

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

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Ten

Hazel Ramer was sure that over the course of her life she had tried pretty much every neurostimulant that was legal and a good number that weren't. Some of them were better than others, and of course you used different things for different reasons. She was particularly fond of a couple of combinations — she liked to be able to feel different emotions and sensations at once. But those she only did online. The implants she and everyone else used to access everywhere.net had built in safeguards, so there was no way she could hurt herself with anything she did online, not permanently anyway. And if she was physically safe in her apartment, it didn't really matter if she had a bad reaction. She had her system set to automatically log her off if things got out of control, and once she was disconnected, she'd be fine. It had been a long time since it had come to that.

She wasn't one of those poor people you see in doorways and alleys, in those terrible dive bars in the bad parts of the city. She believed that if the chemicals exist to help you feel the way you want to feel, it's just plain stupidity not to take advantage of them. She thought it would be like refusing to talk to people online and only ever meeting face to face. Pointless. These things all existed to make life better, so there was no reason not to use them.

She was thinking about that as she walked home from the train stop. She was remembering her conversation with Dex, his strange refusal to do those little things that made life bearable. He'd always been that way. What was it he said, that he preferred to suffer? She wondered how true that was. He had always had the air of a man with a past, some kind of dark secret, but Hazel always guessed that it was just an act to keep people from trying to get close. He seemed different now, though. Still suffering, but maybe finally learning to enjoy the pain?

Just as those thoughts crossed her mind, she felt a pain of her own. A hand was clapped over her mouth and nose, and she felt her left arm being twisted behind her. She tried to scream, but the hand over her face muffled her cries. She felt herself being pulled backward, but she could only limply struggle. She couldn't breathe. She saw a flash of metal under her eyes. There was something in the hand that was over her face, something digging into her cheek. She felt herself begin to panic, when the hand twitched and a jolt of pain shot through her cheek. But as soon as it began, it was over, and Hazel felt better.

No, she didn't feel better — Hazel felt great. Where her arm was pinned behind her, the nerves all sang. It was like where there had been pain there was now a pleasurable tingling. Very pleasurable tingling indeed. The hand over her mouth felt like a caress, and

only its presence stopped her from moaning with pleasure. Even her lungs, starved of air, felt wonderful, like they were snuggled under a warm blanket. Hazel felt herself being stuffed in a box, the cramped quarters cozy as a womb. She felt the box moving — maybe it was a trailer on a scooter, she thought. She never wondered where she was being taken; the trip itself was so wonderful. Every bump and jostle made her muscles tense and contract, the sexual feeling overwhelming.

Finally, the box stopped moving, and Hazel saw it open. A man she didn't recognize stood over her, smiling. She smiled back, and let him help her out of the box. They were in a small, dirty room, with nothing but a plain metal chair. "Sit," he said, his voice nuzzling her ears. She would do anything for a voice like that, she thought, and sat in the chair. She saw him take a length of polymer rope out of one of his pockets, and grinned. He was going to tie her up! Just thinking about it made her feel wet between her legs. She couldn't stop herself from uttering small gasps as she let him bind her to the chair.

"Does that feel good?" he asked in that beautiful voice, once she was trussed to the chair. Her arms were pinned behind the chair back, her hands together. She could barely move. The sensation was exquisite.

"Yes," she whispered.

He smiled, and took a gleaming knife from a small sheath on his hip. He held it loosely in front of him, at about Hazel's eye level. She was mesmerized by the way the undulating metal of its blade caught the little light in the room. "That's good," he said as he cut away the material of her shirt. Hazel cried out in pleasure as he slipped the knife under the skin of her chest, between her breasts. He was pulling now, tiny drops of blood spattering his face. Hazel had never felt joy like this before.

"That's good," he repeated, his voice like velvet on her skin. "I want to make you feel the way I feel."

