

BLUE HOLLOW

"Pilot"

Written by

IdeaM

TEASER

FADE IN:

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT PARKING LOT - DAY

The yellow caution tape flaps weakly in the damp air, strung between two parked squad cars. The area around SHERIFF ELARA VANCE's patrol car is cordoned off.

AVA VANCE (30s), dressed in a sharp, city-appropriate trench coat that looks too clean for the muck, kneels on the wet asphalt. Uniformed OFFICERS stand near the perimeter, maintaining a rigid, professional distance.

She ignores the officers, her focus absolute. She points a gloved finger to a small, almost invisible smudge of grey dust near the passenger door handle.

AVA VANCE
(low, precise)
Look here.

A DEPTHL Y CONCERNED OFFICER (40s) shifts his weight, casting a nervous glance toward the squad cars.

DEPTHL Y CONCERNED OFFICER
Ma'am, we've logged everything.
It's secured.

AVA VANCE
(not looking up)
The surface particulate. This isn't
general dust. It's a specific
mineral residue.

A beat of silence, broken only by the drip of water from the eaves.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
It's the town, ma'am. Everything
out here settles the same.

AVA VANCE
(rising slowly, brushing
dirt from her knees)
This smudge. It's too high for
ground runoff. And it's not local
soil composition.

She steps carefully over the edge of the yellow tape, an

action that draws immediate, sharp looks from the surrounding deputies.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
Who was here, in the hours leading up to the perimeter being established? Beyond the immediate responding units.

The officers exchange strained glances, the practiced veneer of calm cracking just around the edges.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
There is a transfer point here. And this smudge is proof that something was moved, or something was left behind that wasn't accounted for.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT PARKING LOT - DAY

BEN CARTER (50s), leans against the far edge of the yellow tape, arms crossed over a damp flannel shirt. He watches Ava kneel again, now focusing on the same spot.

He takes a slow drag from a cigarette, the cherry glow brief against the dismal backdrop.

AVA VANCE
(to herself, barely a
whisper)
The transfer point.

Ben pushes himself off the car, taking one unhurried step closer to the perimeter, violating the invisible buffer zone.

BEN CARTER
(a slow drawl)
You look for the dust, do you?

Ava snaps her head up, recognizing the voice immediately, but not the intent.

AVA VANCE
You know this place. You know the dirt.

Ben lets out a breathy chuckle that holds no humor.

BEN CARTER
Know it? You read about it. You
read the histories, the
ordinances. You read the pretty
lies they print on the quarterly
reports.

He flicks the cigarette butt away; it sizzles briefly on
the wet asphalt.

BEN CARTER (CONT'D)
But the land, the real dust, that
settles differently. It settles
where the old bones are.

AVA VANCE
(crossing her arms,
meeting his gaze)
And what does the dust say about
the bones?

Ben shifts his weight, his eyes flicking from Ava's face to
the smudge on the car.

BEN CARTER
Nothing the way the locals say.
When the dust settles on old
wounds, you don't find evidence,
Prosecutor. You find the memory of
the ache.

He turns, melding back into the backdrop of the parked
vehicles as if he were always part of the architecture.

CUT TO:

INT. VANCE RESIDENCE - KITCHEN ENTRANCE - DAY

The side entrance to the Vance house smells of damp earth
and mildew. The air is thick with the smell of wet wool and
decaying foliage.

AVA VANCE walks past the taped-off section, heading toward
the main house entrance. A local GROUNDS KEEPER (60s),
wearing faded overalls, sweeps up wet leaves and small
debris near the curb.

He glances up at Ava. His eyes are flat, watching her
passage, not the police tape behind her.

The sweeping movement causes a small pile of damp asphalt

grit to shift. A piece of aged, yellowed newspaper, folded into a tight square, blows out from under the edge of the curb.

The groundskeeper stops sweeping. He stares at the clipping.

AVA VANCE
(pausing, watching the
paper)
What is that?

The man does not answer. He simply watches the paper, as if it is an unwelcome relative.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
(softly)
It's old.

The groundskeeper finally bends, his movements stiff, and retrieves the clipping with the tip of his broom. He straightens up, holding it loosely, his gaze still fixed on the damp ground.

He does not offer it to her. He just holds it, the corner slightly darkened with moisture.

CUT TO:

INT. THE GRIND - BOOTH SEATING - DAY

The diner is quiet, the clatter of plates muted by the persistent drizzle pressing against the large picture windows. Steam drifts up from the coffee cups.

AVA VANCE sits in the corner booth, ostensibly reviewing her notes on local zoning, but her eyes are fixed on the street visible through the smeared glass.

She traces a finger over the condensation on the windowpane, leaving a clean path that frames the street beyond.

She waits.

The street remains empty for a beat, then a sedan--dark, unremarkable--slowly pulls into the visible portion of the street, as if making a drop-off.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
(muttering to herself)
Too slow.

The car idles for a single second. Then, its engine surges, and it accelerates rapidly, turning corner sharply, its rear license plate flashing into brief, sharp focus before the drizzle swallows the details whole.

Ava's hand freezes on the glass. She watches the spot where the car vanished, her expression shifting from detached analysis to sharp, sudden alert.

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

INT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT OFFICE - DAY

The office is small, smelling faintly of stale coffee and cleaning solution. Files are stacked on every available surface.

AVA VANCE sits across a metal desk from DEPUTY JENKINS (40s). Jenkins is meticulously organized, his posture too rigid for the casual setting.

JENKINS
(Tapping a glossy report)
It's all procedure, Ms. Vance. Basic evidence protocol. Bag it, tag it, log it. You learn it when you start.

AVA VANCE
(Pointing to a specific section of the report)
The clothing, Jenkins. Elara's jacket. It was documented as 'found near vehicle.' But the tag indicates it was processed for prints, yet there are no accompanying photographs of the items before transport to the lab.

JENKINS
(Frowning, adjusting his tie)
We photographed everything. The log reflects that. It's redundant, I know, but it's standard for high-profile--

AVA VANCE
Standard, yes. But the chain of custody for the evidence tags themselves. Who signed off on the transfer from the immediate scene unit to the evidence locker?

Jenkins shifts in his chair, a tiny bead of sweat forming near his temple.

JENKINS

That was handled by forensics. They take primary custody on site.

AVA VANCE

They took primary custody, but the local reporting unit, the deputies on scene, are responsible for the initial tagging and securing. You signed off on the transfer of the tags.

Jenkins avoids her gaze, instead focusing intently on a stack of index cards.

JENKINS

I verified the tags were present and legible. That's what I documented.

AVA VANCE

Legible, yes. But I'm looking at the original bag seals, Jenkins. They show a variance in the numbering system used for the footwear found. The initial report lists the shoe size, but doesn't cross-reference it with the departmental inventory log for that model.

She pushes a small, laminated card across the desk. It has a diagram of a boot heel.

JENKINS

(Picking up the card,
his voice suddenly too
academic)

That's a minor notation error, Ms. Vance. A clerical oversight. The boots were cataloged under the general 'Department Issue' code. We assume the correct size pairing based on the model number.

AVA VANCE

Assume. You don't prosecute based on assumption. You prosecute based on documented, sequential fact.

Jenkins clears his throat, straightening up suddenly, his performance of competence almost visible.

JENKINS

Look, this was a stressful scene.
We processed what we could with the
manpower available. We followed
protocol to the letter, Ms. Vance.
The paper trail is there.

AVA VANCE

The paper trail is what people
convince themselves is there.

CUT TO:

INT. THE GRIND - COUNTER SEAT - DAY

The diner is a study in faded institutional beige. The air is thick with the scent of stale coffee and industrial cleaner. Rain streaks the windows, blurring the world outside into watercolor washes.

AVA VANCE sits alone at the long counter, nursing a coffee. She pretends to read a thick, brittle-looking municipal code book, occasionally tapping a section with her pen.

A group of three TOWNSFOLK (various ages, dressed in worn but clean clothes) occupy a booth near the counter, nursing mugs of coffee. They are speaking low, their voices carrying the practiced intimacy of people who share the same history.

AVA VANCE

(Muttering to herself,
checking a page)
...zoning variance 4.B. Subsection
nine... permissible setbacks...

She subtly shifts her chair, angling herself slightly so the flow of conversation drifts toward her.

ONE TOWNSFOLK

...said the lot was always meant
for the livery stables. Never a
residential overflow.

ANOTHER TOWNSFOLK

But the deed we have shows it was
rezoned after the mill closed.
Took years.

The third townsfolk laughs, a short, dry sound.

THIRD TOWNSFOLK
Deeds change, boys. People forget
what the land was for. That's the
trick, ain't it?

