



an Anderson Dexter novel

Act of Will

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Forty

When Dex got to the hotel room, Annabelle was in pajamas, curled in a ball under the covers on the bed. He had been talking to her the whole time he walked from his apartment to the hotel, but he still had to confirm that it really was him at the door before she would disengage the locks and remove the chair she'd wedged under the knob. When she opened the door, and saw him there, she collapsed into his arms.

"Did you get him?" she whispered as she clung to him.

"There was no one there," Dex said. "It looked like there was some blood or something at the corner, in the doorway of the supplement shop."

"I guess that means I didn't kill him," Annabelle said, sniffing and starting to pull away from Dex. They walked back into the hotel room awkwardly, Annabelle refusing to allow Dex to let go of her completely. Dex shut the door behind him and he heard the thunk of the lock as Annabelle's system re-engaged the deadbolt.

"Guess not, kiddo," Dex said, walking her back to the bed, and sitting beside her. He pulled the cover over her, wrapping it around her shoulders. She had been shaking since he'd arrived and she was still shivering, though the temperature in the room was higher than normal. "You want to talk about it?" he asked, gently.

Annabelle shook her head. "I just want to forget it," she said, wiping her nose. "I've never been so scared. All I could see was that box clamped behind that scooter. He was going to put me in it, I know he was. I can't stop thinking about it. I close my eyes, and there it is — dark and small. It was the most terrifying thing I've ever seen." She buried her face into Dex's shoulder, and he just held her. "I wish I could just forget it all," she whimpered.

They sat that way for a long time. Finally, Dex said, "I know you want to forget it, but our memories make us who we are. Even the hard ones. Maybe those ones the most." He stroked her hair, and sighed deeply. "You're a strong person, Annabelle," he said. "Stronger than anyone I know. This won't kill you, not even close. You've been through so much more than this — I know you can handle it. If anyone can, it's you, kiddo." She didn't answer, just held on to Dex as if he were the only thing keeping her from falling off an apartment block rooftop.

Eventually, Annabelle pulled away, and padded into the lav. Dex heard water

running, and rushed to the door. "Wait," he shouted. "You'll have evidence on you..."

Annabelle opened the door, and stood just on the other side of the threshold. She smiled, but her eyes were vacant. "I already took the swabs," she said. "Blood on my hand, my sleeve where he grabbed me. The physical specimens are over there," she pointed at the table, where Dex saw a piece of fabric and a sample cloth each in their own silvered sterile bags. "I did it while we were talking; the scans are already being analyzed."

"Jesus, Annabelle," Dex said. "I can't believe you managed to do all that."

"It was your voice," she said, softly. "As long as I could hear your voice, I knew there were things I had to do. I didn't have to think about — about what happened."

"Oh, kiddo," Dex said, his voice cracking. He took a step toward her, but she raised her hand.

"Don't you fall apart on me, now," she said, tears coming to her eyes. "I can't handle that. Just let me wash my face, and then we'll see what we need to do, okay?"

"Okay," Dex said, fighting for control. When Annabelle closed the door, Dex wiped his eyes and fought down the tears that were threatening to take over. He couldn't believe how strong she was. Not only had she fought off a killer who had taken at least six other people, but she'd had the presence of mind to send her own samples in. It would have been better if she'd waited for him, but he couldn't fault her that. He knew that if it had been him, he'd have been in the shower long before he even thought about evidence.

He logged into the case file, and saw that Annabelle had, indeed, scanned and logged the two samples, and that the system was extracting DNA and other evidence from them now. She had even set the system to search for a match among all the male employees on the list from Gractor.

"You did all this while I was coming over?" he asked aloud as Annabelle returned from the lav.

"I did the online work while I was in the shower," Annabelle said, sitting in the chair by the table. "I didn't want to feel anything, you know, here," she said, her voice quiet. "It's always easier for me if I'm online."

"I know," Dex said, sitting on the edge of the bed. He looked at her, and wondered at how the fragile woman before him, who couldn't even look at him, could be the same person who did everything else she had done that night.