Chapter Eleven

Dex couldn't find anything about Hazel Ramer. He'd checked B&B's internal board when he'd first gotten in, but there was nothing new. There wasn't even a mention — it was as if nothing had happened. Dex frowned. He knew that B&B's Security would be looking into it; there was the apartment to deal with at a minimum, and if she'd had some kind of accident then showed up a few days later to find someone else in her apartment and her job up for grabs, it would be a nightmare of paperwork for her compensation and benefits advisor. Dex guessed that it wouldn't look too good to new hires, either.

But if they were investigating, they were doing it quietly. He connected to the Cubicle Men's system, and sent a request to have B&B's Security logs sent to him. The organization had a staff of many people whose talents were more like Annabelle's than Dex's. One of the reasons why the organization encouraged its members to take on low to mid level jobs with the firms was to get access to their internal systems. Over the years, clever crackers had tapped into the Security systems for all of the major firms. It wasn't always on; in order to keep their own access a secret, the organization had to access each system discretely. Dex had the rank and access to get into his own employer's Security files, it just wouldn't be immediate. He figured that he would know whatever the B&B Security people knew by the time he got home.

Or maybe more. Dex guessed that Security would be assuming that Hazel had just taken off, or maybe had some kind of misadventure. He hoped that's all it was, but honestly he doubted it was either. Hazel had never struck Dex as the impulsive type, at least not with her livelihood. And he knew she was smart enough to hit a medclinic if something happened, even if she were high when it did. So long as you're getting your quota of widgets out, corporate couldn't give a shit about what you do. And the firm's medclinic is on retainer, so it's not like they are shelling out any cash to fix up your bangs and bruises. So, Dex figured that there was a good chance that Security was just chasing empty leads. And he had an idea about something he could check that they couldn't.

It was mid-afternoon, Dex's own personal witching hour. Nothing was worse than an almost but not quite finished work day. He got up from his desk, scowled at Mister Mouse and walked the few metres to the break room. He poured a coffee, and thought about Hazel. He liked her, always had, and hoped that she liked him, too. If she was okay, and he was just being paranoid, what he was about to do could really piss her off. It seemed like a worthwhile gamble.

Back at his desk, Dex pulled up a client file and started a manual upgrade the client had ordered. While he worked, he used his private access to call Annabelle. "In the afternoon slump, are you?" she asked.

"Am I that predictable?" Dex asked, turning to the wall and subvocalizing so that the prying Mister Mouse didn't have anything to add to the file Dex imagined that he kept on him.

"I'm afraid so," Annabelle said. "So, have you sorted out that thing that was bothering you last night?"

Annabelle kept her voice light, but Dex knew she was concerned. It had doubtlessly taken all her willpower not to call him before he reached out to her. "No," he said simply, "and that's why I called. See, it's not just the two pm blues."

"What's up?" Annabelle asked, and Dex told her briefly about Hazel's disappearance. He expected Annabelle to tell him that he was jumping the gun, that a woman he barely knew could be expected to do just about anything, and taking off for a few days was not that unusual anyway. He expected her to remind him that the organization's resources were not for his own personal use, and that her particular and highly illegal talents weren't his for the taking whenever he felt like it. But she didn't say anything like that. She said, "What can I do to help?" Dex could have kissed her.

"I want to you look for Hazel," he said. "You know, the kind of invasive, immoral cracker way you have." Annabelle had discovered a way to crack into the everywhere-net's logs of individual access systems. The public net that everyone used for business, finance, entertainment and more was essentially a public utility run by a cartel of the firms. Almost everyone accessed the system through neural implants which interfaced with personal systems — those internal nodes which held audio and video memories or enhanced cogitation or sensation — and those personal systems were of necessity chock full of identifying information. The everywhere-net kept logs of everyone's activities, both online and offline. Hardly anyone ever looked at these files, and they were automatically purged within a few days of creation. They existed mostly for cases just like this one, but it took a long time for even a large firm's Security to get access to the information. Hazel had already been gone a couple of days; if Barrett and Brar's Security didn't have the information already, it would probably be gone in a day.

Getting everywhere-net's logs for Hazel wasn't the part that Dex worried about, and Annabelle agreed readily to check them out. It was his next request that was more of an issue. "So, Annabelle," Dex began, "if you can get into everywhere-net's logs, you must be able to trace Hazel once you're in there. You know, tunnel into her own personal system

or something, right?"

