

A wooden chair with a ladder back, set against a red background. The chair is the central focus of the image, with its backrest and seat clearly visible. The text is overlaid on the image.

an Anderson Dexter novel

Act of Will

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Sixteen

The man sat alone, in the dark, in the small apartment. Gerry had gone out somewhere, the man didn't know where. It didn't matter. He sat on his narrow bed, legs crossed, leaning into the wall. There was a small window high on the wall above from him, and he could see the lights of the city reflected on the walls. He kept the apartment's lights off. He had taken out the box of tools he kept in the carrier on his scooter. He opened it, and pulled something out. It was long and thin and looked like a bit of food brick left out in the sun. He had dried it out in the zapper on another night when Gerry had been out, and added it to his collection. This one had been from an earlier candidate, one that had gone well.

The last one had been different. It was the new buzzer, of course. Her reactions had been so intense, so powerful, it had thrown him off. He hadn't expected it, but he should have known. He hadn't had enough time alone to try the buzzer on himself — he wasn't willing to get off when Gerry was there, and this was the first time he had been alone in the apartment for days. He knew that the reaction would be stronger, but how much stronger had been a surprise. He didn't like surprises.

He wasn't sure that he liked the powerful pleasure she seemed to get from the jolt. He knew the buzzer was configurable, but that would be a trial and error procedure. And, of course, each person's response was different, so he could never be absolutely sure what it would be like with someone new. It was the same with his old unit, of course, but its highest setting had never been as strong as just the default was on the new one. He was beginning to regret having traded his old unit in.

It had been distracting, and once he began the work with the knife, her moans were so loud he worried that they might be discovered. They hadn't been disturbed, though, and he could always add a gag to the procedure, so there was no problem there. It wasn't that he begrudged her the pleasure, or even that it was distracting. The trouble was that it just didn't feel right. It was supposed to be his decision what she felt, his decision whether she was a candidate or not, his choice how, when and if she died. But the new 'buzzer took some of that control away, and he didn't like it; he didn't like it at all.

He had no interest in hurting the candidates, that was why he used the 'buzzer in the first place. When he'd started the work, he had chosen people who were already high on physical stims. He'd moved on to the 'buzzers after only two candidates, though. He didn't like meeting the people in the physical world, didn't like them looking at him while

he determined if they were acceptable. The first candidate had been fine, happily flying in his own personal world of mental joy while the man did the work. The second one, though, had been much less successful. He didn't like thinking about that particular candidate, but the thought came unbidden to his mind.

It had been raining slightly, and when they left the stim joint the candidate seemed to be high and fine. She tilted her face up toward the falling water, her eyes closed as the drops hit her face. The man grabbed her then, slipping the crook of his arm under her chin. He squeezed, just enough for her body to become pliable, then he put her in the cargo carrier attached to the back of his scooter. She was quiet as he drove to the spot he'd found, driving right in to the derelict building and into the small room he'd prepared. He hauled her out of the box, and wrestled her into the chair. He was excited. He remembered the sense of completion he'd felt with the first candidate when the cutting started, the feeling of calm and control when the man had died. He wanted those feelings again, wanted them so much his hands were shaking.

He tied her hands behind the chair back, and bound her body to the chair. He didn't know how much she would struggle, and he wanted to have his hands free for the work. She was starting to wake up as he finished the last knot, and he waited for her to open her eyes. Her eyelids fluttered, and he smiled as he waited for her to become alert. "Where..." she croaked out, as her eyes adjusted to the dim room. "Where am I?"

"Don't worry about that," he said, keeping his voice calm and soothing, waiting for the stims to kick back in. "Everything is just fine." But it wasn't fine. She began to thrash in the chair, trying to loosen the bindings around her. Once she found her voice, she started screaming, and he began to panic. The building they were in was abandoned, but that didn't mean it was necessarily ignored. And even though screams and shouts were not uncommon in this neighbourhood, he couldn't be sure that some curious streeter wouldn't be attracted by the noise. She had seemed so happy, so blissed out at the stim joint — he couldn't understand what was happening here. But there was nothing he could do to shut her up other than hit her until she was quiet, so that was what he did.

He never knew if it was the blows of his fist or the blade of his knife which finally finished her. He was so distraught by the end that he swore that this would be the last one; he was finished with the work. It had taken him weeks to realize that he couldn't be finished, that the work was his life. And he found another way to be sure to keep them quiet, keep them compliant and happy. As it turned out, the 'buzzers were much better than physical stims. Even now he admitted that this last one was a million times better than the thrasher had been.

