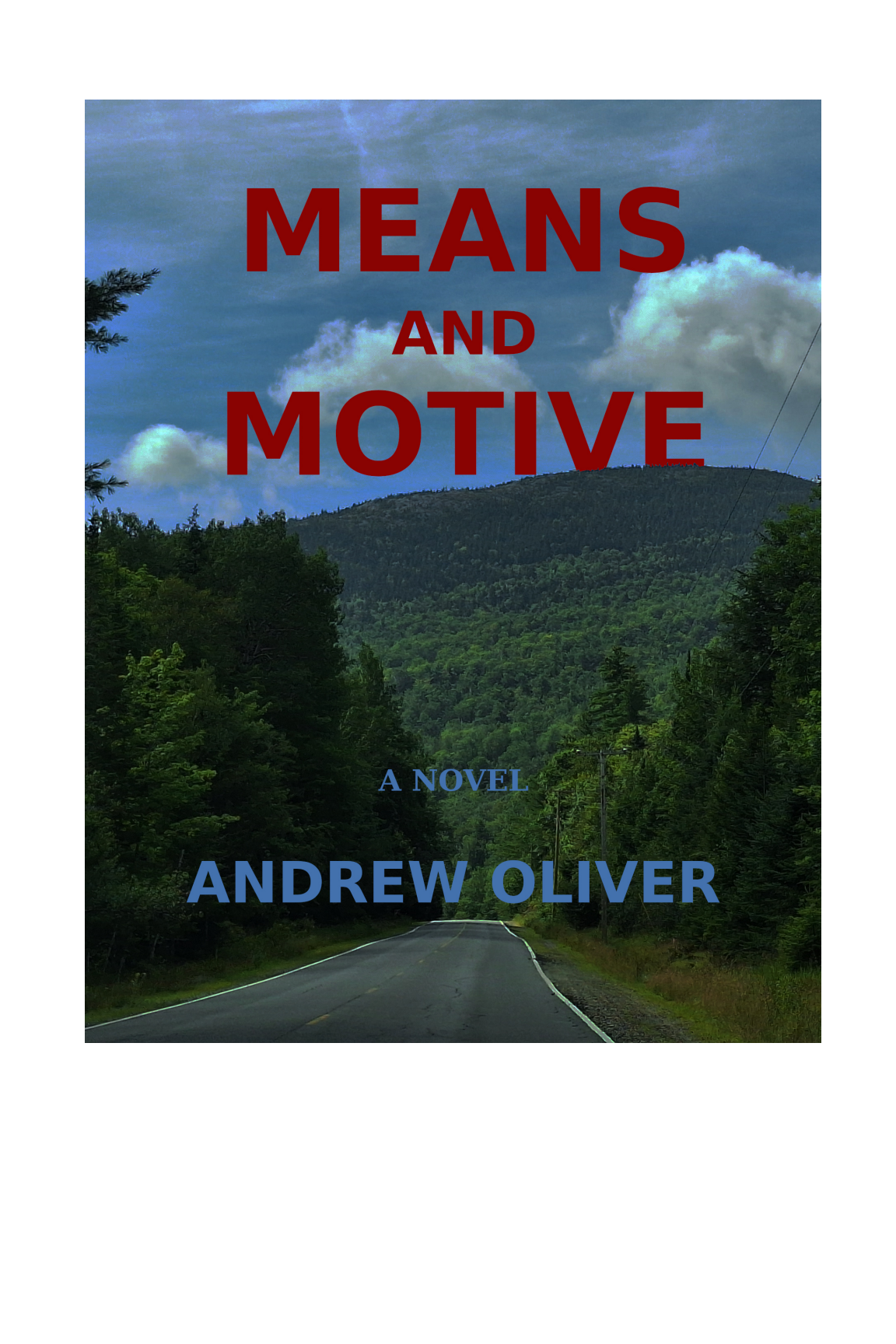


**MEANS
AND
MOTIVE**

A NOVEL

ANDREW OLIVER



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Chapter 1

Fast-falling snow was covering up the pool of blood beneath Ben's still-warm body. I had already checked his pulse, but there wasn't even a faint heartbeat. The three bullet holes in his chest were clearly not self-inflicted. I had just come up here to ask Ben more questions about Jenny Redington, so finding another body was quite a shock.

"Dispatch, this is Jack. I need an ambulance and another officer to the Cooper property on the Weld Road. I've got a 187 and I'm about to search the area," I radioed.

"Chief, please confirm, a 187?" Teresa's voice was tinged with disbelief. Her usual evening shift had reports of rowdy teenagers and the occasional domestic disturbance. A murder was as rare as a 70 degree day in winter around here.