Ava stops pretending to read. She lifts her cup slightly,
pretending to sip, but her focus is absolute.

AVA VANCE
(Quietly, but clear
enough to cut through
the low murmur)
The mill closing. How long was
that?

The three townsfolk jump slightly, looking at her with
sudden, unified wariness.

THIRD TOWNSFOLK
(Stammering slightly)
Ma'am?

AVA VANCE
(Meeting the gaze of the
first townsfolk)
Just curious about the timeline on
the acreage surrounding the old
railway spur. The property line
dispute, I take it?

The first townsfolk exchange a look that is clearly
uncomfortable, a shared knowledge suddenly exposed to the
outside world.

ONE TOWNSFOLK
Nothing to talk about.

AVA VANCE
(Placing her coffee cup
down with a soft clink)
Oh, I think there is. I think
history always leaves a paper
trail, even if the gossip tries to
pave over it.

She picks up her book, but doesn't look at it, letting the
weight of the quiet question hang in the damp air.

CUT TO:

INT. COUNTY RECORDS ANNEX - MAIN CIRCULATION DESK - DAY

The Annex is cavernous and dusty. The air smells overwhelmingly of dry paper and settled mildew. Sunlight fights to penetrate dusty, grimy windows, illuminating motes dancing in the stale air.

AVA VANCE stands at the main circulation desk, facing MS. ALBRIGHT (60s), the head clerk. Albright wears a sensible, dusty cardigan and moves with the practiced inertia of someone who has seen every record and understood nothing about them.

ALBRIGHT
(Without looking up,
stamping a document)
If you need a deed transfer, you
need Form 31-D, in triplicate. And
a fee, of course.

AVA VANCE
I am not here for zoning variances,
Ms. Albright. I am looking for the
chain of custody for the precinct
property records pertaining to the
Blue Hollow Police Department,
specifically anything dating back
to the early nineties.

Albright finally looks up, her expression perfectly neutral, professionally bored.

ALBRIGHT
The department keeps its own files,
Ms. Vance. We only handle the
general land records.

AVA VANCE
But the initial complaint reports,
the evidence intake logs--those are
filed here, aren't they? The
records relating to the incident?

Albright picks up her stamp, tapping it lightly on the counter.

ALBRIGHT
The police department is an entity
of its own records. You need to
speak to the department liaison.

AVA VANCE
(Leaning in slightly,
lowering her voice)
I need the paper trail, Ms.
Albright. The paperwork that proves
what was found, and when. I want to
see the initial inventory
documentation for the scene.

Albright pauses, tapping the stamp against her thumb. The
silence stretches, punctuated only by the distant creak of
an unseen pulley system.

ALBRIGHT
(A low warning)
Ms. Vance, some things are filed
for a reason. Some records are
administrative--they are not for
public review.

AVA VANCE
Which records are not for review?

Albright sighs, a sound of profound, professional
exhaustion. She glances around the vast, dusty room, as if
expecting someone to overhear.

ALBRIGHT
(Quietly, almost to
herself)
The main system handles the active
years. The older, more... sensitive
matters. They are kept separate.
Restricted.

She finally pushes a heavy, unmarked ledger across the
counter toward Ava. It is bound in dark, faded leather, and
the title embossed on the spine is almost illegible:
DECEASED MATTERS - PRE-1990.

ALBRIGHT (CONT'D)
You'll need the access key from the
back office. And you will be
signing a full waiver of liability.

INT. VANCE RESIDENCE - STUDY - DAY

Dust motes drift thick in the afternoon sunbeams slicing
through the tall, mullioned windows. The study is a
monument to accumulated paper--shelves crammed with
leather-bound volumes, files stacked like fallen dominoes.

AVA VANCE stands near a large mahogany desk, tapping a manicured nail against a corner of a brittle, yellowed tax document.

Her father, GEORGE VANCE (50s), is hunched over a different stack of brittle papers near the fireplace, occasionally adjusting his reading spectacles. He looks weary, more like a curator than a lawyer.

AVA VANCE

(calmly)

The original trust covenants. When did the stipulations regarding the Vance family's involvement with the original Blue Hollow mineral rights actually expire?

George jumps slightly, startled by the directness of the question. He flinches, as if the paper itself has stung him.

GEORGE VANCE

(clearing his throat)

We don't talk about the covenants, Ava. Not like this.

AVA VANCE

(not looking up from the document)

You don't talk about the fact that every major land transfer in this county, every significant piece of infrastructure, was legally tied, at some point, to the Vance name or the Vance trust stipulations. It's inescapable.

George forces a brittle laugh.

GEORGE VANCE (CONT'D)

It's history, child. It was a way of maintaining order. A structure.

AVA VANCE

Order built on obligation. If the stipulations were voluntary, they would have simply been liquidated decades ago when the economic necessity passed.

He straightens up abruptly, brushing dust from his tweed jacket.

GEORGE VANCE (CONT'D)
You treat this like a legal
problem from Washington. Like we
can untangle it with a motion and a
deposition.

AVA VANCE
(Lifting her gaze,
finally meeting his
eyes)
I treat it like a pattern. A
pattern of control. Did your mother
ever mention the precise wording
regarding the right of first
refusal on the initial allotment of
land? The one associated with the
Miller parcel?

George's composure cracks instantly. His knuckles whiten
where he grips the edge of the desk.

GEORGE VANCE (CONT'D)
(Voice suddenly low,
defensive)
Do not bring that up. It was
private. It was settled.

AVA VANCE
Was it settled by legal means, or
by the family understanding that
it was better not to ask?

George stares at her, trapped between the brittle evidence
on his desk and the sharp accusation in her voice. He opens
his mouth, then closes it, defeated by the specificity of
her knowledge.

CUT TO:

INT. BLUE HOLLOW DINER - BOOTH SEATING - DAY

The drizzle outside has increased its rhythm, drumming a
steady, melancholy beat against the plate glass. The diner
smells strongly of brewed coffee and wet wool.

AVA VANCE sits alone in the booth, her notes spread out
before her, a barrier between her and the world. She has
positioned herself across from BEN CARTER, who is nursing a
mug of coffee, looking deeply bored.

AVA VANCE
(Leaning slightly
forward)
The Miller parcel. The land
bordering the old railway cut. You
mentioned the deeds changed over
time.

Ben picks at a fleck of dried coffee foam on his saucer. He
does not meet her eyes.

BEN CARTER
Deeds change because the people
change, Prosecutor. The need
changes. Life moves on.

AVA VANCE
But the legal structure doesn't
just move on. It requires
documentation. I was reviewing the
preliminary records, the ones kept
at the Annex. There are
discrepancies regarding the
original zoning classification for
that specific stretch of acreage.

Ben finally looks up, a flicker of something unreadable
passing over his face--recognition, perhaps caution.

BEN CARTER
(A dry, dismissive tone)
You're getting lost in the
minutiae, Ava. Deeds are paperwork.
They reflect what the courts agreed
to at the time. They don't reflect
what the land was doing before the
trains came through.

AVA VANCE
(Ignoring his dismissal)
The records indicate the parcel was
zoned for light industrial use
decades before the rail spur was
even fully operational. A
classification that was later
amended.

Ben sets his mug down with a careful clink. He finally meets
her gaze, and his practiced detachment wavers for a beat.

BEN CARTER

And what does that tell you? That the town grew up, I suppose. That the needs of the living superseded the ink on old paper.

AVA VANCE

It tells me that the zoning variance itself is the point of inquiry. Because the variance suggests a level of oversight, or perhaps, a level of complicity, that I find quite unusual for a simple economic shift.

Ben leans back against the vinyl seat, a faint, challenging smile touching his lips. He taps his fingers lightly on the tabletop, mimicking the rhythm of a slow, inevitable march.

BEN CARTER

You're looking for a pattern, Ava. But you've got the wrong timeline. The deeds were written by men who were paid to write them. They weren't writing about zoning. They were writing about who gets to live here.

CUT TO:

INT. COUNTY RECORDS ANNEX - RESTRICTED SECTION - DAY

The air in the restricted section is noticeably colder, the silence deeper, pressed down by the sheer weight of forgotten paper. Dust sheets drape over filing cabinets like pale, forgotten shrouds.

Ava stands before a massive, iron-bound filing cabinet marked with a brass plaque: "DECEASED MATTERS - PRE-1990."

Ms. Albright stands near the entrance, watching Ava with an expression of profound warning.

AVA VANCE
(Tracing her finger
along the index card
catalog)
If I'm looking for the Miller
parcel's initial zoning
classification, and cross-
referencing it with any
administrative filings pertaining
to the use of police resources in
that area...

