

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

an Anderson Dexter novel

Act of Will

M. Darusha Wehm

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Forty-Three

The squad captain, Zahara Zhang, called Dex as soon as she got the case update. "You make sure you take at least a pair of Shiraishi's folks with you before you hit the apartment. I don't need to tell you that this guy is armed and dangerous, and after getting the shit kicked out of him last night is probably more than a little pissed off. Speaking of which, how is Lewis holding up?"

"She's a champ," Dex said. "But you want to ask her yourself, she's right here with me."

"I'll call her next," Zizou said. "You be careful, Dex."

"Always, cap," he answered with more confidence than he felt. He had arranged with Jay Shiraishi, Malone's replacement as the new lieutenant of the street team, to meet with two of his goons at a small café around the corner from Bolick's building. He and Annabelle were on their way to the rendezvous point, Dex coordinating with the goon squad, and Annabelle setting up a real time tracker on Bolick. With some highly illegal maneuvering, Annabelle would be able to see where Bolick was, in the physical world, using the feed from his onboard system. They would be able to find him wherever he was, however the process was far from instantaneous. Annabelle wasn't even sure how long it would take to get it going; she'd never done it before.

The information they already had showed that Bolick had entered his apartment late the previous night. According to the building's logs he hadn't locked the door from the outside since. Without the tracker up and running, it was all they had to go on.

Annabelle and Dex stepped into the small coffee shop, and Dex's overlay pointed out his contacts at a small table near the bar. The two women, Julianne "Jules" Rudolf and Dot Kuhns were each sipping from tall to go cups and drumming their fingers on the table. Dex noticed Kuhns checking the time compulsively. Jules stood as Dex and Annabelle approached the table, and walked up to Annabelle, her hand extended.

"Nice work," she said, shaking Annabelle's hand. "I heard you were never on street, but you've obviously got the chops." She nodded pertly at her partner, who also stood.

"Let's go get this motherfucker," Dot said, her right hand straying to the knuckledusters on her belt.

Dex turned to Annabelle. "You don't have to come up with us," he said. "You can stay here if you want."

"Don't patronize her," Jules said. "She kicked that fucker's ass once already, I think she deserves to see him go down."

"It's okay," Annabelle said to Rudolf. "This has been really hard for me, and not just for the obvious reasons. He isn't being a dick, trust me." The short, fireplug of a woman grunted, but backed down. Annabelle turned to Dex. "That being said, I do want to see this piece of shit taken down. I'm coming with you."

Dex nodded. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

There was no response to their knocking at the door, so Dot used a chip scanner banned in every jurisdiction Dex could think of to bypass the door's simple ID chip-based security. It shushed open after she activated the small handheld device, and the two goons entered the apartment. They each took one side of the door, weapons drawn.

"Harold Bolick," Jules said, in a loud clear voice. "Show yourself." Nothing happened. Dex and Annabelle were waiting in the hallway for Jules or Dot to give the okay for them to enter the apartment. It seemed like an hour had passed before Dot appeared at the door, a dour look on her face. "He's not here," she said. "But he was."

Dex followed Kuhns to the lav, where the body of a man was lying in a pool of blood. His head was a bloody pulp, and Dex turned away. Annabelle was on her way to the lav to see what the commotion was, and Dex walked into her still moving body, forcing her away from the gruesome sight. "You don't need to see that," he said, as she peered over his shoulder.

She caught just a glimpse of the mess on the floor, and said, "Jesus, is that him?"

"No," Jules said, emerging from the lav. "I'm guessing it's the roommate, but we won't know for sure until the scans are in."

"How do you know it's not Bolick?" Dex asked.

"Too tall."

Annabelle slumped down to the floor, her eyes unfocussed.

"You okay?" Dex asked, sitting down next to her.

"I'm looking for him" she said, her eyes dancing back and forth as if reading something only she could see. "I've got him tracked to a five kilometre radius, but that's just not enough." Frustration filled her voice.

"Send me the map," Dex said, a dark idea spreading in his mind. Almost as soon as he finished the sentence, his system pinged, and a map of the city appeared on his display. The image centred on circle which showed the area Bolick was currently in. The circle encompassed a hodgepodge of neighbourhoods, but Dex felt his blood chill when he saw what he'd feared — one of those neighbourhoods was brown sector. Where Bolick had taken all his victims.

Dex and Annabelle left Rudolf and Kuhns to take care of the mess in the apartment, and caught a train to brown sector. En route, Dex called Jay Shiraishi and filled the new lieutenant in on what had happened.

"You'd better get a move on," Shiraishi said. "I got a message from Melissa Vonruden about ten minutes ago. She recognized the image you sent around of the perp. Seems that she ran into him at her day job."

