

A Deeper Look at *Cold Record*

Charged with the murder of a young woman on an estate in rural northern California, defendant Andrew Rodarte is held to account by the jury. But seven years later he returns with a very unexpected claim, and it falls to the prosecutor who convicted him to investigate and reconcile it not only with the law itself, but the darker, thornier questions of truth and justice that lie beneath.

This is the story of *Cold Record*, a courtroom drama and mystery that looks at the justice system through a less-familiar lens. Authentic and descriptive, *Cold Record* realistically depicts both the investigation and trial of a brutal killing and the impact of the crime on all those it touches – the victim and her loved ones left behind, the truth-seekers who investigate and prosecute the case, and even the accused himself, caught up in events that spiraled out of control.

Cold Record is primarily told by John Patrick Howland, a thoughtful but unambitious deputy prosecutor in a remote northern California county. Howland is tasked with assisting senior prosecutor Sonya Brandstetter, who has returned to the limelight after a self-imposed exile, in the trial of Rodarte for the murder of 20-year-old Haylee Branch.

Haylee, unpretentious, mature and beautiful, had formed a surprising friendship with Jacinta Cantrell, the wealthy Frank Cantrell's bright but reckless daughter, who had been living virtually alone on the estate. Rodarte, attractive and aimless, was merely passing nearby, and their three paths converged.

The key events in the early investigation – and another, many years later – are described by lead detective Mark Wade, who battles his own ambivalence as he builds the case against Rodarte.

At trial, after the prosecution has presented a powerful case in chief, Rodarte takes the stand and makes a stunning admission. But just before the case is to be argued to the jury, circumstances cause Howland to take center stage, and after his strong but slightly equivocal closing statements, the verdict is a small mercy for Rodarte.

Contemplating the outcome, the victim's mother recounts both the personal agony of her loss and the hope she has gained through the justice-seeking process. Meanwhile, Howland – still faintly haunted by Haylee Branch, the trial and events that followed – methodically continues his career until seven years after the fact, when Rodarte returns with a shocking claim that, if true, profoundly alters the case.

Concluding that he has a duty to explore the claim on Rodarte's behalf, Howland launches an investigation that eventually bears startling fruit, yet does not fully answer the question of Rodarte's guilt or innocence – a mystery only resolved by a final confrontation and its surprising aftermath.

Author Eric Ferguson, a California prosecutor for 18 years, draws on his experience with trial and the post-conviction litigation of murder cases to construct a compelling legal mystery. Though told from the DA and police perspective, and for its first two-thirds a courtroom drama, *Cold Record* is ultimately something more – a complex, deeply realistic story that transcends the conventions of the legal genre, of victory and defeat, and even of guilt and innocence.