



an Anderson Dexter novel

Act of Will

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Thirteen

The morning dawned grey and early. The slight trickle of light which shone through Dex's small window cut a laser through his head, and he barely made it to the lav before his stomach rebelled. After a few minutes of heaving, he stripped out of the stained one piece and turned on the shower. Once the water was gone, and he was dry, he made his way back to the bed and the bottle of Flying Fish. He took a large swig, and through sheer force of will kept it down. In a minute he was feeling better. Not well, not even truly human, but better.

He opened the autoclave and swapped his clean uniform for the nasty one piece. He dressed, stuffed a couple of food bricks in his pocket and walked out of the apartment. He stopped briefly at a kiosk for a decent cup of strong coffee before catching the train to work.

At his desk he avoided Mister Mouse's accusing eyes, and checked the internal boards. He was becoming quite the model employee on that front. He knew that the managers knew who read what, and wondered if this would counteract some of the black marks he knew were next to his name on some personnel file somewhere. He didn't care one way or another. If they fired him he'd be so much happier, at least until his two week severance period ended and he got kicked out of his apartment.

Again, there was nothing about Hazel. He wondered if B&B's Security even knew she was dead yet. He hadn't even bothered to log into the Cubicle Men's system after Annabelle gave him the news. He couldn't imagine what Security could have learned that would help him, and he'd just wanted to forget. Now, though, with a still slightly pounding head and a roiling stomach, he knew he would have to go through the Security files carefully. The initial shock of Hazel's death was past, now, and Dex had moved on to that obsessive state which made him such a good detective.

While he answered a customer enquiry about warranty replacements for parts which had been incorrectly installed, he fired up his back door access out of Barrett and Brar's internal system. He logged into his account with the Cubicle Men, and saw that he had three messages. The first was a notification from his clients on the housing case. They were unanimously unhappy that their employers were going to get away with providing such substandard living quarters, but they realized that they had no binding way to force the firm into anything. They were willing to fix the things they could, and asked Dex to set it up. He forwarded their message directly to Pat Malone, with a short covering note asking the other man to do what he needed to in order to have his connection with the

printer to help them.

His next message was from the automated system, with a link to the live tunnel into the B&B Security system. Dex would have access to anything they were doing, including internal memos and messages. He wouldn't be able to change anything, but he could look. He saw that the access was good only for 48 hours, and most of that time had passed already. Because of the time crunch, ordinarily he would have just ignored the other message in the queue, but it was from Captain Zhang, and it was specifically to Dex.

"I saw your request for access to Barrett and Brar's Security logs," she wrote. "I know you aren't assigned to any cases that have anything to do with them, and I also know that they are your employer. I've let the access come though, because you've never fucked around before, and it might be urgent. But I want to know what you're up to. You've got two days access for free, but that's the end of it until you get me up to speed. Also, good work on the housing case. I knew you'd figure a way out with sufficient motivation. — ZZ."

Dex didn't begrudge the captain her concern. There was nothing inherently wrong with investigating a case related to your own employer, but it was unusual. Most cases came through a central clearinghouse, and were assigned by the captain or one of her lieutenants. Generally, detectives would never get assigned a case which had anything to do with their own employers. Some clients, though, sought out individual detectives or were referred to a particular person. Usually, those cases stayed with the D who brought them in, even if there was a conflict of interest. The organization had found over the years that when people came to a particular individual for help, they felt most comfortable dealing only with that person. And while the organization encouraged its members to have regular jobs, it also expected that those jobs would be relatively transitory. The nature of their clandestine work dictated that their people would be fired on occasion or at least have to move on voluntarily from time to time in order to keep their work for the organization a secret.

Dex would explain what was going on to the captain later, though. He was running out of time to see what B&B's Security had discovered, and while he didn't expect there to be any great revelations, he couldn't afford to be wrong and miss something. He linked into the cracked opening to B&B's Security system, noting that he had less than 24 hours of access left. He wasn't sure how much junk he would have to go through to find what he needed, and if they were actively pursuing leads, he would want to follow their live conversations.