"What does she do?" Dex asked.

"She tends bar at a stim joint in green sector," Shiraishi said. "And she's certain your man was in, not even an hour ago."

"She's sure?" Dex asked, his heart racing.

"Yeah," Shiraishi said. "She said he looked like he'd gone one round too many with a mean drunk, but it's him. And he left following another guy out."

"Oh shit," Dex said. "Jay, we need everyone you've got in brown sector to search the abandoned buildings. He's got another victim, right now."

"I've only got two pair on the street," the lieutenant said. "I'll get them working the grid right away, but don't you have anything more than just someplace in brown? Anything to narrow it down a little?"

Dex looked over at Annabelle, who was still working away online. "Not yet, but soon, I hope."

"Well, let's just hope it's soon enough," Shiraishi said.

Dex and Annabelle got off the train in the middle of brown sector. Shiraishi had patched Dex in to his teams on the street, so they could match their search to the grid Shiraishi had laid. As they approached the first building, Dex turned to Annabelle. "I want to tell you that you don't have to go in there," he said, "but I can't. It's just you and

me for now. If anything happens Shiraishi's people will be here within minutes, but we're on our own up front. Do you think you can handle it?"

Annabelle focussed back on Dex, and managed a smile. "It doesn't matter what I think," she said. "What choice do I have? I can't let something awful happen just because I'm a little shy."

Dex put his hand to her cheek. "You're incredible," he said.

"And don't you forget it, mister," she said. "Okay, let's get it over with."

Chapter Forty-Four

The first building was empty, but they didn't know that until they'd searched every room. They stayed close together, trying to be as quiet as possible, but Dex was sure that anyone could hear the tattoo their racing hearts made, and the rasp of their shallow breaths. When they finally got out of the dilapidated old warehouse, both of them were drenched with sweat.

"I have to tell you," Annabelle said, when they were on their way to the next location, "this really is a pretty terrible date." Dex laughed, all the way down to his belly, and Annabelle joined in. They stood on the street, the two of them looking like they hadn't seen the inside of a lav in days, laughing their heads off.

Finally, they stopped, and Dex looked at Annabelle. "When this is over," he began, but she put a finger on his lips.

"Later will take care of itself," she said. "Let's just get this done, okay?" Dex nodded, and they walked the three blocks to the next building on their list.

They had crawled into a small opening which Annabelle was sure would emerge in a large room, when both their systems began an insistent chirping. They stopped and each of them answered the call. "I've got it," Annabelle whispered.

"Me, too," Dex said, as he saw a map of brown sector appear before his eyes. A small green dot appeared at one corner, the dot representing Harold Arturo Bolick. He was in a building only two blocks away, and he wasn't moving.

"Back up," Dex said, urgently, starting to crawl backwards into Annabelle.

"I'm going as fast as I can," she said, as she backed out of the small tunnel.

"I've notified Shiraishi and the street team to meet us there," Dex said. "We're the closest, so we'll probably get there first."

"Fine," Annabelle said, "if we ever get out of this goddamned hole." Dex could hear her voice getting higher, and her breath was coming faster and faster.

"It's okay, kiddo," he said, trying to calm her, "we're almost out now. Just a few more metres." He could hear her ragged breaths, but she kept moving and soon she was out of the tunnel and heading for the door of the building. Dex followed quickly, and they were on the street, running toward the green dot.

As they ran, Dex pulled a stunner from his pocket. "Take this," he said, pressing the

small object into Annabelle's hand. "Just in case."

"You need it," she said, her breath heavy.

"I've got other stuff," Dex said, pulling a set of tarnished knuckledusters and a sedative spray from his pocket. "I'll be okay." Annabelle nodded, and pocketed the stunner. They turned a corner and slowed, approaching the building where Bolick was waiting.

"We can't wait for the goons to catch up," Dex said quietly as they walked to the broken door of the decrepit old one storey building.

"I know," Annabelle said, a steely look in her eye. "I'll be fine. Let's go get him."

They sidestepped through the doorway, slipping beside the door on its broken track. The map showed that Bolick was in a room just to the east of their position, through a hallway and around a corner. Dex opened an audio channel between himself, Annabelle and the rest of the team. "We're in the building," he subvocalized, and looked at Annabelle. "I'll go first, you follow and cover me." She nodded, and crept behind Dex as he crabwalked down the small hallway.

There were boxes and bags all over the floor, the place covered with the detritus that streeters leave when they've decided a place is too destroyed even for one of their squats. One of the outside walls had a ragged hole through it, and some previous resident had tried to patch it with what looked like an amalgam of old food wrappers and glue. Mixed in with the other trash were patches of broken tech, bundles of unbearably filthy clothes and some kind of sticky goo that Dex refused to contemplate. He ignored it all, but moved carefully so as not to disturb the mess and give themselves away.