"Whoa, Dex," Annabelle said. "That's a serious invasion of privacy. I mean, if you'd just decided to say fuck it all or were off on a bender or something, how would you like it to get a knock in your head and have some stranger barge in on your mind? I mean, most people don't even know that that sort of thing can even happen. I can't imagine what that would be like."

"I know it's kind of an extreme idea," Dex said, backpedalling a little. "I just wondered if you could do it; you know, if it seemed like it was the only way."

Annabelle was quiet for a moment, and Dex wondered if she was thinking of a way to tell him how appalled she was at him even suggesting such a thing. Privacy was very important to Annabelle, Dex knew, and he was afraid that he'd made a terrible mistake in asking her this. He was trying to figure out a way to get out of this situation when he heard her take a deep breath.

"I can do it," she said carefully, "but just because it's possible does not mean that I should do it."

"Fair enough," Dex said. "It's probably overkill here, anyway. I just feel like my hands are tied, like there's nothing I can do. And while I can't explain it in any way that makes any real sense, I just have a terrible feeling about this. If she's in trouble, and I really think she is, if there's any way to help her I want to do it."

"I understand, Dex," Annabelle said, and Dex knew that she meant it. "If we find anything more concrete, maybe it is something we could try. Maybe. I'd have to be pretty sure that it was the only way, but I'm not ruling it out completely. I'm just not willing to do it now."

Dex let out a breath he didn't realize he even been holding. "I'm sure that's the right decision," he said. "You'll get the other stuff for me, though?" he asked.

"Of course," Annabelle said, the lightness back in her voice. "I know I have to earn my keep."

Dex laughed. "You earn your keep plenty, kiddo, and it's not by doing anything fancy with cracking into systems, let me tell you."

"You old sweet talker, you," Annabelle said. "Now go back to pretending to work so I can get back to really working. Some of us have things to do in a day, you know," she chided Dex good-naturedly.

"You know, I could help you with that," he answered, and ended the call.

It was less than an hour later, almost the end of his day, when Dex's messenger chirped. It was his boss, Marian, wanting a chat. Dex closed his eyes, and sighed. He needed this kind of distraction like a hole in the head. He hadn't spoken with his boss since he'd been put on a kind of employment probation, three-quarters time and pay. It had actually worked out great for him, since he kept his apartment and other benefits and got a shorter workday out of it. But he also knew that it was a last chance kind of thing. One more fuckup and he was out.

He thought about it for a moment. He had no love of his job and B&B. He had some seniority and enjoyed a slightly better apartment for it, but otherwise what he did day in day out would be no different at some other firm. Maybe it was time to move on. Getting canned could actually help him out — they would have to give him severance which he wouldn't get if he quit, so he'd have at least a couple of weeks before he'd have to find another job. Or at least somewhere else to live.

Having decided that he couldn't be bothered to try and keep his job, Dex answered Marian's ping. He heard his boss's voice clearly in his ear, and he idly wondered if they gave new management training in how to sound like a dick.

"Andersson," Marian began, and Dex sighed inwardly. "I've been looking at your personnel record as part of a periodic review." So this was it, Dex thought. He said nothing, and could almost hear Marian's discomfort. He smiled to himself.

"Yes, well," his boss said, unable to bear the silence. "I've been reviewing your file, and I've noticed that you have been back on track. No more tardiness, following all the scripts on your calls. Very good, Andersson. I'm pleased to see that you are back on the team." Dex still had nothing to say, but had to make sure his boss knew that he was still there.

"Glad to hear it," he said.

"Unfortunately," Marian's voice became cooler, "we are not yet able to reinstate your full time status." Dex grinned to himself as Marian took on a conspiratorial tone. "I might be able to move forward on that a bit faster if you were to participate in a new program we have instituted. Purely voluntary, of course."

Dex rolled his eyes. "I'm listening," he said.