Albright stiffens, her composure returning with palpable effort.

ALBRIGHT
That section is indexed by file
number, Ms. Vance. It is not
conversational.

AVA VANCE
(Pointing to a specific,
dusty drawer)
This drawer. File 44-B. It was
opened, and then it was closed. Why
was it flagged as 'Miscellaneous
Administrative Error' and then
shelved?

Albright hesitates, her eyes darting to the end of the
aisle, checking for witnesses.

ALBRIGHT
It was cleared. The records were
deemed supplemental, Ms. Vance.

Ava pulls the drawer open with a harsh scrape of metal on
metal. Inside, amidst yellowing folders, she spots a single,
thin manila envelope that looks conspicuously newer than the
rest. It is labeled with a case number, and a faded ink
stamp: VANCE, E. (PREDECESSOR).

She pulls it out carefully.

AVA VANCE
(Whispering)
This file pertains to Elara's
predecessor. Not the department.
Something else.

She opens the envelope. Inside are not reports, but
photocopies--discrepant notices, memos, and a single,

heavily redacted document. Ava's eyes jump to the redacting. It is not uniform; it is clearly done with different levels of stationery, different ink sources.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)

(A sharp intake of
breath)

This wasn't an error. This was an
excision.

She smooths out the last visible document, confirming the pattern of deliberate removal.

CUT TO:

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

FADE IN:

INT. THE GRIND - COUNTER SEAT - DAY

The drizzle outside continues its steady rhythm against the plate glass. AVA VANCE sits at a worn booth. DR. REED (40s), a local general practitioner with tired eyes, sits opposite her, reviewing a thick file.

Ava taps a polished nail against the corner of the file, not looking at the paperwork.

AVA VANCE
The official assessment focuses on
withdrawal and acute stress
response. Textbook.

Dr. Reed doesn't look up from the paperwork.

DR. REED
That is the clinical reality, Ms.
Vance. We document what is
observable.

AVA VANCE
(Quietly)
But the pattern isn't just
withdrawal. It's withdrawal from
something. Something tangible.

Dr. Reed sighs, finally placing the file down. He leans back, professionally weary.

DR. REED
What are you suggesting? That her
decline is behavioral, not
chemical?

AVA VANCE
I'm suggesting that the stressors
in Blue Hollow don't register on a
standard psychometric scale.
They're woven into the routine.
The land records, the old
disputes, the weight of a hundred
years of 'settled' things.

DR. REED
(A faint smile)
You're anthropomorphizing the
county zoning map.

AVA VANCE
(A challenging look)
No. I'm suggesting that the
emotional architecture of this
town is built on a very specific
type of selective forgetting.
Something that requires a certain
kind of sustained, local belief
system to maintain.

Dr. Reed studies her, his professional curiosity battling
his instinct to keep the conversation within clinical
boundaries.

DR. REED
Belief is not a measurable
variable, Ava.

AVA VANCE
But the need to believe something
is, Doctor. And what happens when
the foundation they built that
belief on starts to crumble? When
the local narrative can't account
for a dead body in a parking lot?

She leans forward slightly, dropping her voice.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
You've seen enough locals to know
that people don't just pass away
from simple overdose. They are
often the breaking point for a
very deep, very old secret.

Dr. Reed shifts uncomfortably in the booth, his gaze
lingering on her face. The carefully constructed distance
between them suddenly feels thin, almost brittle.

DR. REED
You are making inferences that
venture far outside established
diagnostic parameters.

AVA VANCE
(Meeting his gaze,
unwavering)
Am I wrong to follow the pattern
the physical evidence keeps
creating?

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. VANCE RESIDENCE - CONSERVATORY - DAY

Dust motes dance in the weak light filtering through the glass roof of the conservatory. The space smells overwhelmingly of damp earth and decaying jasmine. Ava moves methodically, brushing dust from antique furniture pieces while packing away Elara's personal items.

She pauses at a small, mahogany side table, covered by a draped cloth.

AVA VANCE
(To herself)
Just get this done. Get the boxes
sealed.

She pulls the cloth away. On the table sits a small, ornate keepsake box. It is dark wood, heavily varnished, and secured by a delicate, tarnished brass lock.

Ava recognizes the style. It smells of her mother's era.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
(Whispering)
Mom's box.

She tries the latch. It resists immediately.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
(Muttering)
Locked.

She moves to the surrounding photos, running a finger over the glass of a portrait--a formal, slightly saccharine image of her mother at a town gathering years ago. The background figures are recognizable, the established local faces.

She turns her attention back to the box, examining the lock mechanism. It is old, complicated, and utterly undisturbed.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
(To the air)
What did you keep that required
this much effort to hide?

She kneels beside the table, her fingers tracing the engravings on the wood--a family crest, or perhaps a town seal, she can't tell.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
(A breathy
acknowledgment)
Not just memories.

She notices a faint, almost invisible scratch near the base of the lock--a scratch that looks like a deliberate scoring, not wear.

Ava pulls a hairpin from her own hair, examining it in the meager light. She inserts the fine tip into the scratch, applying precise, minimal pressure.

The lock gives a tiny, protesting click.

Ava freezes, listening. The sound is monumental in the quiet room.

She works the latch open. It springs open with a soft, almost reluctant sigh.

Inside, nestled on faded velvet, are not jewels, but a small stack of brittle, sepia photographs. They are of the same gathering as the portrait, but the people are arranged differently. And among them, a single, folded piece of patterned silk fabric.

Ava picks up the fabric, unfolding it slowly. It is a swatch of material she instantly recognizes from her mother's wardrobe, but it's paired with a different shade of ribbon--a color that has no place in the established Vance aesthetic.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. COUNTY RECORDS ANNEX - GENEALOGY DESK - DAY

The Genealogy Desk is a fortress of accumulated data, towering stacks of microfiche and endless, rolled parchment defining the town's documented lineage. The atmosphere is one of oppressive, meticulous order.

ARCHIVIST ELIJAH REID (60s), a man whose tweed jacket seems as permanent as the dust, sits at the head of the desk, meticulously stamping documents. He does not look up when Ava approaches.

AVA VANCE

(Calmly)

I was looking at the land deeds surrounding the old Miller parcel again. The one adjacent to the original railway rights-of-way.

Elijah continues his stamping rhythm, a steady thwack-thwack-thwack.

ELIJAH REID

Those are already digitized and cross-referenced by the county commission. Standard procedure.

AVA VANCE

I'm not asking about the zoning variances this time. I'm looking at the names. The initial ownership markers. The ones dated pre-1880.

Elijah stops stamping. The sudden silence is jarring. He finally lifts his head, his expression unreadable, guarded by years of institutional habit.

ELIJAH REID

And what does the provenance of the initial owners suggest, Ms. Vance?

AVA VANCE

They suggest a pattern of interlocking ownership that is remarkably deep. The Miller parcel, the original lot surrounding the rail spur, the land that eventually became the site of the old general store--they all trace back to the same three family names. Names that were always required to agree on the initial boundaries.

She slides a folder, heavy with brittle, yellowed deeds, across the polished wood surface. The names on the deeds are clearly visible, linking the foundational structures to the same few individuals.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)

The Vance name appears, of course.
But it's not the only one listed in
the primary signatories for the
core allotments. I'm looking at the
Hawthorne and the Merritt names.

Elijah's hands, which had been resting on his stamp, twitch slightly. He stares at the folder, his professional façade finally showing a hairline crack.

ELIJAH REID

Those are prominent families. They
were involved in the founding of
the settlement.

AVA VANCE

(Pressing him gently)

Prominent, yes. But how do you
account for their sustained,
documented economic presence in the
county's legal records, while their
direct involvement in day-to-day
civic governance seems to have
always been mediated, or even
quietly sidelined, by the Vance
family structure?

Elijah leans back, suddenly looking tired, the weight of
the paper suddenly pressing down on him.

ELIJAH REID

(Voice low, almost a
warning)

Some things, Ms. Vance, are simply
how the town was built. You can't
just pull out one deed and rewrite
the foundation.

Ava lets the silence stretch, letting the implications of
the names--Hawthorne, Merritt, Vance--hang in the dust-
filled air.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT PARKING LOT - DUSK

The sun has dropped below the surrounding ridge, casting the
parking lot in a sickly, yellow-grey light. The yellow crime
scene tape still demarcates the area around the patrol car,
looking ridiculous and fragile against the encroaching
twilight.

Ava walks slowly, deliberately skirting the perimeter of the yellow tape. She ignores the parked cars, the official vehicles, and the uniformed deputies who are now gathered in hushed, nervous clusters, talking in low tones.