The system was typical of most corporate Security teams Dex had seen. It wasn't all that dissimilar to the Cubicle Men's system — there was a messaging client, assignment

centre and file storage. Each case had a directory with reports and information which was accessible based on rank and profile, so that the higher ups could see everything that was going on, but lower level staff had more restricted access. Dex, of course, had access to everything.

They had done all the usual things — checked all of Hazel's incoming and outgoing text and voice messages from work, but they'd found nothing strange there. After she didn't turn up for work for a day, a couple of the bruisers went out to her apartment and poked around. There was a video file of the search, and Dex watched as these monkeys pawed through her things like common burglars. From the video file Dex could see that Hazel's apartment was a little larger and nicer than his but not in the same league as Annabelle's. He was surprised; he would have thought that a sales job would come with much better digs than his lowly CSR apartment.

Hazel lived alone, and it looked like she wasn't into a lot of physical world activities. Her small closet held her B&B uniforms, a few casual outfits and that was about it. In the rest of her apartment, Dex could see no decoration, toys, tools or supplies. It was an entirely normal apartment, and it looked very much like it should have if she'd just left for work one morning and never come back. There was even a dirty coffee cup on the small counter next to the autoclave. Dex was even more sure that whatever happened to her, she had planned to be back that day.

He started paging around the reports and discussion of B&B's Security. There wasn't much activity; he could see that it wasn't a high priority item for them. There was only one officer assigned to the case, a class 4 named Monika Raff, and she had a half dozen other items on her docket. It looked like she was half heartedly trying to find friends or family to notify or interrogate. She'd sent a request to everyone in Hazel's private contact list, but there were only a handful of names. Looking at Raff's private messenger, Dex saw that she'd received two responses to her queries, and hadn't even looked at them yet. He couldn't really fault the officer — missing persons wasn't exactly something they dealt with every day and the sad truth was that the bosses at B&B didn't really care much about the fate of one employee. They were probably more concerned about finalizing the state of Hazel's clients and apartment than what actually happened to her.

Dex spent a few more minutes poking around the Security files, but there wasn't anything else there. He took the contact information for Monika Raff, in case he wanted to talk to her, but he didn't think they would find anything new before he did. He logged out of his tunnel into the B&B Security system, after copying everything to his own disk first. He would open a case on the Cubicle Men's system and dump all the B&B's information into that file for reference. As far as he could tell, only he and Annabelle

knew that Hazel was dead, which meant that all the access in the world to the B&B Security files wasn't going to do much for him. His own investigation was the best bet for finding out what happened, and he didn't even have anywhere to begin.

Chapter Fourteen

When Dex got back to his apartment, he changed and ate, then sat in his comfortable chair, unfocused from his apartment and logged into the Cubicle Men's system. He quickly updated Captain Zhang on Hazel's disappearance. He didn't mention her death, not yet. He knew the captain extended him a fair amount of latitude, but he didn't want to let on that he was using Annabelle's skills before there was a real case file started. He didn't want the captain to think that he was abusing his relationship with Annabelle, even though he thought that was exactly what he was doing. Annabelle had made her interest in Dex clear long ago, and had always been more than willing to give him whatever he wanted in the way of help, or anything else. But now that their relationship had changed, Dex felt awkward taking Annabelle's help on cases that weren't officially on the books. Or, more accurately, he felt awkward having the captain know about it.

So, once his message was sent, he set about legitimizing his investigation by making a case file. It was tedious work, but Dex found that organizing his thoughts into a written report often helped him find things he'd overlooked in a case. He liked the way it forced his haphazard ideas into a linear format, and gave him a better sense of the situation. He copied the information he'd taken from B&B's system into the case file, and wrote up a summary of his investigation. He was finishing up this preliminary report, trying to figure out when to add the information Annabelle had given him about Hazel's death so it looked like he'd enlisted her help after the case was properly opened, when his system pinged. He saved his work, and saw that it was Annabelle calling. He realized that it was the first time in weeks that he hadn't heard from her or called her himself by this time of day. He wondered briefly if everything was okay.

"Hi," he said. "I'm just getting a case file open for this thing with Hazel," Dex said. "How has your day been?"