As they reached the corner, they could hear voices. One voice was low and they couldn't make out the words, but the other one seemed to be laughing maniacally. Annabelle made to move in, but Dex put a hand up. "Two voices is a good sign," he said. "Let's not blow it now." He crouched, and moved silently around the corner, edging to the other side of the wall. Annabelle crept around the corner, staying on the inside. There was a closed door just in front of them.

"Shiraishi," Dex said, and he and Annabelle heard the lieutenant reply. "What's the ETA on the cavalry?"

"About a three minutes," he said.

Dex looked at Annabelle, who shook her head. "Not fast enough," he said. "We're

going in.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Shiraishi said.

“Damn it,” Annabelle broke in. “He’s got someone in there with him. Did you even look at the images of those bodies, you fucking—”

Dex cut her off. “We’re going in, Jay. Get your people here as soon as you can.”

“Roger,” Shiraishi said.

Dex turned to Annabelle and gestured to the door. “I’ll knock it down, then you go in and take the left. I’ll take the right. Just stun anyone you see, and we’ll sort it out later. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Dex stood, and aimed a hard kick at the spot next to the doorknob. The door cracked, and half of it fell into the room. Annabelle was through the small gap before Dex had time to think, and as he pushed the remains of the door aside, he heard the sound of a stunner go off. As he entered the small room, he smelled a raw, human stink before he saw the man tied to a chair, slumping forward, two long cuts on his naked torso.

Dex heard an electrical pop, like a stunner going off, and the man in the chair fell forward, limp. He took a step forward, then heard a voice to his left say, amazed, “You came back,” and simultaneously the sound of a stunner clicking ineffectually in rapid succession. Before he could even turn toward her, Dex yelled, “Thumb the reset!” at Annabelle. He turned and saw Bolick and Annabelle, the man with his arms around Annabelle’s neck.

Dex began stepping forward and pulling his arm back, knuckledusters already covering his fist with their crackling electricity, when he heard a sickening crack. He saw a body slump toward the floor, and a combination of terror, rage and indescribable sadness momentarily paralyzed him. “Annabelle,” he choked out, then heard the clatter of a steel-bladed knife falling to the grimy floor. His eyes followed the knife up to the hand which had just before been holding it, and he realized that he’d gotten it backwards.

Annabelle was holding the lifeless body of Harold Bolick, a look of cold rage on her face. Her right hand was still on his left cheek, his head at an impossible angle to the rest of his body. She looked at Dex, and when their eyes met she finally dropped Bolick. He slid to the floor like a sack of vatmeat. Annabelle let her hands drop to her side, and let Dex come toward her and put his arms around her. “It’s over,” he said, stroking her hair. “It’s over, now.”

She pulled away, and blinked the tears away. "I stunned him," she gestured at the inert and bleeding man in the chair without looking at him. "But he needs help — he's cut pretty bad."

Dex left her and went to the man on the chair. He was alive, but bleeding a lot from the cuts on his chest. Dex was undoing the bindings which held him to the chair when the four members of the goon squad burst in.

"Where's the perp?" a tall, broad shouldered man demanded.

"Dead," Annabelle said, pointing at the body on the floor.

"This guy needs help," Dex said, pulling the man out of the chair and into the arms of two of Shiraishi's people.

"Consider it done, sir," a familiar voice said, and Dex recognized Eduardo Lino. "I'm glad to be here for this, and I can't say I'm too sad to see it end this way." He gestured at the body on the floor. Dex shot a look at Annabelle, but her expression was unreadable.

"Just take care of this guy," Dex said, and walked back to Annabelle. He took her hand in his, and after a beat she slowly looked at him.

"Let's get out of here," he said. She nodded and they walked out of the building.

Chapter Forty-Five

It had been a couple of months since Annabelle had killed Harry Bolick, and a month since Dex arrived in Nice. Dex was working a case about a stolen objet d'art for one of his neighbours in the housing cooperative and slowly building a reputation in Nice. He had managed to stay on at the squad, but Zizou suggested he might want to make nice with the local captain at least. Dex had met the man a few times for cocktails at a local café — Le Rétro was no Cog and Sprocket and René Biagini was no Pat Malone, but Dex liked the local beer and the local captain's company well enough.

After the regular meeting with Zizou's squad, Dex found himself still in Monte's after the usual crowd had left. It was only him and Annabelle, and she had been tying one on a little more than usual. Thanks to Biagini, Dex had found an excellent liquor store locally and he'd been treating himself to a couple of rounds of rum and water. They were both a little looser than usual, and Annabelle suggested a change of venue.