"10-4. Do you have an officer nearby?"

"I'll get an officer and the EMTs out there soon, hold on."

With backup on the way, I knew I should check to see if anyone else was still around. Ben was lying in his front yard, just a few feet from the screen door to his small but once-tidy house. It had seen better days. After the events this fall Ben had clearly lost what little interest in house maintenance he

once had. The last of the long-fallen autumn leaves rotting in the gutters were disappearing under the heavy, wet flakes.

I had seen nobody parked on the Weld Road. But there was a trail to the Northwest that must go to the Old Pond Road, barely a quarter mile from here. If the shooter was still around, he was probably out there. I took one last look at Ben's corpse, and decided with backup on the way I'd have to leave the body if there was any chance of catching the guy who did this.

The path wasn't as snowy yet, narrow and covered with a high canopy of spruce branches. The department-issue boots, with a tread that looked absurd walking around the station, served their purpose here as I navigated the slick trail tangled with roots. I could see waning daylight, already murky and gray from the snowstorm, where the trail opened up ahead. I turned off my radio so it wouldn't give away my approach.

As I neared Old Pond Road, I heard the rumble of a vehicle idling. I hurried forward. When I was almost to the road, the engine noise suddenly increased in volume and pitch. Exiting the trees, I spotted taillights across the road to the left, receding quickly toward the Weld Road. The lights were high and wide, probably a pickup. They vanished into the curtain of white as the snow fell unabated. There was no way I could catch it on foot, but I ran across the gravel road to where it had been parked.

The driver had been in a hurry, the wheels had spun out when leaving, making a mess of the tracks. All tires had spun out, so it was a four-wheel-drive truck, which unfortunately included nearly half of the vehicles in town. I pulled out my flexible ruler and laid it near the best of the tracks. I snapped some pictures with my phone in hopes we could match it to a vehicle later, but it was a long shot.

While the sun hadn't been visible all day, even the little light making its way through the thick clouds and snow was fading fast. I turned on my tiny-but-powerful LED flashlight and briefly scoured the area near where the truck had been parked. I couldn't see anything left behind. I took a few more pictures, but between the fading light and the snow, I doubted they'd hold any clues. I turned back towards the Cooper house down the narrow path.

I didn't know who was going to arrive first at Ben's body. There were two gung-ho rookies who were full of energy that might have taken the call. This would be the first homicide for either of them. I didn't want to find out what would happen if adrenaline overwhelmed their training, so I pushed on faster. With darkness falling and the thick spruce branches covering the trail, however, it was extremely treacherous. The roots threatened to trip me with every step. I remembered my radio was still off. I reached toward my belt and turned the knob. I caught the tail end of a conversation.

“Jimmy, the ambulance is already on its way from Farmington. ETA 10 minutes. Jimmy, is Jack back yet?”

Dammit. Jimmy was not only one of the rookies, but my nephew. If he messed up a homicide, it could blow up for both of us, possibly ending his young career.

“Jimmy, this is Jack. Are you on scene?” I radioed.

No response. I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. I’d already lost a suspect. And now a rookie was alone with a dead body.

I rushed down the path towards the Cooper house, the way now lit only by my flashlight. In the darkness I couldn’t even tell I was close until I saw the lights of Jimmy’s cruiser illuminating the yard. Jimmy was kneeling next to the body and doing something.

“Jimmy, get back from the victim. What are you doing?”

“Uncle Jack! I already checked his pulse but I couldn’t find any. But I found this.”

He held up a small metal oval. It had a purple glass center, but any beauty it may have possessed was obscured by the blood smeared over it. Then I realized Jimmy was barehanded. In his excitement he must have forgotten to glove up after checking the victim’s pulse.

“Christ, Jimmy, this is a murder scene. Put that in here.”

I fished out an evidence baggie from my jacket and had him slide the oval into the baggie. Holding it up in the cruiser’s headlight, I could see fingerprints in the congealing blood — Jimmy’s fingerprints.

Jimmy was crestfallen, realizing the severity of his error. “Sorry Jack, I noticed it when I was checking his pulse. I totally forgot about my gloves. Do you...” he started to say before he was interrupted.

My radio blared to life, “Jack, the ambulance is almost there. Is Jimmy with you?”

“Yes, we’re securing the scene. Tell the coroner to get ready.”

“10-4”

Once the ambulance got here there would be lots of eyes on the scene. I put the baggie back in my jacket.

“Jimmy, let’s document the scene. Let’s cover the area where the body is and where he was in the moments before. And don’t touch anything else!”

