WEAPON	Brass "Golden Reel" award, 2.1 kg, taken from the victim's own shelf
PERSONS PRESENT	N. Vance · T. Brandt · C. Iyer · R. Pike (no staff on site that night)

1. Circumstances

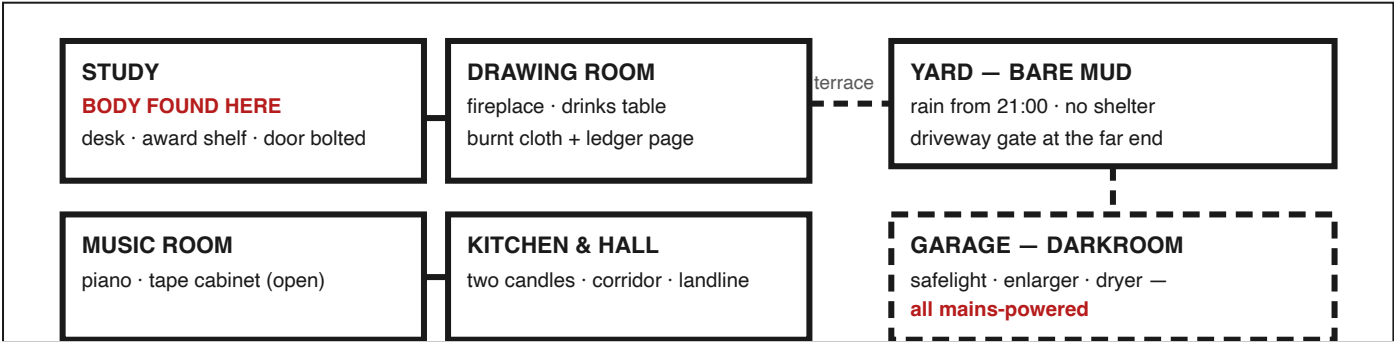
Adrian Vance had invited four guests to dinner to mark the twentieth year of his label. Dinner ended at 20:30, the party moved to the drawing room, and heavy rain began at 21:00. At **21:12** a fallen line cut power to the whole of Hillcrest Lane. The house has no generator and no emergency lighting. The blackout lasted **fourteen minutes** and power returned at **21:26**. Apart from two candles lit in the kitchen, the house was in total darkness throughout.

- 2. Findings in the study**
- Vance was struck once from behind while seated at his desk. No defensive injuries, no sign of a struggle, nothing removed from the room.
 - The award was found on the rug, wiped clean. No usable prints on it or on the desk edge.
 - The terrace door was **bolted from the inside**. The hall door is the only way in or out of the study.

- 3. Findings elsewhere in the house**
- Drawing room fireplace:** a grey microfibre cloth of the type sold for camera lenses, half burnt; and a torn page of the label's accounts ledger, burnt at one corner (Exhibit A).
 - Music room:** the tape cabinet was open. Two boxes of studio master tapes were later recovered from a guest's overnight bag.
 - Yard:** bare earth, churned to mud by the rain. Anyone crossing between the house and the garage after 21:00 would return soaked and mud-stained. No footprints of any kind were found in the yard.
 - Garage darkroom:** the red safelight, the enlarger and the print dryer are all mains-powered from the house supply. During the blackout the room had no light source of any kind.

4. Timeline

TIME	EVENT	SOURCE
20:50	N. Vance goes into the study alone; comes out at 20:58.	Iyer, Pike
21:05	Heavy rain since 21:00. A. Vance enters the study to take a call; heard talking.	all four agree
21:12	Power cut — total darkness. The group scatters.	utility log
21:15	Outgoing call from T. Brandt's phone, 4 min 10 s.	Exhibit B
21:26	Power returns.	utility log
21:27	R. Pike appears in the hall from the kitchen corridor. Clothes and shoes dry and clean.	Vance, Iyer
21:31	C. Iyer opens the study door and finds the body.	Iyer