"I've had better ones," Annabelle said, and Dex thought her voice sounded tired. "Work was tough; I'm having to cover for someone so that means a bunch of extra tasks. Not a real problem, just a pain in the ass, you know?"

"Sure," Dex said, feeling bad about always asking her to drop everything and help him whenever he needed some sneaky systems work. He knew that her day job was not only more demanding than his, but was work she actually enjoyed. Sometimes he forgot that not everyone held his cavalier attitude toward continued employment. "You should take the night off, maybe," he said. "Watch a vid or go out for a drink or something."

“Are you asking me on a date?” Annabelle said, the usual twinkle in her voice returning briefly.

“Uh,” Dex stalled, “I was thinking I’d be busy tonight on getting this case organized.” He heard Annabelle sigh. He quickly scanned his report and saw that he didn’t have much left that he could add, and without any new information he didn’t really have anywhere to go on the investigation. “On the other hand,” he said, “I could maybe stand a break, too.” Dex swore he could hear Annabelle’s smile.

“See you in Monte’s in half an hour?” she suggested.

“Sure,” Dex said.

Dex linked into the bar, and recognized a few other Cubicle Men detectives at the small tables. Most were alone or with one other person, and none of them seemed to pay much attention to Dex’s arrival. That was one of the things he liked about Monte’s — everyone kept pretty much to themselves. It wasn’t the same as being in a real pub, but even before he started keeping time with Annabelle, Dex would spend a few nights a week there. Like everyone, he needed a better view than the four walls of his apartment every once and again.

He didn’t see Annabelle waiting at any of the tables, so he ambled over to one of his usual booths along the far wall. Through the heads up interface he ordered his usual: a non-stim dark and stormy and a pack of virtual cigarettes. The drink materialized in front of his right hand, sweating slightly over a deep cherry red napkin. The smokes appeared just in front of the glass, a silver lighter on top of the red and gold pack. He took a sip of the drink, the simulated taste of it sharp on his dry tongue. He shook a cigarette out of the pack, lit it and sucked a plume of smoke into his rendered lungs. He didn’t taste anything; the cigarettes were all for show, like a necklace or fancy hairdo. It had been donkey’s years since he had put anything on fire into his mouth in the physical world, but he admitted that he liked the way his avatar looked like with a smoke, so it was one of his few concessions to the virtual world.

He was stubbing out the cigarette when Annabelle materialized just inside the bar’s door. Dex was relieved to see that she hadn’t dressed up or anything. Her avatar wore her usual slim brown trousers and artsy printed tee shirt. Dex stood as he waited for her to approach the table. However, he watched as she recognized someone at the bar and walked over to him. He was rooted to the spot as he watched her greet the tall, very muscular broad-shouldered man warmly, briefly hugging him and letting him kiss her cheek.

Dex found his feet and slipped out of the banquette. Surprised by the pang of jealousy he felt as he watched her giggle at something the man said, Dex forced himself to walk over to the couple, sure to keep his avatar's face neutral. Annabelle saw him before he could say anything, and smiled. She turned her companion to face Dex as well, and said, "Dex! What a coincidence. You should meet Neil Weisman. Sarge, this is my good friend, Andersson Dexter."

Dex faced the other man, and had to look up. Weisman's avatar was enormous. He looked like he had muscles on his muscles, the bulges rippling under a tight button down shirt. He grinned widely at Dex, though, and stuck out a massive paw. "Mr. Dexter," he said, his voice gravel. "Good to meet you." They shook hands, and Dex looked past the giant at Annabelle, who smiled happily.

"Nice to meet you," he said, withdrawing his hand. "And how do you two know each other?" he asked, oddly afraid of the answer.

"Out there," Weisman answered bluntly, and Dex nearly fell over.

His equilibrium was not improved when Annabelle added, "Sarge and I are old army buddies."

"You were in the army?" Dex repeated, after the three of them had gone back to Dex's booth and were seated with drinks.

"It wasn't for long," Annabelle said.

"She wasn't exactly cut out for it," the giant man added.