“What about the metal piece?”

This was just what I had feared. If word got out that Jimmy mishandled evidence, his career might be over. I also knew

that becoming an officer had been his dream since being a kid. He just finished the basic law enforcement program a few months ago.

“Forget you ever saw it. We need to collect other evidence and be ready for the ambulance to take away Ben’s body.”

Jimmy hesitated briefly, then his training kicked in. Soon he was putting up police tape around the body, tying it to nearby trees. He blocked off the area between the body and the door to the house. The door was ajar, it seemed likely the victim had just emerged from the house before or during the altercation.

With Jimmy safely documenting the scene, I had a moment to call in the pickup truck I saw leaving the scene.

“Teresa, this is Jack. Can you put out an APB on a vehicle on the Weld Road leaving Old Pond Road? It’s a four-wheel drive pickup.”

“That’s all you’ve got? Did you get a color or partial plate?”

“No, that’s all I could see. They took off before I could get close and it’s hard to see more than 30 feet out here right now.”

“Is the driver a suspect?”

“Not yet. Right now they’re just a person of interest.”

“10-4, I’ll send it out right now. Not sure if anyone’s in the area though.”

“Thanks, I know it’s a long shot.”

I went back to helping Jimmy scour the scene. I photographed the body and the rest of the area. The victim had 3 visible gunshot wounds to the chest. The medical examiner could tell us more, but they were in Augusta so it would be a few days before we heard anything from them, even for a homicide.

Looking closer to the house, there was some blood in the snow between the body and the steps. I walked back to my car and got the DNA kits out of the trunk. The snow was still coming down heavily. If I wanted to get samples I’d better do it before they were covered up.

“Jack, the ambulance is here!”

I turned around and saw the ambulance coming up the driveway from the Weld Road. They had the lights going but no siren. It stopped abruptly, close to my cruiser. The passenger door opened first and a female paramedic jumped out whom I didn’t recognize. She hurried over to the body while the driver got out more slowly. He approached me with a weary demeanor. I recognized my old friend Drew.

“What have you got for me today, Jack?”

“It looks like Ben Cooper really pissed someone off this time. Multiple gunshots.”

“He sure had a way with people, didn’t he?”

Drew walked over to where the other paramedic was already examining the body. She was checking for pulse and any other sign of life, but quickly came to the same conclusion Jimmy and I had.

“He’s DOA, sir,” she said to Drew, “should we bag him up?”

Drew turned to me. “Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, we have pictures of the scene. We’ll take samples once you’re gone. And the coroner can get the rest of the evidence from the body.”

“Great, I love driving to Augusta in the snow.” Drew knew this couldn’t wait, but it was clear he wasn’t excited about maneuvering his two-ton vehicle 40 miles through inclement weather. It was probably going to take a couple of hours, even if he managed to keep it out of the ditch.

“Thanks, I know it’s going to be dodgy, but we need the coroner to get started on this right away.

“Don’t forget Jack, you owe me one — again.”

Drew and his helper got out the black plastic bag, and unrolled it on the ground next to the body. Ben wasn't a large man, so the two of them were able to slide his body into the bag without much difficulty.

Jimmy was already taking samples of the blood close to the house. Now that the shock had worn off he was back to his careful, straight-out-of-the-academy self. He had drawn out the scene in his gridded notebook and had all of the blood spots marked out and labeled. He had already collected several swabs of blood in our sample bags, marking each with the same labels as recorded in his notebook. In our small town we didn't have enough crime to carry around a set of numbered crime scene markers like the big city departments did, so it was the old-fashioned way for us.

“Which locations do we still need to sample, Jimmy?”

“Just the ones under the body”

The paramedics had just lifted the bag with Ben's body inside. “Can we get some help here?” Drew called to us. Jimmy and I hurried over, careful to avoid the area we had yet to sample. We each took a handle and helped the two of them lug the corpse over to the waiting ambulance. They had us place the body on the gurney and they strapped it in place for the long drive to the coroner's office.

“Jack, we need to get going if we’re going to reach Augusta tonight.”

“I’ll call ahead so they’ll have someone there to meet you. Thanks again, Drew.”

He climbed up into the cab, joining the younger paramedic who was already buckled in on the passenger side. He maneuvered the big vehicle easily, turning the ambulance around and heading back down toward the Weld Road. He had been driving this exact same ambulance for years, so despite his obvious reluctance he was probably the safest driver of all the local paramedics.

From my cruiser, I called dispatch again.