She walks toward the edge of the asphalt, where the concrete gives way to a patch of overgrown weeds and packed earth.

She kneels down, ignoring the glare of the flashlights trained on her. She doesn't look at the ground directly beneath the car; she examines the ground beside it.

She brushes aside a thick patch of thorny weeds near a storm drain grate. The earth here is looser, disturbed.

Ava runs her fingers along the edge of the curb, examining the curbstone itself. It is old, mortared brick, chipped in places.

She presses her ear close to the brickwork, listening for the normal sounds of the town--the distant hum of traffic, the drip of water, the sound of the wind. She hears only silence, except for the faint, grinding sound of water seepage.

She pushes her fingers into a small gap between two bricks, a space the officers have clearly ignored while managing the primary scene.

Her fingers brush against something foreign, something that doesn't belong to the natural decay of the lot.

It is a small, metallic object, partially sunk into the mud, coated in damp earth and grit. It catches the weak streetlight glow.

Ava carefully digs it free with her thumbnail.

It is not a piece of debris, nor is it an everyday tool. It is a small, highly specialized piece of hardware--a bolt head, perhaps, but custom-machined, far too precise for standard municipal equipment. It looks expensive, designed to secure something heavy, something requiring absolute stillness.

Ava lifts the bolt head, turning it over in her palm, the metallic surface cold against her skin. It is too pristine to be old. It doesn't match the age of the surrounding decay.

She looks up from the bolt head, past the yellow tape, toward the silent, watchful cluster of deputies. Her

expression is no longer focused on the body, but on the implications of this single piece of forgotten machinery.

INT. THE GRIND - BOOTH SEATING - DAY

The rain continues its monotonous beat against the diner windows. Ava sits across from MAC HOLLOWAY (40s). He picks at the sugar dispenser, avoiding her gaze.

AVA VANCE

(Calmly)

The Miller parcel. The acreage surrounding the old rail line. That was considered industrial potential at the time, correct?

Mac finally looks up, annoyance hardening his features.

MAC HOLLOWAY

It was potential. Potential changes. The town changes.

AVA VANCE

Potential requires capital. And capital requires consistent, verifiable zoning records. The records suggest the land's value was predicated on a resource that wasn't quite what the town claims it was. The mine, for instance.

Mac sets the sugar dispenser down a little too hard.

MAC HOLLOWAY

We had a mine. We had jobs. That's the capital.

AVA VANCE

A mine based on what ore? The preliminary reports I reviewed--and I know you find them inconvenient--suggest a far lower yield than the annual reports the town council has been citing for the last two decades.

Mac leans forward, his voice dropping to a challenging murmur.

MAC HOLLOWAY

You're treating this like a textbook case study, Ms. Vance. Blue Hollow isn't a syllabus. We built this town on more than just rock.

AVA VANCE

(Meeting his stare)

But the rock is what allowed the initial construction, isn't it? The mine provided the initial wealth that established the land values, which then created the need for the zoning laws, which then required the continuous oversight of the local legal structure.

He laughs, a short, brittle sound.

MAC HOLLOWAY

And you think that whole sequence was manufactured? That we just decided on a zoning map and the ore magically appeared?

AVA VANCE

I think the story of the ore is only half the truth. Who benefited most when the ore became unprofitable, Mr. Holloway? Who held the legal claim to the land after the payout when the mine sputtered out?

Mac laughs again, louder this time, sounding forced.

MAC HOLLOWAY

You're grasping at straws, Prosecutor. You're looking for a narrative where there's just... survival.

AVA VANCE

Survival financed by a very specific, documented economic pillar. You can't just let the main supporting column vanish and pretend the roof was never there, Mac.

Mac grips the edge of the sticky tabletop. He looks genuinely cornered, his bluster momentarily deflating into wary defensiveness.

MAC HOLLOWAY
You're pushing too hard.

CUT TO:

INT. VANCE RESIDENCE - STUDY - DAY

Dust motes hang thick in the air, catching the slanting, watery light. Ava stands in the doorway, blocking the light from the hallway, forcing George Vance (50s) to remain in the dim, cluttered space.

George is standing near the fireplace, running a hand over a mantelpiece carving, his back mostly to Ava. He seems too fragile for the room.

AVA VANCE
(Quietly)
It was the ribbon.

George freezes mid-motion. His hand stills on the carved wood.

GEORGE VANCE
What ribbon?

AVA VANCE
The silk swatch. The one with the pale blue ribbon. I saw the photographs. I saw the grouping of people. It was at the Hawthorne gathering, wasn't it? The one after the rail line was finalized.

George does not turn around. His shoulders seem to drop an inch, a visible deflation of posture.

GEORGE VANCE
You shouldn't be looking at those.

AVA VANCE

(Taking a slow step into
the room)

The blue ribbon. It was always
yours, wasn't it? Your mother kept
it. She was sentimental about the
specific shade. The shade of the
day she decided she was never going
to let you argue the point with
her.

His breath hitches. He finally turns, his face a mask of
sudden, profound pain, not the detached lawyerly weariness
she expected.

GEORGE VANCE (CONT'D)

(Voice cracking)

You have no right to bring that
up.

AVA VANCE

(Barely above a whisper)

It wasn't about the law, was it,
Dad? You never argued about the
mineral rights. You always argued
about whose memory got to define
the place. About who got to
dictate the story.

He looks away, staring at the floorboards, avoiding her
gaze entirely. He runs his palm over the dust, as if
searching for something tangible to distract him.

GEORGE VANCE (CONT'D)

You were always better at the
performance, Ava. Always the
sharper point.

AVA VANCE

And you were always better at the
cover-up.

A long, charged silence settles, broken only by the
distant, rhythmic drip of a faulty outdoor faucet.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT STEPS - DUSK

The yellow tape remains a vivid slash against the muted grey of the concrete steps. Ava stands several yards away from the immediate chaos of the yellow tape, positioned where she can see the entire facade of the precinct--the formal, imposing entrance, the small, nervous cluster of officers near the main desk.

The setting sun is almost gone, casting long, deep shadows that stretch out from the parked cars, exaggerating the scale of the quiet town.

Ava slowly turns, her gaze not fixed on any single person, but sweeping across the entire structure--the building, the flags, the signs that proclaim law and order.

She pulls a small, leather-bound notebook from her bag. She doesn't open it to write. She just holds it, using it as a prop, a physical barrier between her and the raw, messy reality of the moment.

She closes her eyes briefly. She breathes in the damp, metallic smell of the rain mixed with old asphalt and stale coffee.

She opens her eyes. They are clear, stripped of the aggressive prosecutorial edge. There is a new, colder kind of focus there.

She looks down at the notebook, then back at the precinct, synthesizing the bolt head, the zoning discrepancy, the personal memory, and the official protocol breach.

Ava slowly, deliberately, snaps the notebook shut. The sound is final, definitive.

She pockets the book. She does not look at Ben Carter, who is still visible in the periphery, or at the cluster of deputies. She looks out toward the unseen edge of town, past the yellow tape, toward the unknown.

She stands perfectly still, absorbing the composition of the lie--a perfect blend of legal statute, economic necessity, and shared family history. She knows exactly how the pieces fit together, and that the pieces are held by people more invested in the structure than in the truth.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

FADE IN:

INT. THE GRIND - BOOTH SEATING - DAY

The rain continues its steady drizzle against the diner windows. AVA VANCE sits across from BEN CARTER. Ben picks at the condensation ring left by his glass of water.

AVA VANCE

The zoning dispute. The acreage surrounding the old railway spur. The initial deeds referenced a primary commodity, didn't they? Something specific that made the land valuable enough to warrant early jurisdictional maneuvering.

Ben doesn't look up. He traces the pattern on the laminated tabletop with a fingertip.

BEN CARTER

Deeds are about lines on paper, Ava. About who signed where. They rarely tell you what the ground actually held.

AVA VANCE

But the deeds exist. And they all reference the same initial valuation metric. A metric that seems suspiciously consistent with the early reports on the deeper, non-surface deposits.

Ben finally raises his head. His smile is gone, replaced by a careful neutrality.

BEN CARTER

You're building a narrative from receipts.

AVA VANCE

I'm connecting dots that someone paid a lot of money to keep separate. The Annex file--the pre-1990 records. They mention the original claim structure, don't they? Before the mine fully shifted focus.

Ben shifts in the vinyl seat, the sound loud in the quiet booth. He meets her gaze, a flicker of genuine discomfort crossing his face before he masks it.

BEN CARTER

And what does the pattern you're building require?