But for the first time since then, the man didn't have the wonderful calm feeling after

the work was done. Now he felt twitchy and strange, like he'd taken part in some ritual that he didn't fully understand, like someone else was in control. And that was unacceptable. He needed to find a way to control the candidates, control himself again. He caught himself glancing at the apartment door, as if it could tell him when Gerry would return.

He pulled the new 'buzzer from its place in his tool box, next to the knife, and opened the small settings hatch. He turned it down to the lowest setting. He would have to systematically try to them all until he found one that was right, one that was appropriate. He went into the lav, locked the door and sat on the ceramic floor near the drain. He took a deep breath, held the unit up to one of the small silver studs in his cheek, and with a shaking hand, thumbed the unit on.

Chapter Seventeen

For a change, Dex spent the morning focussed mainly on the work his employer paid him to do. At least, that was the way it appeared. While he answered customer questions and routinely tried to get them to buy more upgrades or newer packages, his mind was turning over the information about Luis Harker's death. The report indicated that a neuroscan was being done on the body for traces of stims or other pharma. Dex had asked the organization's system to alert him to any updates on the Harker file, so he'd find out when the results were in. Dex guessed that they would find something in the scan — he just couldn't imagine anyone happily undergoing torture like that without some kind of chemical assistance. Even if the man had somehow agreed to be flayed like that, the smile on his face just made no sense. But Dex knew there were powerful enough stims available that could block out anything.

Shortly after lunch, Dex had a ping on his private system. He expected it to be the automated response from the Cubicle Men's system with the chem report on Harker's body, but it wasn't. It was Annabelle.

"Hey, kiddo," Dex subvocalized, "you're not snowed under today?"

Annabelle ignored his question. "I've found Hazel's body."

Dex took a deep breath. He'd known that this would happen, had been waiting for it, but now that Annabelle had finally said those words, he found that he wasn't prepared for the reality of it. He tamped down the feelings of nausea and got down to business. "Give me the details," he asked Annabelle, glad that speaking silently hid the roughness of his voice.

She sent him the coordinates, and Dex overlaid them on a map of the city. The location was deep in brown sector, an area full of abandoned buildings in various states of dereliction. Most were used by unemployed squatters, but some were so bad that even they wouldn't live there. Dex knew there would be plenty of places to hide a body.

"What are you going to do," Annabelle asked?

Dex thought for a fraction of a minute. "Okay," he said. "I've opened a case file on the system," and he sent her a link as they were speaking. "If you could do me a favour, and add your information to the file." There was a pause as Annabelle scanned the report.

"You didn't mention that we know that Hazel is dead," she said, surprised.

"It wasn't an official case when you found that out," Dex said, sheepishly. "Zizou

was on my ass about using resources without explaining why, and I didn't want to involve you. The timeline on our end doesn't matter, so just don't put a date on when you learned that, okay?"

"Sure," Annabelle said, "but remember that I'm a big girl, Dex, and I'm perfectly happy to take responsibility for the things I do. If I help you, that's my choice. You don't need to protect me from anything."

"Okay," Dex said, but he doubted that he would have done it differently. There was no need for Annabelle to pay for his recklessness. "Anyway, once the information on the location of her body is in the system, just pipe the file over to Malone's team. They'll have someone go take a look today, I'm sure."

"It's done," Annabelle said, after hardly a beat had passed.

"That was fast," Dex said, impressed.

"You don't get to be a world class cracker with two jobs without being pretty quick." Annabelle said, a smile in her voice. "Speaking of which, I have to get back to it. We'll talk later, okay?"

"Definitely," Dex said. "You've been a big help, kiddo."

"Aw shucks," Annabelle said, laughing, as she ended the call.

Dex spent the rest of the afternoon jumpy and annoyed. He knew he couldn't do anything until the chem screen on Harker was in or the goons found Hazel's body and started that ball rolling. But it was maddening to have so much new information so close and yet so far away. Dex wished for the first time that he was still on the goon squad. He had no desire to see Hazel's dead body; rather the opposite. He was dreading the inevitable images and video that the squad would provide, and that he would have to pore over. But he hated the waiting, relying on someone else to provide the intelligence he needed. It was incredibly frustrating, and made him angry. He nearly yelled at two customers before taking a walk to the break room for a coffee and a chance to clear his head.

When the work day finally ended, Dex stormed out of the office complex. He logged into the Cubicle Men's system as soon as he was shot of the building's door, and let his feet carry him to the train stop unaided by conscious vision. The screen on Harker still wasn't in, which he knew because he'd had no notification of it, but he thought there might be some news on Hazel's body. He paged over to the goon squad's area, and

watched the live feed of information from the folks on the street.