"Let's walk," she said, and Dex agreed. He took her arm, and they walked into the dark, rainy streets of Chandlers. "How's your new place?" she asked, as they walked under the weak yellow light of a streetlight.

"I'm getting used to it," Dex said. "I still bash into the table in the middle of the night when I get up to take a piss, but otherwise it's fine." Annabelle laughed. Dex's new apartment was smaller than his old one, but it was noticeably nicer. It was a modern multiuse design, so the table and two chairs concealed the main cupboard, zapper and recyclatron. He actually had more usable room, even though the place was a good 10 square metres smaller than his old apartment.

Of course, Dex's place couldn't hold a candle to Annabelle's apartment, but with the pay cut he'd taken by giving up his job at B&B, he was lucky to have gotten as nice a place as he did. And he rarely had the opportunity to be envious; he was now only a quick fifteen minute train ride away from Annabelle's place, but he'd only been over there once since he moved. He had promised not to push things once he arrived in Nice, and he hadn't. He could wait. He could wait a lifetime if he had to.

"Actually, it's a great place," he continued. "I haven't managed to ruin it with all my junk yet."

"What junk?" Annabelle asked. "Now that you don't have a work uniform any more, you hardly have any stuff at all."

"There's my mandolin," Dex said, a wounded look on his avatar's face.

"Which you wouldn't even have if I hadn't given it to you," Annabelle said. "For someone who likes the physical world, you don't show it, mister."

"There's more to the world than stuff," Dex said, smiling. "I'd love to have you over sometime," he continued, "I could play for you..." He felt her stiffen against his arm. "I'm sorry," he said, quickly. "I'm not trying to pressure you into anything, I was just talking."

"I know," Annabelle said. "It's just that after everything that happened, I just feel a little..." Her voice trailed off. "Fragile, I guess."

She hadn't ever talked about what happened in that small room in brown sector, and every time Dex had tried to bring it up she either changed the subject or just left. He'd stopped trying. Now, he cautiously said, "I know how things can haunt a person."

"This isn't just any old thing," Annabelle stopped and turned to face Dex. "For christ's sake, I killed a man. With my bare hands; I broke his neck."

"You had no choice," he said.

"There's always a choice, Dex," Annabelle said. "And we know which one I made." She turned, and walked a few steps into the darkness. "I was only just getting used to it," she said, in a small voice.

"Used to what?" Dex asked, confused.

"This," Annabelle said, her hands pointing at herself. "This body of mine. I was almost feeling like it was part of me, part of who I am, who I want to be. Then it went and..." She choked back a sob. "I never wanted to do anything like that, not even to someone like him. Not ever." Her shoulders shook, and Dex knew she was crying. He walked up behind her, and carefully put his arms around her.

"He would have killed you," Dex said, turning her to face him. "When he got

you on the street, he was going to cut you just like he cut the others. And he wouldn't have stopped with you. He wasn't going to ever stop, Annabelle, you have to know that."

"I don't know," she said, her eyes welling up again. "Maybe I should just have let him..."

"Don't ever say that," Dex said, sharply.

"What?" Annabelle said. "I'm useless, now. I'm worse than I ever was — I can barely leave my apartment, Dex, I'm so scared of being touched. I can hardly even concentrate on my job; I haven't picked up a case since it happened. Hell, even in here in M City I'm no good any more." She looked away from him, and said quietly, "I know you're only still with me out of pity..."

"That's the dumbest thing I've heard in a long time," Dex said. "Sure, I wish things were different, who doesn't? But we get what get. And what do I have? I have a beautiful girlfriend, who is smart, strong and the toughest person I've ever met. Don't you fall apart on me now."

Annabelle looked up at Dex. "You really think I'm strong enough for this?"

"Hell yes," Dex said. "You'll get through this, I know you will. It just takes time. And I'm a pretty patient guy. Besides, if you never come see my apartment, I never have to tidy it up." He grinned.

Annabelle smiled, weakly. "I'm glad you haven't lost your sense of humour."

"You haven't either," Dex said. "It's just hiding. But I mean it, Annabelle. If you can never be with me out there again, I can live with it."

"Are you sure?" Annabelle asked.

"Yes, I'm sure," Dex said, and took a breath. "I love you, Annabelle Lewis, and whether I'm with you in here or out there, that doesn't change it. I'm here for you. Wherever you want me, however you'll have me, I'm yours." He reached out to touch her face, and she walked into his arms. She lifted her face and they kissed, holding each other in the darkness of the virtual street.

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