AVA VANCE

It requires knowing who benefited most when the primary, profitable claim shifted away from the surface extraction and into the subsurface. The land tenure that survived the boom.

Ben lets out a slow breath, a sound that is almost a sigh of recognition. He looks past Ava, toward the grey curb outside, as if seeing the disputed land.

BEN CARTER

The commodity changed. The law adapted. That's what happens when the money runs out, Prosecutor.

AVA VANCE

Or when the people holding the original claims decide the established law is suddenly inconvenient.

Ben finally looks back at her, his eyes holding a dangerous resignation. He leans in slightly.

BEN CARTER

The original claim holders weren't focused on the ore, Ava. They were focused on the access. Who controlled the passage over the best ground, regardless of what was dug out of it. They paid for the right to pass. And that right, decades ago, was bought from a man whose name doesn't appear on the primary tax rolls.

CUT TO:

INT. VANCE RESIDENCE - STUDY - DAY

The room is cluttered with books, the air smelling faintly of aged paper and beeswax. Ava stands near the desk, holding a small, tarnished silver-framed photograph. It depicts a gathering--a formal portrait of the Vance family from a decades past.

GEORGE VANCE stands by the fireplace, meticulously brushing dust from the mantelpiece. He avoids looking at her.

AVA VANCE
(Quietly)
This picture. The day after the
dedication plaque was mounted.

George's hand stills on the mantelpiece. His breathing seems to catch in his throat.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
Look at your mother. She's smiling,
but her eyes aren't on the
photographer. They're on something
happening just outside the frame.
On someone who wasn't supposed to
be there.

George finally turns, his face hardening, but the effort costs him.

GEORGE VANCE
It was a large group. Everyone was
there.

AVA VANCE
(Tilting the photo
slightly)
She's looking at the car. The
sedan that parked just down the
block. The one with the deep green
trim. The one that belonged to the
Hawthorne man.

George flinches visibly, as if struck. He turns fully away from the fireplace, his back to her.

GEORGE VANCE
You cannot build a life on what
people saw in passing, Ava. People
pass. Things are forgotten.

AVA VANCE
But you didn't forget. You walled
it off. You made sure the records
never mentioned the money that
followed the Hawthorne man's
investment, only the land it was
supposed to improve.

A long beat of silence stretches, punctuated only by the
muffled sound of the rain outside.

GEORGE VANCE
(Voice strained, low)
The appearance of continuity, Ava.
That is what we built this town on.
Not the raw facts of transactions.
The illusion of a stable history.

AVA VANCE
And the cost of that illusion?

George slowly lifts his gaze to her. His defensive mask
finally cracks, revealing a profound, weary pain.

GEORGE VANCE
The cost was always the truth. We
paid it with silence. And we paid
it with our reputation.

CUT TO:

INT. DR. REED'S OFFICE - DAY

The room is too bright, too sterile, smelling sharply of
antiseptic and clean linen. AVA VANCE sits opposite DR.
REED (50s), who sits behind a large, solid oak desk. He does
not look at her, instead studying a file folder containing
her initial intake notes.

DR. REED
You processed the incident quite
well, professionally speaking. Your
command of procedure was
remarkable. You kept the questions
focused on the measurable, the
procedural.

Ava maintains a neutral posture, hands resting flat on her
knees.

AVA VANCE
My job is to establish the
measurable.

Dr. Reed finally raises his eyes, fixing them on her. They are empathetic, but clinically detached.

DR. REED
But you did not allow yourself to process the human element. You kept returning to the 'transfer point,' the 'smudge,' the 'bolt head.' All physical anchors. You are building your entire case on misplaced objects.

AVA VANCE
The objects are evidence.

DR. REED
Evidence of what? Of a pattern? Ava, you are an exceptional prosecutor, but you are treating Blue Hollow like a deposition transcript. Everything must be sourced, cross-referenced, admissible.

He leans back, steepling his fingers.

DR. REED (CONT'D)
But what if the failure isn't in the evidence? What if the failure is in the assumption that the lie can be contained by a piece of paper? You keep looking for the single point of entry, the single piece of misconduct that explains the rest.

Ava remains motionless, absorbing the critique.

AVA VANCE
And what do you suggest I look for instead?

Dr. Reed offers a small, sad shake of his head.

DR. REED

The compromises. The necessary human compromises. The things people agree to forget for the sake of keeping the lights on. That's where the evidence becomes... subjective. And far more dangerous to prosecute.

CUT TO:

INT. COUNTY RECORDS ANNEX - WINDOW VIEW - DAY

Ava stands near a vast window overlooking the main intersection. The town looks wet, muted, and deceptively calm under the overcast sky. She has a single, heavily redacted document from the Annex in her hand.

She slowly lowers her gaze from the document to the wet asphalt visible through the glass.

She recalls the fine grit from the precinct lot--the dust that settled around the car.

She reaches into her jacket pocket, pulling out a small, opaque plastic evidence bag containing a single, almost invisible pile of particulate matter. It is the residue from the patrol car's smudge.

She stands in the light filtering through the dirty glass. She brings the bag of dust close to the windowpane, aligning it visually with the wet street below.

Ava stares at the combination: the abstract pattern from the deeds, the emotional weight from her father, the psychological roadblock from Dr. Reed, and the physical residue in her hand.

She lets the dust settle near the window ledge, allowing it to mix slightly with the fine, reddish-brown grit that has naturally washed in from the curb outside.

The two materials--the minute, transferred dust, and the native soil--are now visibly mingled on the windowsill. It is a perfect, undeniable match of composition.

Ava doesn't gasp. She doesn't write a note. She simply looks at the amalgamation of the dust and the earth, a silent, devastating confirmation that the lie wasn't just legal--it was geological.

She finally understands the physical depth of the cover-up.

INT. THE GRIND - BOOTH SEATING - DAY

The rain continues its steady, monotonous beat against the diner windows, blurring the neon glow of the 'OPEN' sign across the street. Ava sits opposite BEN CARTER. The coffee cups on the table have grown cold.

AVA VANCE

You know, the pattern of these zoning carve-outs isn't about acreage. It's about infrastructure. The town always needs something running through it--water lines, rail access, the main electrical conduit.

Ben picks at a loose thread on the vinyl cushion, his earlier nonchalance replaced by a taut alertness.

BEN CARTER

And you think we can just trace a line through enough of those to find where the money was diverted?

AVA VANCE

I think we can trace who signed off on the inspection that determined the conduit path. Because the original inspection logs for the Blue Hollow Water Main Upgrade, twenty years ago, are suspiciously clean.

Ben stops picking at the thread. He lets his gaze drift around the diner, as if looking for an escape route.

BEN CARTER

The city did that. It was a federal grant. Lots of people signed off on it.

AVA VANCE

Not enough people. There are twelve signatures required for those initial certifications, Mr. Carter. My research flagged discrepancies in the timing of the second and fourth signatures. They appear to have been expedited by one full business day, which is statistically impossible given the documented workload of the County Clerk at that time.

Ben finally meets her eyes. There is a flicker of genuine alarm, quickly masked by a weary cynicism.

BEN CARTER

You're getting esoteric, Ava. You're trying to build a conspiracy out of paperwork timing.

AVA VANCE

Conspiracies are always about timing, Ben. They are about the moment the necessary permission is acquired before the public even knows the resource exists. Who was the clerk at the time? The one who oversaw the signing of those twelve authorizations?

Ben shifts in the booth, suddenly appearing too large for the vinyl seat. He glances toward the diner entrance, as if expecting a uniformed presence.

BEN CARTER

You're wasting your time.

AVA VANCE

Am I? Because I'm looking for the name. The name that allowed the passage to be declared 'unencumbered' in the records, despite the fact that the land directly underneath the proposed conduit path was already legally encumbered by a previous, private claim. A claim that was conveniently ignored.

Ben exhales slowly, a sound like air leaking from a tire. He looks down at the table, tracing a pattern in the

condensation ring left by her cup.

BEN CARTER (CONT'D)

The clerk... that was Elias Thorne. He ran the certification department for the county that year.

Ava leans forward just an inch, a barely perceptible tightening of her posture.

AVA VANCE

Thorne. And what was his relationship to the primary beneficiaries of that conduit access?

Ben doesn't answer immediately. He just stares at the pattern he created on the table, the truth finally seeming to press the air out of the small booth.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT - ADMINISTRATIVE WING - LATE AFTERNOON

The precinct is quiet, the day's bustle having evaporated into the steady drizzle outside. Yellow caution tape, the remains of the day's drama, is neatly coiled and stored in a corner, ignored.

Ava walks slowly down the corridor, her footsteps echoing too loudly on the polished linoleum. She passes empty desks, the coats of deputies hanging undisturbed on hooks like forgotten uniforms.