He scanned the rolling wave of words, much of it text extracted from audio as the squad members reported in from their rounds. He couldn't find anything in the current conversation about Hazel's body, so he ran a search over the last few hours for the location he'd described. Immediately his system showed him the hit — a request had been sent to the squad members closest to the area, Vonruden and Lino, to check it out on their shift. Dex focussed his system on their reports alone, and saw that they were stuck mediating some dispute between a shopkeeper and a streeter. Dex didn't bother with the details, just saw that they guessed it would be at least thirty minutes before they were going to be free. By then, his stop had been reached, and Dex automatically had begun walking toward his apartment building. He refocussed on his surroundings, and made a decision.

He went up to his apartment, quickly changed out of his B&B uniform into nondescript street clothes, and walked out of his apartment. He called up a city map, and got directions to the location Annabelle had given him. It was a couple of trains to get there, but Dex figured he might even get to the spot before Vonruden and Lino arrived. He sent them both a quick, low priority message letting them know he was going to be there. He didn't know what either of them looked like in the flesh, since he'd only ever met them at the squad meetings held in M City, and there was no reason to assume that their avatars looked anything like their physical selves. He sent them both an image of himself so they would recognize him.

He quickly updated the case file to indicate that he was going to the address in brown sector, and shot a ping to Annabelle. He wanted to keep her informed of what was going on in the investigation, but really he just wanted someone to know where he was. He couldn't think of a reason why it would be dangerous, but he found that his heart was pounding. It had been a long time since he had been on the streets, and he was nervous.

He switched trains at the edge of red sector, the main business area of the city. He caught the brown line, and watched as the infrastructure of the city visibly deteriorated as they flashed past the train's grimy windows. The buildings in red sector were tall, shiny monoliths, symbols of the firms' control over the people and spaces of the city. Across the border, the complexes grew smaller, more squalid, more haphazard. The further the train travelled into brown sector, the less well kept the buildings became, until he was faced with literally crumbling apartment towers and broken down squats.

He could see from his map overlay that he was getting close to the building where Hazel's body was hidden. As the train slowed, he waited for the door to spiral open, then he jumped down to the platform. The train shushed away and he looked around. There

weren't many people about on the street, though Dex guessed that many corners and doorways would have people sleeping or hanging around, just out of sight. He started walking down the street toward the building which was lit with a cool blue glow on his map overlay.

He couldn't see anyone hanging around the location where he expected to find Hazel's body. He logged into his account on the Cubicle Men's system, and looked up Lino and Vonruden's reports. They had finally settled the dispute between the streeter who was trying to use a local hydro-farmer's storage room as a home and the owner of the space. They were headed to Dex's location now, and Dex estimated that they would arrive in five minutes. He hoped that they would have had an opportunity to see his message — he didn't want to try to have to explain his presence if they didn't know who he was.

He sat on the curb and waited. The sun, such as it was, was going down, its light trapped behind the tall buildings which surrounded brown sector. Dex could see movement out of the corner of his eye, but every time he turned in its direction there was nothing there to be seen. It was disconcerting, but intellectually he knew not to be afraid. He knew that Vonruden and Lino were going to be there any minute; he also knew that almost everyone on the street was more afraid of a stranger than anything else. Plus, he'd pocketed the old knuckledusters he'd used those few years he spent on the streets. He was prepared if anything came up.

He hadn't waited long when he saw a man and a woman walking briskly down the street toward him. Dex didn't know what to expect from Melissa Vonruden and Eduardo Lino, but he was sure it was them. They were walking in the middle of the street, not trying to keep to the shadows or look for a way to escape should things get hairy. They both wore stunners on their belts, and Dex was sure they each had at least one other weapon on their bodies. They exuded calm confidence, but they didn't seem like folks on a power trip to Dex. Some of the goon squad got that way, but Lino and Vonruden seemed all right. The tall woman waved as she approached Dex.

"You must be Andersson Dexter," she said, in a clear, strong voice. Dex stood as she stepped toward him, her hand extended. He clasped it, and felt her firm grip as she shook his hand. "I'm Melissa Vonruden," she said, and turned to her partner standing a few steps behind her. "This is Eduardo Lino." She introduced the man, and he lifted a hand in greeting to Dex.

"You think there's a body in there?" Lino asked, gesturing to the crumbling building.

"Annabelle Lewis traced my missing person's ID chip to this location," Dex said, and

the two goons both nodded curtly.

“Okay,” Vonruden said. “Let’s go and take a look, shall we?”

Chapter Eighteen

Tall, thin Melissa Vonruden led the three of them into the broken down old building. Dex, who was right behind her, watched as she slowly swept her eyes over the space while they slowly picked their way into the first room. "I'm sorry I didn't bring my old scanner from my days on the street," Dex said, "double up the effort."