Forensic Summary & Exhibits

CAUSE OF DEATH	Single blunt-force blow to the back of the skull, delivered downward from behind
TIME OF DEATH	Between 21:15 and 21:25 — narrower than usual: the victim's watch face was cracked in the fall and stopped at 21:19
ASSAILANT	Right-handed; ordinary adult strength; no height estimate possible from a seated victim
TOXICOLOGY	Alcohol 0.04 %. No drugs, no sedatives.
WEAPON TRACES	Award base carries fibres consistent with a microfibre polishing cloth (see Exhibit and fireplace find)
HANDS / CLOTHING	No mud, no rainwater and no soil traces on any garment surrendered by the four persons present

Laboratory remarks. The blow was struck in darkness or near darkness: the desk lamp was switched on but the circuit was dead, and the victim was still holding a pen. A person who did not know the room well would not have found the award shelf; it stands behind the desk, at shoulder height, out of the doorway's line of sight. The cloth recovered from the fireplace is a camera-lens cloth, laundered, of a brand sold only in photographic shops. Burning it took a deliberate detour into the drawing room.

EXHIBIT A — TORN LEDGER PAGE, RECOVERED PART-BURNT FROM THE DRAWING-ROOM FIREPLACE

VANCE RECORDS — GENERAL LEDGER, FOLIO 41

TRANSFER · SEPT · "STUDIO MAINT." 18,400

TRANSFER · NOV · "STUDIO MAINT." 22,750

no such invoices — ask N. on Friday

EXHIBIT B — NETWORK LOG, HANDSET REGISTERED TO T. BRANDT

START	LENGTH	NUMBER / DIRECTION	CELL MAST
20:41	0:38	Incoming — withheld	Hillcrest East (house)
21:15	4:10	Outgoing — 0207 44 ****	Hillcrest East, gate sector
21:33	0:52	Outgoing — same number	Hillcrest East (house)

Operator note: the gate sector antenna covers the driveway and the first ten metres of the lane only. It does not cover any part of the house interior, the yard or the garage. The 21:15 call was therefore made outdoors, at the gate, and lasted until 21:19. The number belongs to the switchboard of **Ardent Sound Group**, a rival label.

EXHIBIT C — RECEIPT FOUND IN THE POCKET OF A COAT HANGING IN THE HALL

HILLCREST PHOTO

17 APR 2026 16:42

FIXER 1L 9.90

LENS CLOTH x2 .. 6.00

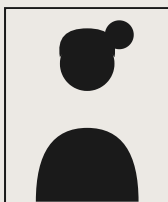
PAPER 18x24 ... 31.50

TOTAL 47.40

Retailer statement. The shop confirms the sale was made in person at 16:42 on the day of the death, six hours before the murder, and that the customer was a regular known to staff as a professional photographer.

Note. Two lens cloths were bought. One was recovered, unused, from a camera bag in the hall. The other has not been accounted for. The cloth burnt in the fireplace is the same brand and weave, but a laundered older one — it cannot be matched to this receipt by age. It can only be matched by *who in this house owns cloths like it at all.*

Interrogation Transcripts 1–2

**Nadia Vance**

SUSPECT 1 · CFO, VANCE RECORDS · SISTER OF THE VICTIM

TRANSCRIPT 1
00:20–00:47

Q. Where were you when the lights went out?

A. In the kitchen. I'd gone for the corkscrew. I lit the two candles on the counter – that's my hand you'll find on the matchbox.

Q. Did anyone see you there?

A. Not the whole time. Cass came through once, I heard her more than saw her. I stayed by the candles until the power came back. I'm not proud of it, I was hiding.

Q. Hiding from what?

A. From my brother. He'd found the ledger. Yes, I moved money. My daughter's treatment isn't covered and I moved it and I meant to put it back. He confronted me at ten to nine, in the study. That's what that scene at 20:50 was.

Q. And you burnt the page.

A. I burnt the page. That was after – I did it while everyone was shouting in the hall, after Cass found him. It was the stupidest thing I have ever done and it had nothing to do with killing him. He was going to fire me, not press charges. Adrian never pressed charges against family.

Q. Forty-one thousand is a motive.

A. It's a motive to run, not to swing. And I'd have had to walk past the drawing room to reach him. In the dark. Wearing heels on parquet. You'd have heard me in the cellar.