She stops at the records archive adjacent to the main front office--a small, seldom-used room smelling of mildewed cardboard. She pulls a heavy, ring-bound binder labeled 'WATER UTILITY ACCESS PROTOCOLS - 1998' from a shelf.

She opens it. The pages are filled with standard departmental checklists, the kind of tedious, dry material that usually bores prosecutors into immediate sleep.

Ava flips past the initial, clean forms until she reaches the section designated 'Authorization Sign-Offs.' She finds the entry for the Water Main Upgrade.

She scans the signatures, looking for the twelve required approvals. They are all present, neat, and official.

But her focus drops to the final section of the procedural manual attached to the binder--a subsection titled 'Deviation and Contingency Protocols.'

She flips through the pages, reading through the technical jargon aloud, softly at first, then gaining a steady rhythm.

AVA VANCE

(Reading)

'In the event that primary site clearance is delayed... the Departmental Overriding Authority (DOA) shall be invoked...'

She reads the definition of DOA. It is a clause that grants temporary, localized authority to bypass standard procedure when municipal necessity dictates immediate action, overriding existing property claims pending a formal review--a review that can take years.

She rereads the authorizing signatures for the DOA invocation. They are all current, valid, and signed by the departmental head on file.

But Ava's gaze falls on the fine print at the bottom of the protocol page--a small, handwritten notation, almost pencil-light, tucked beneath the printed text.

It reads: 'DOA usage requires a Level Three Affidavit of Shared Community Interest, signed by a local magistrate currently in good standing, notarized within 72 hours of invocation.'

Ava's breath hitches. The protocol she was expecting--the bureaucratic failure--was never about the signature itself. It was about the failure to document the required secondary affidavit.

She closes the binder, the sound echoing like a gunshot in the quiet room.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. VANCE RESIDENCE - FORMAL LIVING ROOM - DAY

The room is opulent, heavy with dark wood furniture and the weight of old money. Sunlight, struggling through the heavy drapes, illuminates the dust motes dancing in the air between Ava and her father.

George Vance sits in an armchair, looking older than his years, trapped amidst the rich, suffocating textiles of the

house. He keeps his hands clasped tightly in his lap.

AVA VANCE
(Without preamble)
The DOA protocol. It wasn't the
lack of the primary signatures that
was the problem. It was the
mandatory, Level Three Affidavit
of Shared Community Interest.

George doesn't react visibly, merely tightening his grip on his hands.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
The procedure requires a
magistrate, someone active, someone
trustworthy, to notarize that the
community agreed to the temporary
override. And there is no record of
that affidavit for the conduit
access.

George finally lifts his eyes, a flicker of true panic
crossing his face before he clamps down on it.

GEORGE VANCE
You have been digging through the
weeds, Ava. You've found a few
obscure regulations. They don't
prove anything.

AVA VANCE
They prove that every single
procedural step taken to build the
infrastructure--the initial
assessment, the zoning carve-out,
the conduit approval--was
predicated on a procedural
omission. A deliberate, systemic
blank spot in the record that
required an active, local
accomplice to ignore.

She walks to the side table, placing the binder on top of
the ornate mahogany surface.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
You never argued about the mineral
rights, Dad. You argued about the
protocol. Because the protocol is
where the law lives, and the law,
for you, has always been the most
valuable commodity to protect.

George stares at the binder, then at his hands, as if they have betrayed him. He opens his mouth, a denial forming, but it sounds thin, reedy.

GEORGE VANCE

It was necessary. For the town.

AVA VANCE

(Voice rising, but
controlled)

No. It was convenient. It was the most elegant way to keep the money flowing without drawing the attention of anyone who actually knew how to audit a multi-jurisdictional utility grant. Your entire professional life, the reputation you've spent forty years curating--it's not built on law, Dad. It's built on the continuous, masterful management of what you all agreed to forget.

George looks up at her, and the facade finally shatters. His face crumples, not in anger, but in a desolate exhaustion that seems to age him instantly. He sinks back into the chair, defeated by the comprehensive structure of the truth.

GEORGE VANCE

(Whispering)

It was always going to be this way,
Ava.

CUT TO:

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT PARKING LOT - DAY

Rain drips from the yellow caution tape, pinging against the wet asphalt. Ava stands directly in front of the tape, not kneeling, but standing tall and authoritative. She does not look at the patch of ash where Elara Vance was found.

Instead, she points, not with her finger, but with an open hand, toward a routine, bolted-down departmental signpost listing the standard emergency equipment inventory. The sign is slightly askew.

AVA VANCE

(Calmly)

This post. Inventory tag 44-B. It lists three items of emergency signaling equipment. All three are present, accounted for, and appear to have been utilized.

Jenkins watches her, his posture rigid, like a poorly maintained statue.

JENKINS

It's a checklist, Ms. Vance. We check the box.

AVA VANCE

(Tilting her head slightly)

But the protocol for utilization requires more than just the item to be physically present. It requires documented sign-out, an immediate departmental record of transfer, and a corresponding sign-in upon restocking. Where is the log for the three flares, Deputy?

Jenkins shifts his weight, his authority suddenly looking flimsy against the relentless drizzle.

JENKINS

We were dealing with a scene, Ms. Vance. We were clearing it. The documentation came later.

AVA VANCE
(A slight, dismissive
lift of her chin)
'Later' is a subjective state,
Deputy. Bureaucracy, however, is
remarkably literal. Show me the
logbook for the flare guns.

Jenkins hesitates. He glances at the other officers, seeking consensus. They look anywhere but at Ava.

JENKINS
That book... it's in the main
office, under lock and key.

AVA VANCE
(Stepping slightly closer to the
post, her shadow falling over the
equipment) Then I suggest you open
it. Because if the documentation
of the process is flawed, the
underlying narrative of the event
becomes equally questionable.

She lets the silence build, the only sound the steady dripping water, forcing them to defend the meticulous, mundane reality of their paperwork rather than the body itself.

INT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT HALLWAY - DAY

The hallway is narrow, lined with water-stained wood paneling that seems to breathe dampness. Ava has maneuvered Jenkins into a space between the filing cabinets and the main administrative office door.

Ava holds a small, clear evidence bag. Inside, visible to both of them, is a fine, greyish-white ash, perfectly distinct from the native soil.

AVA VANCE
(Voice dropping to a
conversational level)
This ash. It was found embedded in
the tread of the rear tires,
Deputy. Not on the body, not on the
ground. Right here.

Jenkins avoids looking at the bag. He focuses instead on a faded, official-looking logbook tucked under the counter edge, barely visible.

JENKINS
It's residue. Tire dust. It sticks.

AVA VANCE
(Tapping the evidence
bag lightly)
But this isn't uniform street grit.
This composition, the mineral
signature... it matches the
chemical residue we found on the
latch of the restricted records
annex drawer.

Jenkins flinches almost imperceptibly. He finally glances down at the logbook, his professional facade straining over the fragile surface.

JENKINS
You're connecting disparate pieces,
Ms. Vance. You're building a
correlation where there's no direct
causal link.

AVA VANCE
(Meeting his gaze,
unwavering)
But the timing is the link, isn't
it? The timeline shows the annex
drawer was accessed after the
incident was processed, yet the
ash was deposited during the
initial perimeter sweep. Someone
was moving through here, Jenkins.
Someone who knew precisely what
they were leaving behind.

She lets the bag drop slightly, making the ash catch the overhead fluorescent light.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
The paperwork doesn't account for
this. The process was incomplete.

INT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT STEPS - DAY

Mac Holloway steps out from the main entrance, moving with an air of conspicuous casualness that is entirely out of place in the tension-filled hallway. He overhears the exchange between Ava and Jenkins.

He stops, placing his hands behind his back, adopting the

posture of a man surveying a minor inconvenience.

MAC HOLLOWAY
(Loudly, projecting)
What's the issue here? We're having
a professional discussion,
gentlemen. Nothing to see here.

Ava turns fully toward him, keeping the evidence bag
visible in her other hand.

AVA VANCE
We were discussing procedural
adherence, Mr. Holloway.
Specifically, the documented path
of evidence recovery, which
appears to have been compromised.

Mac chuckles, a sound like dry gravel shifting.

MAC HOLLOWAY
Compromised. Always 'compromised'
with you people from the city. You
walk in here with your federal
standards, your checklists, and
you act like we're running some
kind of... science experiment.

JENKINS
(Muttering)
Mac.

MAC HOLLOWAY
(Ignoring Jenkins,
addressing Ava)
This town runs on precedent, Ms.
Vance. Not on ideal procedure
outlined in a binder someone found
in a dusty drawer. You bring your
theory of failure, and you
undermine the stability of the
entire department.