"I'd think not," Dex said, looking at Annabelle out of the corner of his eye. "I don't know a lot about the military," he continued, "but I'm pretty sure it's all running and jumping and it's all out there, right?"

Annabelle laughed. "Yup," she said. "The running and jumping wasn't that much of a problem. I didn't mind that stuff too much. It was all the hand to hand combat that did me in."

"Actually, she was pretty good at that, too," Weisman said, smiling. "She could even drop me most of the time."

"I just hated every second of it," she said, scowling. "I had a real incentive to end the fight fast."

"So, whatever compelled you to enlist in the army?" Dex asked, still incredulous.

"I was still trying to make myself become normal," she said. Dex glanced at Weisman, and Annabelle caught the look. "It's okay," she said. "Sarge knows as much about me as anyone. He was one of the leaders of my unit back then, and helped me get out of my contract early." She looked over at the big man with a warm smile. "He understood."

Dex's eyebrows lifted, but he didn't want to pry.

"I'm not all that different from Lewis, here," Weisman volunteered. "I lost my legs in an ordnance accident twenty ago, so I wear these fancy prostheses out there. I can outrun slow vehicles now, jump over twenty metres. It's great for an infantryman like me. But all the time I'm out there, I miss this," he stood and slapped his thigh. "So, I spend all my free time in M City. It's where I feel like a real person." He caught Annabelle's eyes, and they shared a smile.

Dex shook his head. "Just when I think I've got you sussed, you find some new way to surprise me," he said to Annabelle.

"A girl's got to have a little mystery," Annabelle said, grinning.

They finished their drinks, then Weisman excused himself and linked out of the bar. Annabelle scooted over to sit next to Dex and they briefly embraced, Dex kissing her cheek. He had gotten so used to this action by now that it barely bothered him any more. Another shimmering green drink appeared before her, and Dex knew that it would be a stim-laced cocktail of some sort. He watched her take a sip, and saw a flush of warmth cross her cheeks. He wondered what real-world sensation that image was simulating.

"What a great idea this was," Annabelle said, putting her drink down in front of her. "I haven't seen Sarge in years, and I'm already feeling a million times better. You were right, I needed this."

"Yeah," Dex said, "you sounded like you were getting a little wound up." Annabelle stretched and ran her hands thorough her hair.

"It's just work," she said. "I like it, so it's never that bad. Right now things are very 'time sensitive', as the management drones would say. I don't have a problem with real deadlines or urgencies, but I can't help but get annoyed when it's somehow my problem that someone else didn't turn up and finish their tasks." She sighed and took another sip of her drink.

"That's life in the big city, kiddo," Dex said, smiling.

"I know," Annabelle said. "I'm not trying to make it sound like my problems are unique, they just piss me off, that's all."

"Understandable," Dex said. "The one joy of having a shitty job is that no one really expects anything of you."

"Maybe that's the way it is with your employer," Annabelle said, "but we all know your real work is with the organization, and you take that plenty seriously indeed."

"Sure," Dex conceded, "but Zizou doesn't treat us like children. I get more respect from her than I do from my bosses at B&B by a lightyear."

"It's different, Dex," Annabelle said. "You know it is." He just nodded, and they sat in silence for a moment, the virtual smoke from Dex's cigarette spiralling in almost random patterns between them. "Speaking of real work," Annabelle broke the silence, "I wrote a script to look for Hazel's ID chip trail. I've been getting bits and pieces over the last 24 hours, but it's going to take a bit more time to compile it all."

"Jesus, Annabelle," Dex said. "You don't have to do that right now. I mean, if you're swamped at work you shouldn't be spending time on this stuff for me. Shit, I haven't even put the information you've already given me in my report for Zizou, yet."

"Come on, Dex," Annabelle said, smiling wryly. "I like my job plenty, but you can't expect me to believe that you think that writing code to make the trains run on time is in the same league as helping to solve a possible murder."

Dex blinked at her and let a beat pass. "Murder," he echoed, finally.

"Well," Annabelle said, looking away, "it's a possibility we have to consider, particularly since her body hasn't been found yet."

"How do you know it hasn't?" Dex asked, more sharply than he'd intended.