**Theo Brandt**

SUSPECT 2 · MANAGING PARTNER, 20 YEARS

TRANSCRIPT 2
00:52–01:19

Q. Your account of 21:12 onwards.

A. When the lights died I went out of the front door to the gate. I wanted a signal and I wanted privacy. I made a call. I stood in the rain for it, which tells you how badly I wanted privacy.

Q. You were wet when you came back in?

A. Soaked. My jacket was still on the radiator when your people arrived – take it, it's evidence, I don't care.

Q. Who did you call at 21:15?

A. Ardent Sound. There. Yes. Adrian was going to sell the label out from under me – a deal that valued my twenty years at nothing – and I had already agreed terms to walk across the road and take three artists with me. I was going to tell him on Monday.

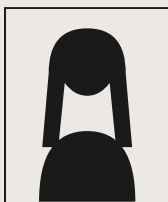
Q. That is a considerable motive.

A. It's the opposite of one. If Adrian sells, I get paid off and I go. If Adrian dies tonight, the label goes into his estate, the sale collapses, and my contract with Ardent is worth exactly nothing until probate finishes. Ask a lawyer. Killing him cost me more than he ever did.

Q. Did you see anyone else outside?

A. Nobody. The yard was black and it was coming down sideways. I'd have noticed a person crossing it – you can't cross that mud quietly, it pulls at your shoes.

Interrogation Transcripts 3–4

**Cass Iyer**

SUSPECT 3 · RECORDING ARTIST, SIGNED TO THE LABEL

TRANSCRIPT 3
01:25–01:50

Q. You found the body.

A. At half past. I went to knock because the power was back and he still hadn't come out. The door wasn't locked. I didn't touch anything except the door.

Q. And during the blackout?

A. Music room. In the dark, on the floor, next to the tape cabinet. I went through the kitchen on my way there – Nadia was lighting candles, I said something about the fuse box and kept going.

Q. The tapes in your bag.

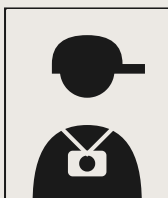
A. Are my record. Two years of my life that he shelved because a focus group in a hotel basement didn't like the third song. He told me at dinner that the masters stay with the label whatever happens. So I took them. I was going to walk out with them tonight and let him sue me.

Q. You were stealing from him at the moment he died.

A. I was stealing my own voice back. And if I'd wanted him dead I'd have waited until after he signed the release – dead men don't sign anything. Right now those tapes are worth nothing to me. His estate owns them and his estate is four lawyers who have never heard my name.

Q. Did you hear anything from the study side of the house?

A. A door. Once, near the end of the dark. Not the front door, that one bangs. An inside door, softly. I couldn't tell you which.

**Rowan Pike**

SUSPECT 4 · PHOTOGRAPHER, SLEEVE ARTWORK, 11 YEARS

TRANSCRIPT 4
01:56–02:24

Q. Account for the fourteen minutes, please.

A. I was in the darkroom in the garage. I'd gone out there after dinner to print the anniversary shots – that's what I was there for, the man wanted prints by the morning.

Q. Through the blackout as well?

A. Through all of it. I stayed put and carried on under the safelight – you don't walk out of a darkroom mid-print. I had a sheet in the developer when the mains came back and the white light killed it. Twenty minutes of work in the bin. Then I came in through the kitchen corridor and that's when everyone started shouting.

Q. You came in at 21:27.

A. If that's what they say. A minute after the lights, give or take.

Q. And your relationship with the victim?

A. Eleven years. He made me and I know it. If you're asking what everyone else has been whispering – yes, he'd started asking questions about the 2019 archive series. The negatives that made my name. He was going to make a phone call this week that would have ended me. I'm not going to pretend I'm sad. I'm saying I was in the garage.

Q. Anything else we should know?

A. Only that whoever did it knew where he kept that award. It's behind him, on the high shelf. You'd have to have stood in that room a hundred times to reach for it in the dark.