AVA VANCE
(Voice razor-sharp)
I bring the requirement that when a
life ends under the care of this
department, the record of that care
must be unimpeachable. Is that a
procedural issue, Mac? Or is it
something you'd prefer we keep out
of the ledger entirely?

Mac takes a step closer, his voice dropping in volume but gaining sheer force of conviction.

MAC HOLLOWAY
You're overreaching your mandate.
This is Blue Hollow. We handle our
own messes.

INT. THE GRIND - BOOTH SEATING - DAY

The rain continues its steady, monotonous beat against the diner windows, blurring the neon glow of the 'OPEN' sign across the street. Ava sits opposite Ben Carter. The coffee cups on the table have grown cold.

Ben observes the rising tension between Ava and the officers, watching her expertly manage the procedural trap. He looks less like a participant and more like a fascinated anthropologist observing a rare ritual.

Suddenly, a waitress, whose name Ava does not know, passes by the booth. She pauses near Ben's elbow, ostensibly to wipe a drip from the table edge.

As she straightens up, she accidentally bumps the edge of the sugar caddy, sending a small, folded, cream-colored receipt fluttering down.

It lands directly at the edge of the tabletop, inches from Ava's hand.

Ben's eyes track the falling paper. He doesn't reach for it, but his gaze locks onto it, a slight, almost invisible change in his expression passing over his face--a momentary flicker of recognition, perhaps regret.

Ava follows the trajectory of the paper with her eyes. It is a dated receipt, printed on a thermal machine, and the merchant name on it is not a local business.

Ben watches her focus on the innocuous piece of paper, the small disruption in the otherwise escalating conflict, finally breaking his steady, challenging composure.

INT. COUNTY RECORDS ANNEX - RESTRICTED SECTION ENTRANCE - DAY

The dust motes dance in the single shaft of weak afternoon light cutting through the narrow corridor of the Annex. Ava moves with an economy of motion, bypassing the main counter where Jenkins hovers like a nervous sentry.

She approaches the frosted glass door marked: RESTRICTED MATTERS.

The official ledger of access logs sits on a small, dusty side table nearby. Ava ignores the faded index of property deeds. Her eyes are fixed solely on the entry book.

She picks up a feather duster, pretending to clean the top of the logbook.

AVA VANCE
(Quietly, to herself)
The access log. Not the deeds. The presence.

Jenkins watches her every move, his jaw tight.

JENKINS
Ms. Vance, we covered this. The log tracks the retrieval of files, not the casual walk-through of personnel.

AVA VANCE
(Without looking at him)
Procedural adherence, Jenkins. The protocol exists to track every person who touches the secret records. I'm looking for a signature.

She opens the book to the entries corresponding to the week before Elara's death. She runs a manicured finger down the page, counting entries.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
There are nineteen entries for the week leading up to the incident. Nineteen people who legitimately needed to consult materials in this restricted zone.

She stops at a specific date, marked by a different style of ink than the surrounding entries.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)
But on the third and fifth days, the log indicates three distinct entry stamps. Three separate signatures claiming access, yet only one entry stamp was physically applied to the logbook itself.

Jenkins stares at the page, his composure finally beginning to fray at the edges.

JENKINS

That's impossible. The stamps are sequential.

AVA VANCE

The physical record contradicts the documented presence. Someone entered the restricted area twice without the system registering the second entry. A ghost signature.

She taps the logbook sharply.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)

Who was in the records annex, Jenkins, on the day of the thirteenth? Because the log says someone was there, but it can't account for who.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. VANCE RESIDENCE - FRONT PORCH - DAY

The drizzle has thickened, turning the porch wood slick and dark. George Vance stands near the edge, looking out over the neat, manicured expanse of the town square that stretches out toward the distant, indifferent hills. He seems smaller than he did in the study.

Ava approaches him slowly, leaving the formal weight of the house behind. She does not look at the house, or the town crest on the nearest building.

She speaks softly, referencing a memory that has nothing to do with law or property lines.

AVA VANCE

The talk at the old Hawthorne gathering. The one where Uncle Silas was showing off that ridiculous pocket watch.

George stiffens, his shoulders tensing against the damp chill of the porch air.

GEORGE VANCE

I don't know what you mean.

AVA VANCE
(A gentle push)
You mentioned the story. The way
the first settlers were told the
town was founded not on resource
extraction, but on a pact with
something else. A river spirit, or
maybe a benevolent curse.

George looks out at the square, his gaze distant, fixed on
something beyond the visible architecture.

GEORGE VANCE
It was a story. A nice thing to
tell the children.

AVA VANCE
(A slight pause)
But you described the pact as
requiring 'unwavering community
belief.' Not legal consensus. Not
deeds. But belief.

He finally turns his head slightly toward her, his
expression a complex mixture of guilt and profound
weariness.

GEORGE VANCE
Belief is yours to keep, Ava. I
dealt in what was tangible. What
held value in court.

AVA VANCE
And what happens to the tangible
when the foundation of the belief
system crumbles? When the story--
the one that keeps everyone
pretending they know what they're
doing--falls apart?

He looks away again, refusing to meet her eyes, his silence
now heavier than any legal argument.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT - MAIN DESK AREA - DAY

The three main figures--Jenkins, Mac, and a few deputies--
are clustered near the main desk, their posture defensive,
rigid. The air is thick with the smell of wet wool and
desperation.

Ava stands in the center of the small group, projecting the evidence gathered from the previous locations: the restricted annex log, the ash residue, the DOA protocol manual. She holds the binder like a weapon.

AVA VANCE

(Calmly, addressing the group)

The evidence isn't pointing to a simple accident or a simple cover-up of a single illicit transfer. It points to a continuous, procedural omission.

She taps the DOA protocol section.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)

This entire edifice--the conduits, the zoning, the supposed stability of the mineral claims--was built upon a protocol that requires external validation: the Affidavit of Shared Community Interest. A document that, by all records, was never secured.

Mac Holloway finally drops his casual facade. His face drains of color, the bluster draining out instantly.

MAC HOLLOWAY

(Low, panicked)

You can't prove that. It's circumstantial.

AVA VANCE

It's circumstantial, Mr. Holloway. But it's also consistent. It shows that the legal framework was never truly sound. It was only sound because the necessary paper trail--the paper trail that proves the *agreement*--was simply never generated.

Jenkins shifts his weight, his eyes darting between Ava, the binder, and Mac. The control is visibly slipping from his shoulders.

JENKINS

You're reading too much into paperwork, Ms. Vance.

AVA VANCE
(Voice gaining a sudden,
cold clarity)
No, Jenkins. I'm reading the truth.
And when the law is built on a
foundational lie of documentation,
then the law itself becomes a lie.
That, gentlemen, is the crime.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT - MAIN DESK AREA - DAY

The silence that follows Ava's final statement is absolute. The drizzle outside seems to fade entirely, leaving an unnatural quiet in the precinct. The deputies look to Jenkins, waiting for him to regain command, to issue a dismissal, a reprimand, a redirection.

Jenkins remains frozen. His hands, which had been gripping the edge of the main counter, suddenly relax. The tension that has held his body rigid for the last hour seems to drain out of him in one audible, ragged exhale.

He doesn't look at Ava. He looks at the space just over her shoulder, at the empty air where the past seems to press in.

His polished facade shatters. His voice, usually authoritative, cracks under the weight of the exposed rot.

JENKINS
(Barely audible, a
broken plea)
The children... they just wanted us
to keep the lights on.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT FOUR

ACT FIVE

FADE IN:

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT PARKING LOT - DAY

The yellow caution tape still flaps in the slight breeze. The yellow police tape is a gaudy, pathetic contrast to the surrounding decay.

JENKINS
(Voice tight, strained)
Alright. Everyone back. Perimeter
secure. Nobody touches anything
until Forensics clears the area.

Jenkins moves like a man running on fumes. He is shouting orders, but they lack conviction, rattling off procedures meant to restore order rather than enforce it.

AVA VANCE
(Calmly)
The report noted the bolt head was
found by a civilian source.

Jenkins stops mid-sentence. He turns, his eyes flicking toward Ava, then to the bolt head resting on the asphalt near the yellow tape.

JENKINS
(Sharply)
That piece of hardware is
evidence. You touch it again, Ms.
Vance, and you'll be dealing with a
direct violation of my department's
chain of custody.

AVA VANCE
It's been resting here since the
initial sweep. It's part of the
scene, like the overdose residue.

Mac Holloway steps up beside Jenkins, planting his hands on his hips. He looks agitated, caught between procedure and panic.