"We don't use scanners anymore," Vonruden said, without turning back.

"She's got a Mark Four optical upgrade," Lino said, as if Dex was supposed to know what that meant. "I'll be getting mine in a couple of months," he added. Dex just nodded, and guessed that Vonruden was using various kinds of vision enhancement, looking for dangers of the human, technological and physical kind. Just because they didn't see any people, that didn't mean they were alone in the room, and it also didn't mean that someone hadn't left behind a little surprise to keep the space to themselves. Streeters were often quite technologically adept, and old but still functional equipment was always available from street corner resellers for next to nothing. It wasn't unusual to find surprisingly complex booby traps in the seemingly abandoned buildings many streeters used as homes. And, of course, there were falling beams, broken floors and general debris to be concerned with. Dex was glad he had waited for help before heading in.

Annabelle's search program had turned up detailed coordinates for Hazel's body, so Dex and his two cohorts knew exactly where in the building to look. The problem, though, was figuring out how to get there. The body was in a subterranean room, close to the centre of the building, but there was no obvious way of getting to the floor below. Following Melissa Vonruden, Dex and Eduardo Lino stepped between broken furniture, old food brick wrappers and bits of hardware Dex couldn't even begin to identify. It was getting cold; there was obviously no heating in the building, and whatever insulation the walls had once provided was gone with holes that had been punched into them. Dex wished he'd brought a warmer jacket.

"We need to find a way to get downstairs," Dex said.

"I'm trying to find a pole or something," Vonruden said, her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized the area. Dex stepped over a box, and put his foot in a pile of soggy towels.

"Ugh," he said. "This place is a real hole."

"There's an awful lot of places like this around here," Eduardo Lino said. "This whole sector was abandoned by the firms about twenty years ago, and only a handful of the

buildings have been taken over by the folks trying to make a living outside the system. Even then, they usually only have so much left over for improvements. It's a pretty rough place to live, let me tell you."

"I think I've got something," Vonruden interrupted. "Over on the east wall, it looks like there's a door, and a set of steps beyond it."

"I don't see anything that looks like a door," Lino said, squinting at the ancient sheetrock, plastered over with various artefacts from the years of squatters.

"Yeah," Vonruden said, "it's totally hidden among all the crap on the wall. But I'm sure it's there. Follow me."

They carefully picked their way over to the wall, which was covered in old posters, wallpaper and Dex thought it was maybe some kind of glue or gruel thrown on top of it all. As they got closer, they could see that under all the mess on the wall there was a small door concealing an opening. Vonruden peered at it closely, then lightly touched the right side. Nothing happened. She looked back at Dex and Lino, then roughly put her shoulder to the door. It popped open with a loud creak, and they saw a set of steps leading down into darkness.

Eduardo Lino pulled a small disk out of one of his cavernous pockets, snapped its centre and it began to glow. It got brighter as Lino threw it through the doorway and down the stairs. By the time it hit the bottom, it was shining brightly and lit the stairwell. Vonruden looked back at the two men, and started stepping down into the lower room. "It's a bit treacherous," she called back after having traversed a couple of the rickety metal steps. "But I think I can make it all the way down." Dex heard her heavy boots on the metal tread clunk down the steps, then stop with a soft thud. "Yeah," she shouted up, "it's no problem. I just need to get a little more light down here."

"I've got it," Lino said, pulling another couple of disks from his pockets, while he and Dex picked their way carefully down the stairs. After a flick of Lino's wrists, Dex saw two glowing shapes sail down into the room and then the whole place lit up from corner to corner. It was as bright as day down there, so none of them could miss the corpse lying in the middle of the floor.

Dex didn't want to get too close, but he couldn't keep away, either. He stepped up to the body, which had a bunch of small insects crawling on it. In what must have been shock, Dex found himself thinking that you didn't often see insects in the more built up areas of the city, probably because there was so little organic matter there. Why his mind

went there he didn't know, but he did know that he really did not want to think about what he saw in that basement room. He let Lino and Vonruden do what needed to be done — the videos, still images and physical scans of the body and the area. They would need backup to move the body out of there, but they would have to get complete scans of the room first. Dex just stayed out of the way, trying not to think.

It was Hazel, of course. Her torso was dark with congealed blood, and Dex thought he saw strips of skin hanging off. He couldn't tell if the front of her legs were cut or simply stained by the blood from her chest wounds, but he knew that Vonruden and Lino would get that information. All of a sudden, Dex wanted to be anywhere but at the scene. He stood against the stairs, breathing deeply and watching Lino and Vonruden work.