Suspect Board & Answer Form

SUSPECT	MOTIVE	CLAIMED POSITION 21:12–21:26	CHECKABLE AGAINST
Nadia Vance sister, CFO	Caught taking 41,150 from the label; about to be dismissed.	Kitchen, by the candles. Partly seen by Iyer.	Exhibit A; Iyer transcript
Theo Brandt partner	The sale of the label would have written off twenty years of his stake.	Outside at the gate, on the phone, in the rain.	Exhibit B (mast + times)
Cass Iyer artist	Her album was shelved; the masters were being kept from her.	Music room floor, by the tape cabinet.	Tapes in her bag; Vance transcript
Rowan Pike photographer	The victim was about to expose how the 2019 archive series was made.	Garage darkroom, printing, under the safelight.	Scene report §3; timeline 21:27

QUESTIONS WORTH ANSWERING BEFORE YOU NAME ANYBODY

- Three of the four alibis are supported by something outside the speaker's own mouth. Which one is supported only by the speaker?
- What does a darkroom need in order to be a darkroom, and did the house have it between 21:12 and 21:26?
- The yard was open mud in heavy rain from 21:00, and the report records no footprints in it. Who claims to have been on the far side of that yard, and in what state did they walk back in at 21:27?
- Why would a killer make a detour to the drawing room fireplace, and who in this house owns the kind of cloth that was burnt there?
- Two people admit to a crime during questioning. Does a person who has just committed murder volunteer a second crime?

INVESTIGATOR'S CONCLUSION – FILE 2026/117-VH

THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE IS

HOW IT WAS DONE

THE TWO DOCUMENTS THAT PROVE IT

INVESTIGATOR

DATE

CHECK YOUR ANSWER – THE SHIFT KEY

Before you turn to page 08, decode this line. Each letter has been moved **one place forward** in the alphabet, so shift every letter **one place back** (B becomes A, C becomes B, and so on).

SPXBO QJLF – UIF EBSLSPPN XBT EFBE

THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE

ROWAN PIKE

The impossible claim

Pike says he spent the whole blackout in the garage darkroom, working under the red safelight, and that a print was ruined when the mains came back. Two documents kill this.

Scene report §3 records that the safelight, the enlarger and the print dryer are all mains-powered from the house supply. From 21:12 to 21:26 that room had no light of any kind and no working enlarger. Nothing could be exposed, nothing could be developing, and no returning light could ruin a print that was never made. He describes fourteen minutes of work that the power cut made physically impossible.

The timeline and the yard finish it. The only route to the garage is across bare mud in heavy rain that started at 21:00. Pike walks into the hall at 21:27 with dry clothes and dry shoes, and the report notes no footprints anywhere in the yard. He never crossed it. He was inside the house the whole evening.

What actually happened

Vance had begun asking about the 2019 archive series — the work that made Pike's reputation and that Pike had faked. A phone call that week would have ended his career. When the power failed, Pike had the one thing the others did not: he knew the study in the dark, down to the sword on the high shelf behind the desk. He went in through the hall door at about 21:18, struck once, wiped the sword with the lens cloth from his pocket, and burnt the cloth in the drawing-room fireplace on his way to the kitchen corridor. He then walked into the hall a minute after the lights returned with a story that only works if you never think about where a safelight gets its electricity.

The three false trails

- **Nadia Vance** embezzled 41,150 and burnt the ledger page — but she burnt it after the body was found, out of panic, and the theft is a reason to be sacked, not to kill. Her fire in the fireplace is what makes the burnt cloth look like somebody else's mess.
- **Theo Brandt** was signing with a rival label, which sounds damning until you read Exhibit B: the mast places him outside at the gate from 21:15 to 21:19, exactly across the medical window and the stopped watch. The sale dying also cost him money.
- **Cass Iyer** was stealing the master tapes at that moment and found the body — the classic double fad. But the tapes are worthless to her with Vance dead, and the "soft inside door" she heard near the end of the dark is Pike leaving the study.

IF YOU WANT TO SCORE IT

Name only: solved. Name plus the safelight: solved well. Name, safelight and the dry shoes at 21:27: you would have closed this file in one interview.

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