MAC HOLLOWAY
This isn't a deposition, Ms. Vance.
This is a death investigation. We
follow the procedure.

AVA VANCE

And the procedure, Mac, is meant to document the facts. It doesn't account for what happens when the facts contradict the accepted narrative.

Jenkins clenches his jaw, looking cornered. He snaps his fingers at two deputies, who react instantly, looking nervous and overcompensating.

JENKINS

(Barking orders)

Sweep the immediate area again. Focus on the drainage grates. Check for anything loose. No one leaves this quadrant.

Ava watches the deputies scramble, their efficiency marred by visible anxiety. They are performing the motions of procedure, not the certainty of it.

AVA VANCE

The documentation of the process is what you are protecting, isn't it? Not the person who died.

Jenkins spins around, his authority brittle.

JENKINS

You have no jurisdiction here. This is a local matter.

AVA VANCE

(Meeting his stare)

It's a procedural vacuum. And a vacuum, sir, always sucks something out.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW PRECINCT SIDEWALK - DAY

Ava walks away from the yellow tape. The deputies, Jenkins, and Mac remain clustered, arguing in low, intense tones near the car, their desperation building a visible heat.

She walks past them, her pace measured, deliberate. She does not look at the vehicle, the tape, or the men who guard it.

She reaches the edge of the sidewalk, the clean, cracked

concrete meeting the dirt verge.

Ava stops. She looks down at the convergence point--the clean, manufactured line between the town's controlled world and the messy reality beyond the pavement.

She finally understands.

The system wasn't broken by one lie about the conduit or the zoning. The system wasn't even broken by the overdose.

It was built on the mutually agreed-upon inability to see the connection between the administrative failure and the human stain.

She lifts her hand, not to touch the dirt, but to hover just over the seam of the pavement, as if feeling the invisible thread holding the lie together.

This wasn't a prosecutorial victory. A prosecutor brings the full weight of federal statute.

This town required something far dirtier. Something localized.

Ava slowly lowers her hand. She turns her body slightly, finally taking a step away from the yellow tape, away from the visible structure of law enforcement, towards the unknown edges of town.

CUT TO:

INT. THE GRIND - BOOTH SEATING - DAY

Ava walks directly to Ben Carter's booth. He sits perfectly still, a picture of languid patience, observing the fallout from the precinct.

He does not acknowledge her approach until she is right beside the table.

She pauses, her gaze not meeting his, but settling instead on the tabletop surface between them.

She reaches into her jacket pocket and places a single, thick, slightly yellowed deed upon the scarred wood. It is the deed she'd been researching, the one tying the Miller parcel back to the disputed mineral rights.

It is a physical offering, a test.

The silence is absolute, broken only by the low hum of the

refrigerator unit in the diner kitchen.

Ben's eyes track the deed, then lift slowly to meet Ava's. His usual challenging amusement has evaporated, replaced by a deep, assessing stillness.

He picks up the deed, his long fingers brushing the corner of the brittle paper. He doesn't examine the text; he examines the weight of her offering.

BEN CARTER
(Quietly, testing the
paper)
You always liked the physical
evidence. The things you can pin
to a man.

AVA VANCE
(Voice barely above a
whisper)
The things you can't pin to a
statute, Ben.

He looks up at her then, a minute shift in his expression. The façade cracks, revealing a guarded weariness that is far more revealing than any outburst.

BEN CARTER
You're asking for something messy,
Ava. Something that might
require... complicity.

CUT TO:

INT. THE GRIND - COUNTER SEAT - DAY

Ava moves around the table, finally approaching the counter where an elderly man, GARY (70s), the groundskeeper, is wiping down the stainless steel surface. He has been watching the entire exchange between Ava and Ben from a corner booth near the window, positioned perfectly to observe the drama.

She stops directly opposite him, leaning in conspiratorially across the counter's narrow breadth. She does not speak of law or corruption.

AVA VANCE
The blue hydrangeas by the town
hall fountain. The ones that refuse
to bloom unless you treat the soil
with a specific, acidic mulch.

Gary stops wiping the counter. He doesn't flinch at the sudden attention. He keeps his gaze fixed on the steel.

AVA VANCE (CONT'D)

They need something local.
Something that only someone who has
been tending the same patch of dirt
for forty years would know how to
source.

Gary raises his eyes slowly. They are flat, pragmatic, and deeply observant. He sees the transaction forming between them, not the words.

He knows she isn't asking him for mulch. She's asking him to be an unseen intermediary.

A long beat. He wipes his hands slowly on a rag, then stops. He looks past Ava, toward the street, as if assessing the risk.

Gary finally meets her eyes. He gives the smallest, almost imperceptible nod--a gesture that carries the weight of accepting a permanent, dangerous secret.

The pact is sealed.

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW STREET CORNER - DAY

Ava walks away from the yellow tape. The flashing lights of the police cars seem to dissolve into the humid, grey air.

Ben walks beside her, a careful distance maintained between them. Gary walks on the other side, melting into the backdrop of the diner's overhang.

They pass the corner, where the street sign reads BLUE HOLLOW.

Ava does not look at the precinct. Her gaze is fixed slightly past the junction, toward the overgrown fields beyond the town center.

She stops at the corner, letting the residual hum of the police activity fade into the general soundscape of the town.

She slowly turns her head, not to the authorities, but directly toward the camera, the audience.

Her expression is completely altered. Gone is the sharp, prosecutorial aggression. In its place is a terrible, quiet

knowledge.

She doesn't smile. She simply acknowledges something--the complexity, the rot, the necessary grime--that she has just absorbed.

BEN CARTER
(Quietly, to Ava)
You look like you're getting used
to the damp.

AVA VANCE
(A slight breath escapes
her)
It's not the damp.

She continues walking, keeping the pace even, an immersion into the town's tempo.

GARY
(Without looking at her)
You learn the rhythm here. The
places where the sound gets
swallowed.

AVA VANCE
(A small nod to Gary)
I think I'm finally learning the
tempo.

She walks past a hanging planter, its blue flowers drooping heavily. She doesn't look at the flowers, but at the ground beneath them.

CUT TO:

INT. VANCE RESIDENCE - DRIVEWAY - DAY

The sedan carrying Ava pulls away from the heavy oak door. The engine sounds loud, intrusive in the quiet, damp atmosphere of the Vance property.

George Vance stands on the porch, leaning slightly on the railing. He watches the car move down the flagstone driveway.

He does not wave, nor does he move to intercept her.

Ava glances up briefly, catching his eye in the rearview mirror, the distance between them suddenly feeling vast and impermeable.

She sees him--not the powerful patriarch, but a man rendered small by the accumulating weight of decades of silence.

He watches the sedan slowly curve around the corner, the car receding into the shadows cast by the overgrown hedges.

GEORGE VANCE

(Muttering to himself)

The stain never leaves the stone,
does it.

He turns away from the driveway, staring instead at the meticulously kept lawn, his hand brushing against the cool, damp stone of the porch pillar.

He understands now. The facade wasn't just a performance for the outside world. It was a performance for himself, and it requires Ava's absence to maintain its flawless appearance.

He finally lowers his hand, the gesture one of profound, unexpected surrender.

CUT TO:

EXT. BLUE HOLLOW TOWN LIMITS SIGN - DAY

Ava drives slowly. The car moves away from the residential sprawl, passing the neat lawns and orderly streets.

The road begins to flatten, the architecture giving way to rougher, more neglected edges.

They approach the weathered, slightly tilted sign marking the boundary. It reads: WELCOME TO BLUE HOLLOW.

Ava brings the sedan to a near stop, inches from the sign. The engine idles, the noise a temporary shield against the surrounding quiet.

She cuts the engine.

The resulting silence is immediate and absolute, amplifying the sound of the dripping water from the eaves of the town's last structure.

Ava takes a deep, deliberate breath. It is a sound of consumption, of filling her lungs with the specific, heavy quality of this place--the damp earth, the industrial decay, the slow seep of history.

She closes her eyes for a beat, savoring the air. It smells of wet concrete and something metallic, like old pennies.

Ben watches her profile, his face unreadable, having seen this moment coming, perhaps guiding it.

Gary remains near the back of the car, a fixture of the background, watching the ritual unfold.

Ava opens her eyes. They are no longer the eyes of the prosecutor seeking a statute violation. They are the eyes of someone who has decided to stay.

She turns the wheel, not toward the road that leads out, but deliberately, committing the vehicle back into the town's embrace.

The car rolls forward, passing under the sign, leaving the illusion of departure behind her.

FADE OUT.

END OF ACT FIVE