"You aren't the only one who reads the daily reports, you know," Annabelle said. "The only reported body in the last week was that one Malone was talking about at the meeting, and that was before Hazel disappeared, right?"

"Yeah," Dex said. "And it was male."

"Doesn't necessarily mean anything," Annabelle said quietly.

"True enough," Dex said, "but I saw the image and it wasn't her. So, yeah, it looks like she hasn't turned up yet."

"Hopefully I'll have something for you tomorrow," Annabelle said. "If not, I'll get

something to you the next day for sure. I'm on weekend after tomorrow and this is my first priority."

"You're the best, kiddo," Dex said, smiling. "You're way too good to me."

"Just as I keep telling you," Annabelle said, laughing. "But really, people don't just disappear and die. And with your friend Hazel now, and that other body last week, it seems like this is maybe a big deal."

Dex's head snapped up to look at Annabelle. "What did you just say?"

Annabelle frowned, puzzled. "I said that this might be a big deal..."

"No," Dex said, "the other body. There might be a connection. I hadn't even thought of that." He stood, and leaned across the table, kissing Annabelle. "Thank you. I have to look into that right now. I'll talk to you tomorrow." He winked out of the bar right before Annabelle's eyes.

She blinked a few times in surprise¹, then sat back in her chair and laughed to herself. "That's my man," she said softly to no one, and sipped her drink.

Chapter Fifteen

Dex refocussed on his apartment with a slight twinge of nausea. He stood, and went to the cupboard where he grabbed a glass which he filled with water. Working the kinks out of his neck, he sat back down and logged into the Cubicle Men's system again. He ran a search for anything new on the body Pat Malone's team had found the previous week.

There was a lot of information. They'd identified the man as Luis Harker, a tech at a mid level upgrade salon. He was young, only 46 years old, and in life had had the fashionable body often seen on front end workers in salons. His skin was dark, and he was softer in the middle than most people. Under the softness, though was the lean hard muscle created by the nutrition cocktail in the mass produced food supply. He was, in essence, a typical young man. He didn't look particularly typical in the images on file, though. The skin on his chest had been cut off in long strips, the edges clean and straight. It was hard to tell in the images, but the written report indicated that there were six separate strips cut from his chest, and two from his left thigh. His right thigh had one strip that was still hanging on, as if the cutter had stopped in mid-slice.

Dex looked at the images of the corpse, taken when the body was found on the floor of the squalid room. There were close up shots of the wounds, which Dex skipped over quickly, spending more time on the images of the man's wrists and arms. There were clearly visible lines ringing the wrists and similar fainter ones along the outside of his upper arms. He magnified the images, and stared at the marks. The ones on the arms were not uniform, and it looked like maybe there were two or three marks on each arm. The ones around the wrists seemed different, thicker perhaps and more pronounced. Dex didn't want to jump to conclusions, but the bruises made it look very much as if the man had been restrained somehow.

Dex then looked at the images of the man's face. His face was unmarked, a classically handsome profile that, like his body, was attractive in a nondescript kind of way. The eyes were mercifully closed — Dex had seen more dead bodies than he ever wanted to during his tour on the goon squad, and it was the sightless eyes which had always gotten to him. Dead, staring things, all the fire gone from them. He'd be happy never to see those again. He scrutinized the image, looking for any sign on the man's face as to what happened to him. It was disconcerting — there was no doubt that the man looked happy. Dex was certain the that shape of the lips wasn't a rictus of fear or pain, it was a smile. Luis Harker had gone smiling to his death.

Dex shook his head, and hid the images. He pulled up the written report, and

started wading through it. He scanned it for odd bits of information which jumped out at him, like the location where the body was found, and the fact that fibres of polymer rope were found near the corpse. There were also indications in the dirt on the floor of scuff marks that didn't seem to match where the body was lying or look like footprints. Dex guessed that it looked like some kind of item had been removed from the scene. There was plenty of blood on the body and the floor of the room, but the skin from the man's torso and leg was nowhere to be found, and there was no sign of a laser cutter or blade. Whether it was murder or something else, one way or another there had to be another person involved.