Vonruden stayed close to the body, using a sterile handheld scanner over every centimetre of Hazel's body. The scanner detected and logged data from trace evidence like hair and dust, and took samples of Hazel's tissues. More information would come when Vonruden cut shallowly into Hazel's head to access the data port in her interface. Then they would have access to data on Hazel's physical condition — body tissue temperature and function, muscle action, just about anything that happened in or to Hazel's body would be recorded there. Between the external scans and that data, the autopsy software on the Cubicle Men's system would be able to provide an analysis of what happened to her.

Eduardo Lino was using a larger scanner on the room, walking a grid while waving the beam over the floor and walls. The device would identify and log any organic matter, and could separate trace elements which were consistent with the environment from those which appear to be introduced to the area. In a derelict building home to squatters for years, Dex wondered how useful that analysis could be. Even so, Lino methodically scanned the room.

Dex waited until Lino finished with the main part of the room, and was coming over to scan the area where Hazel's body lay, then quietly interrupted.

"I, uh, don't need to be here any more, do I?" he asked, and he saw Lino smile slightly.

"No," Vonruden said. "We could have handled it on our own all along. Everything we find will be in the report." Dex didn't think she was trying to be rude, simply stating a fact. He didn't really care either way.

"I knew her," Dex said quietly. "I had to know for sure."

"Understood," Lino said, gently. "But we've got it from here. Another crew is on its

way to move the body, and after that we'll start to have preliminary results. You can head on out anytime you want." He smiled at Dex, and softly laid a hand on the man's shoulder. He gave a slight squeeze, then let his hand drop back by his side.

"Thanks," Dex said, heat radiating through his body from the shoulder down. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd felt another person's touch like that. It was emotional and personal, not like shaking hands or jostling on the train. It made Dex's head swim even more than the dark room and stench of death. He fled up the stairs, so quickly he almost lost his footing on one of the warped treads. As he scrambled out the door and into the main room of the building, he brought his hand to his face to discover that his cheeks were wet.

The train rides back to his neighbourhood were a blur. He stumbled into his apartment, and barely made it to the lav before he threw up. He leaned against the wall, heaving for a moment, before finally getting a grip on himself and slugging back a shot of FlyingFish. His stomach settled, and he walked back to his room. He stuffed his clothes in the autoclave, pulled out a food brick and the bottle of rum. He ate a bit of the gooey meal, and poured a large shot into his glass. He sat down, and sipped the drink.

He knew Hazel was dead before he got to the scene, and even though he had no real evidence to connect Hazel's death with Luis Harker's, he had been expecting the mutilation. But he was still shaken. There hadn't been many bodies when he was on the goon squad, and most of those had been fresh. Still, Dex knew it was because he knew her that this one hit hard. It was the first time he'd seen the dead body of someone he knew.

He was halfway through the Jamaica's Best, and doing a good number on staring at the wall, when he registered a noise in the back of his mind. After a moment, he realized that it was a ping from his system. He had an incoming message. He wasn't ready to see the report from Vonruden and Lino; Hazel was already dead, what difference would another few hours make? He was going to ignore it, then for some reason he switched his head up display on. It wasn't the report; it was Annabelle.

Dex answered. "We got Hazel's body."

"I saw the live report," Annabelle said. "You were there?"

"Yeah," Dex sighed. "It was a mistake. They didn't need me, I was just in the way. And I wish I hadn't seen her—" His voice broke.

Annabelle filled the silence. "I'm sorry, Dex," she said. "This is a tough one, for

sure. Was it... was it bad?"

"Bad enough," he answered. "You remember the body they found last week, down in brown sector?"

"Sure," Annabelle said. "What about it?"

"What happened to Hazel looked an awful lot like what happened to him."

"You're sure?" Annabelle asked.

"Pretty sure," Dex said. "I'm waiting on the scans from the other body and of course for the stuff on Hazel, but I think we've got something serious here."

He waited for Annabelle to answer. She took her time. "You think this is murder," she said, and it didn't sound like a question.

"I'm keeping an open mind," Dex said. "It could be a kinky sensation thing gone wrong, or some kind of weird side effect of some stim or buzzer. But the Harker scene definitely had indications that one or more other persons were involved, and that always makes me suspicious. And I can say that Hazel might have been into stims, but I never saw physical wounds or bruises on her. If she was doing sensation thrills, it was well hidden, which usually means well controlled."

"But, you don't think that's what it is, do you?" Annabelle asked. "If you were pressed, you'd say they were murdered."

"If I had to bet," Dex said, swallowing the last of his drink, "I'd say we have a serial killer loose on brown sector."

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