As if reading his mind, Annabelle said, "It's like it was happening to someone else,

you know? Like I was just watching it all from a metre away. When I got back here I think I just shut off for a while; I don't remember doing anything until we talked. Then it was like it was someone else again — I just had tasks to do, things to accomplish. If I just plug away at the work I don't have to think about anything. But now..." she looked at Dex, then quickly looked down again. "Now, it's there, in the back of my mind, and I can't make it stop."

She started to cry, very softly. Dex didn't know what to do, whether he should get up and go to her or leave her alone. He just sat on the bed, watching. "Oh, Dex," she said between her tears, "those poor people." She lost it then, weeping openly. Dex went to her, and kneeled in front of her, his arms around her. She leaned into him, sobbing into his shoulder.

"It's okay," he whispered. "You're safe now; I'm here. And we'll catch this bastard, you and me together. He won't hurt anyone else, I promise."

Dex stayed with Annabelle for the rest of the night. He put her to bed, promising to stay in the chair, which did. He didn't think he slept at all, instead he watched Annabelle as she tossed and turned fitfully, even though he'd made her take a draught of SleepingJuice. When she woke early the next morning, he kept his distance but made sure she knew he was there. He was too tired to be surprised when she asked him to join her in the bed.

He climbed in next to her, the previous night's clothes still on, and put his left arm over her. He burrowed his face in her hair, and held her tightly. "Don't leave me," he thought he heard her say, but he had closed his eyes, and sleep was descending on him, so it might have just been a dream.

Chapter Forty-One

When the man came to, twelve hours had gone by. He gingerly got up, and stepped over Gerry's body to look at his reflection. His stomach hurt and his nose looked pretty bad, but he wouldn't be stopped in the street. Especially not where he was going. Plenty of folks down in green sector looked worse than he did.

He changed clothes, and put his tools back into his pockets — 'buzzer in the right pocket, knife in the left. He liked the feel of passing the knife from hand to hand between cuts. He fingered the hilt of the weapon as he unplugged the scooter, the smoothness of the worn bone calming him with every stroke. Annabelle Lewis had gotten away for now. But the night was full of possibilities, of other choices to be made.

He parked the scooter in a small alley near the stim bar, and walked around to the front door. The place was dark, as they usually were, the bartender a tall, blonde woman who looked like she wouldn't put up with any bullshit in her place. That was fine; the man didn't intend to do anything inside the premises.

He ordered a Peach Soda, a mild sedative with clarity overtones, and waited as the woman mixed the cartridge. He waved his hand over the till, paying for the cocktail with an anonymous cash transfer via the chip in his hand. He took the cartridge over to a small table, and shot half the load while he scanned the crowd.

He hadn't been in a place like this in several months, but it was the usual scene — most of the folks lost in their private worlds, some so far gone they were gaping and drooling on themselves. A few chatting amiably, and there was always the couple or group who were obviously only minutes away from one of those charge by the hour rooms down the street. The man ignored them.

He focussed on the loners, the ones who were staring blissfully at nothing, or half smiling to themselves at some private thought. He finally decided on the tall, thin man at the bar. Happy, but not out of his mind. Exactly the right kind of person for a potential candidate.

He didn't believe in fate, but he knew he had made a good choice when the thin man got up to leave just as he'd downed the last of his Peach Soda. He turned in the empty to the recycler by the bar and followed the man out the door a few steps behind. His luck continued, as the man turned into the alley where he had parked the scooter. It wouldn't be like Annabelle Lewis would have been, the man thought to himself in a moment of self-pity, but as soon as the 'buzzer was in his hands all his thoughts turned to

this new candidate.

He slipped in behind the man, cleared his throat, and when the man turned, he shot his arm forward. This time, the 'buzzer connected solidly with one of the man's many facial nodes, and he went down in a heap. In no time the man had his candidate safely in the box, and was on his way to brown sector.

Chapter Forty-Two

Dex woke with a start. At first he didn't know where he was or why he was there, but then the night's events slowly came back to him, like the memory of a nightmare. He rolled over carefully, to find the rest of the bed empty. He reached over to the rumpled sheets where Annabelle had lain. Still warm. He sat up and looked around the small room.