Dex refocused on his apartment, and took a breath. There was no reason to think that this body was related to Hazel's death — he didn't even know where her body was, let alone what had happened to her. He had to wonder about the timing, though. There wasn't a lot of violent crime in the city. Sure, there were bad areas of town, green and brown sectors could be rough, there was no doubt. But most of the problems were personal disputes, and while there were plenty of fights, they rarely ended in death. Even when they did, it was a broken neck or a laser burn, not blood loss from flaying. This was definitely something Dex had never seen before, not on the streets or as a detective, and it worried him.

He couldn't help it, but he wondered if a similar fate had befallen Hazel. He imagined her bound, some crazy with a cutter letting loose on her body. He wondered about the look on the other victim, Harker's, face. How could someone be happy while that was going on? Or was it really a look of relief, some kind of joy that the torment was finally over? Dex felt sick. He took a drink of water, and stood. He paced around his small apartment until the feeling passed.

He wished Annabelle had found something already, but he knew he couldn't push her. She would be generous with her time, he knew, and would never tell him that he was asking too much, but it wasn't fair to her to keep expecting her to drop everything and work on his projects. For all he knew, she was still busy with her own case — the intellectual property thing. He hadn't even asked her about it.

Dex felt like a heel. It was typical — he was so absorbed in his own work that he forgot that anyone else had anything important going on. That never used to be an issue, when he kept to himself and only ever dealt with other people on a professional level. Now, though, it was different. He wondered, not for the first time, what Annabelle saw in him. He sighed, and wished he didn't have to go in to Barrett and Brar the next morning, but he was still two days out from his weekend.

This was not a new feeling. In fact, Dex regularly wished that he didn't have his day

job. He doubted that it was unique; he heard plenty of griping in the break room at B&B as well as among the other detectives on the squad. Most of the other Ds worked at jobs not unlike Dex's — well below their abilities. Even Annabelle had been working at a much simpler and less interesting position for years, but her bosses couldn't help but notice her abilities and, surprisingly, they promoted her.

Dex knew she hadn't mentioned the promotion to Zahara Zhang, since the Cubicle Men had a policy which expected its member to have jobs, but nothing too strenuous. The organization paid well, so the poor remuneration wasn't an issue, and they also expected its members to be surreptitiously making use of their employers' resources. They existed to fill a gap that was created by the firms' complete control over every aspect of most people's lives, and their refusal to do anything for their employees that didn't effect their profit margins. On the face of it The Cubicle Men were just a bunch of loosely organized vigilantes, or a glorified private detective agency, but in many ways they were more political than they appeared.

Annabelle wasn't in it to stick it to the firms, though. Dex knew she had no particular love of her employer or the status quo, but she did love her work. She loved poking around inside systems, and she didn't really care whether it was authorized or not. Dex didn't know how she managed to do it, but even after she was promoted and her day job became much more involved, she still managed to be active in the organization, not just with her own cases, but helping the detectives. Dex knew he wasn't the only one who begged her help for anything technical. She was a very popular person in the squad.

She was a great person, a great woman. Dex never understood what it was about him that drew her to him. He had rebuffed her advances for years, for all the same reasons they both struggled with now that they were together. He had often made it clear to her that he knew they were simply incompatible, but she still wouldn't give up on him. She was brilliant, talented and beautiful and he was just an old man who was born too late. He hated himself for keeping her from being happy, but now that he'd embarked on this crazy relationship with her, he wasn't willing to let her go. Not when he'd finally managed to carve a sliver of happiness out of this world that he was convinced he couldn't understand, and it was all because of her. And he took her for granted.

If ever there was a night that cried out for getting lost in the bottle of Jamaica's Best, this was it. But that was one of the other things Annabelle had taught him, by her example not by hectoring — she never complained about his habits, never scolded or nagged. She simply managed her social life, her regular work and her cases for the organization. She got it done, whatever it took, because she had responsibilities. Dex had responsibilities, too — not his job, not B&B, but to himself and to his cases. He knew that he cared more

about that than he did about drowning his sorrows, so he undressed, took a hit of Sleeping Juice, and went to bed.

**** Watch your feeds next week for the continuation of Act of Will ****