“Teresa, can you notify Augusta they have a body incoming? Drew just left the scene here. I don’t want him to drive all the way to the lab in this weather for nothing.”

“OK Jack, I’ll get ahold of them. They usually have someone on call. I’ll make sure Drew has a welcoming party.”

“Thanks, he has a long night ahead of him.”

Jimmy was working his way back to the body’s snow outline, collecting samples as he went. I walked over to where the body lay just minutes ago. There was lots of blood there as

well, so I used the remaining kits to get additional samples, having Jimmy mark them in his notebook.

“Won’t the MCU need to look at the scene too?” Jimmy asked.

The Major Crimes Unit of the state police didn’t let anyone except a couple of large cities investigate murders on their own. “Yes, I’m sure Teresa already notified them. Let’s set up a tent to preserve the scene. They likely won’t be here until the morning.”

“Who’s going to keep an eye on things until they get here?” Jimmy asked warily.

“You and Travis can handle it, I think,” I said with a slight smile.

“I’ve got a date with Lisa tonight!” said Jimmy, genuinely distraught.

“Well you’ve already got plenty of paperwork to finish. If Travis can get here soon I think you’ll still make it.”

That motivated Jimmy. He went back to his cruiser and called dispatch from its more powerful radio. He wasn’t taking any chances with date night. “Teresa, can you send Travis up here to the Cooper house? Make sure he brings one of the tents.”

“He’s handling an accident out on Route 2.”

“Can he make it here by 6?”

“Hold your horses, I’ll see if he can wrap it up.”

Teresa took a while to radio back. She was known as a prankster around the station, so she probably was just messing with Jimmy. He was starting to fidget visibly, tapping on the steering wheel and sighing. Finally the radio came to life again.

“OK, Travis will be there in 20 minutes with the tent.”

Jimmy was grinning from ear to ear. “Thanks Teresa!”

“Jimmy, when Travis gets here, set up the tent with him,” I said. “When the scene is covered and Travis is ready, get back to the station so you can fill out the paperwork.”

“OK, Jack.” I could tell he was worried about the time it would take to document a serious crime like this.

“It’s an incident report, just think of it like any other. You practiced dozens of these at MCA, right? Just include copies of your notebook pages. I saw you recording the sample locations, so you should be all set. And be sure to lock away all of the samples in the evidence closet.”

Jimmy seemed a little relieved.

“I’m heading back to the station. If Travis doesn’t show up, or anyone from the Daily Pitbull starts nosing around, call me, got it?”

“Yes sir.”

I walked back to my car, the still-accumulating snow crunching like wet sawdust beneath my boots. What a day for a murder. Had the killer picked a storm as cover, or was it merely a lucky coincidence?

I saw Jimmy get back in his cruiser and turn on the engine. With the scene documented and only one road in, there was no need to stand around outside, especially in this weather. If anyone approached the Cooper house, they’d have to go by his car first. Unless they came down the path from the west. Nobody but me was going to use that dark route tonight, I suspected. Well, me and the mystery person I saw driving away on the Old Pond Road.

“Travis, are you on your way?” I radioed as I turned east on the Weld Road.

“Yes Jack, I’ll get there soon.”

“Help Jimmy set up the evidence tent. Then keep watch tonight until someone relieves you later. Don’t let anyone onto the scene. I’m not expecting you’ll have many visitors in this weather, but if you do, turn them right around. The

Major Crimes Unit won't be here until tomorrow, it's up to us to keep the scene intact until they're here."

"Yes, sir."

One more call to make. "Teresa, it's Jack. Did you reach the coroner's office?"

After a few moments, she came on the radio. "Yes, Jack, I called their off-hours line. They're gathering a team at the lab once I told them we had an urgent case headed their way."

"Thanks, glad to hear that they'll be ready for Drew. He'd never forgive me if he had to wait overnight with a body in the back."

"Drew's always got a long face and doesn't say much. I'd say he'd be good company for a corpse," chortled Teresa.

Thank goodness for our new encrypted radios, I thought to myself. Teresa's sharp tongue used to get us in trouble with the police scanner people. I couldn't help but crack a smile, though, she did have a point. Drew had a grumpy streak that rarely gave way to even so much as a grin.

With that last business taken care of, it was quiet for the first time in hours. Driving through the snow, tall spruce on both sides of the winding road, I could finally think. My mind turned to the crime I had just left, and what led to it. Ben

Cooper was always unpopular with a lot of people. It only got worse after the Jenny Redington incident a few weeks ago. Who was it I saw fleeing the scene? In the morning I needed to start interviewing potential suspects. The list in my head was already considerable. It was going to be a long day.

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