Annabelle was at the small cupboard area, heating something in the zapper. She hadn't heard Dex stir, and he watched her hunched shoulders as she waited for the machine to finish. He didn't want to startle her, so made sure he made some noise as he got out of the bed. At the sound of his rustling, she turned and smiled.

"Morning," she said. "I've got some coffee going, it should be ready in a few minutes."

"How are you feeling?" Dex asked, watching her with concern.

"My arm hurts," she said, lifting the sleeve of her top to reveal a livid purple bruise on her upper arm. "Otherwise, I'm just dandy." She smiled ironically, and turned back to the zapper as it beeped. She opened the lid and took out two large mugs of steaming coffee. "Pale and sweet, right?" she confirmed, handing Dex the cup.

"Just like me," he answered, grinning. He didn't know if this forced domesticity was the right thing for either of them now, but what else was there to do? Annabelle was obviously fine physically, and Dex was the last person to know what to do for whatever trouble her mind was in.

"Just like you," Annabelle said, her eyes twinkling again for the first time since before she had left The Cog and Sprocket. Dex marvelled at what a good night's sleep could accomplish.

He sat at the small table and sipped at the coffee. Annabelle made a great cup; so much better than the swill at B&B... "Oh, fuck," Dex muttered, looking down at the coffee cup.

"What?" Annabelle said, her tough veneer cracking as her voice trembled slightly.

"Oh, nothing, really," Dex said, "I just realized that I'm supposed to be at work right now, and I'm pretty sure I'm all out of second chances. I guess I'll be quitting a little sooner than I had planned." He smiled, hoping that they weren't about to get into another argument.

“Why put off until tomorrow what has already been done by mistake today?” Annabelle said. She looked at Dex, and her smile faded. “And in that seize the moment vein, I’m really sorry for the way I reacted last night at the bar.”

“No,” Dex said, “It’s not your fault. I shouldn’t have sprung it all on you like that...”

“Maybe not,” Annabelle interrupted, “but I still overreacted. I know you’re not trying to change anything between us with this move, it was all just me.” She looked away, cradling her coffee cup in her two hands. “I’ve always just thought of the distance between us as an escape valve, you know? Like a natural barrier that we could use — no, that I could use when things got too tough. Even with everything that’s happened between us lately, all the changes, I never thought that that distance would disappear. And I didn’t realize how much I was clinging to it until you said you wanted to move to Nice.”

She turned back to face him. “I’m sorry, Dex,” she said. “I didn’t want you to know how much I needed that space, that easy way to get away.”

“It’s okay, kiddo,” Dex said. “I know you need your independence, and with so much happening between us we both need to be able to have time away from each other. If the Barcelona complex was done, I would have picked that one, but the other two just seemed too far. Though, it would still be closer than we are now, so we could manage, I guess. I don’t think I could afford to visit as often as I do now, but...”

“No,” Annabelle said. “I doesn’t really matter, I see that now. I thought having an ocean between us made a difference, but the real distance between us is the same whether we are on opposite sides of the world or opposite sides of the same bed.” She came over to the table, and sat on its edge next to Dex. “If it’s what you want, move to Nice,” she said. “Or move to St. Petersburg. I’m pretty sure I can afford that train ride and I’ve always wanted to see the North. But whatever you choose, do it because that’s what you want, not because I got hysterical in a bar.”

Dex laid a hand on Annabelle’s knee, and was sure that she didn’t flinch at all. He looked up at her, and felt something brewing in his chest. He’d felt it before, but tamped it down. It was old and familiar, and while it felt good it also gave him a dreadful feeling that things couldn’t possibly end well. “Aw, kiddo,” he said, but his next words were stilled by an insistent ping from his system.

He saw in Annabelle’s eyes that her system was going off, too, and they both knew that this meant only one thing. They had finally gotten a match from the Gractor employee list. They both went online, and in seconds Dex was updating the case files with the new information and sending all the data on this match to every squad member in the city. Annabelle was searching for as much information on the suspect as she could

get while downloading images, addresses and maps to their systems for instant access.
The name they both would remember without help — Harold Arturo Bolick.

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