Marian explained that even with all the monitoring available to them — electronic time stamps, all calls and communications on the system copied and monitored — there were still some things that on the people on the ground could know. "You know," Marian

explained, "attitude, team spirit, that sort of thing. We just want you to give us your impressions of your co-workers so we can know you all a bit better."

"You want me to spy on my neighbours?" Dex asked, almost incredulous, but somewhat unsurprised.

"Just if you notice anything that might be relevant," Marian assured him. "It would be a great help to us here, and would be duly noted on your record."

Dex contemplated telling his boss what he thought of this scheme, but decided he wasn't quite ready to be fired after all. "I'll see what I can do," he said, and ended the call. He sighed, and glanced up at Mister Mouse. The other man avoided his gaze, and Dex wondered if the other man was in on the scheme or just wanted to be. "You deserve each other," he muttered under his breath, then logged out of his B&B account.

Dex was already back in his apartment, out of his uniform and into the hideous but comfortable one piece, when Annabelle pinged him. He settled into his comfortable chair, and put his feet up on the edge of his table. "So, is this a social call, or do you have news from our great mechanical overlords for me?"

"It's about Hazel," Annabelle said, her voice serious.

Dex's smile slid off his face, and he felt the muscles in his neck and shoulders tighten. "What?" he croaked out.

"She's dead," Annabelle said, matter of factly. Dex felt the air leave his lungs like he was being deflated.

"You're sure?" he asked, knowing that Annabelle would never have told him something like that without being one hundred percent sure.

"I'm sure," she said, her voice soft. "Remember I told you how if someone is logged into the nets when they die, there's this specific data pattern that shows up on the logs?" Dex nodded, which Annabelle wouldn't have known since they were using a voice only connection, but she continued anyway. "Well, there's a very clear instance of it for her. For two nights ago. At 03:07 UTC. I make that early evening your time."

"Jesus, Annabelle," Dex said. "Somehow I thought it was too late, but I still hoped, you know? That she was just on a bad stim trip or, I don't know, lying in a ditch with a headache and no memory or something. Goddamn it!" he exploded, and slammed his fist into the arm of his chair. He said nothing for a moment, and Annabelle didn't interrupt his silence. "Any idea what happened?"

“Not yet,” Annabelle said, “but I’m trying to track her identity chip and see if I can figure out where she is.”

“You mean, where her body is,” Dex said bitterly.

“Yes,” Annabelle said quietly. They were both quiet for a while.

“I’m sorry,” Dex said, “I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

“You didn’t,” Annabelle said. “And I’m the one who’s sorry. She was your friend — this must be very hard.”

“She wasn’t my friend,” Dex said sadly. “We sat next to each other at work for a couple of years and complained about the coffee everyday. I didn’t even know she used stims until the other day. I don’t know where she lives, or even who to notify about this. She was just another person I barely noticed on the edge of my life. And now she’s gone and that’s all she’ll ever be.”

Chapter Twelve

Annabelle and Dex talked for another hour, mostly Annabelle listening to Dex alternately rage about Hazel's death and moan about he'd hardly even gotten to know her. Annabelle said little, other than to remind Dex that what happened to Hazel could not possibly be his fault. She promised that she would do what she could to track Hazel's movements in the hours before she died, following the signals in the chip embedded in Hazel's hand. Identity chips didn't broadcast unless they were in use, so you couldn't really track a person using them. However, Annabelle had found that a careful reading of their logs often painted a picture which could be used to recreate a particular period of time for a person. She was quite good at it, and it was one of the reasons why she was so well regarded among the Cubicle Men.

After Annabelle extracted a promise from Dex that he would not go and do anything until the next day, she rang off to begin her search. Dex was torn. One part of him wanted to break his word and hit the streets, trying to find Hazel's body by breaking down every door in the city. The other part of him wanted to forget that Hazel was gone, forget that he would be unable to let this go. It wasn't his case, would probably never be his case even if someone did come to the organization looking for a resolution. But he was stuck with it, he knew. He would never be able to just let it go. But maybe for a few hours on this night, he could forget.

He walked to the cupboard, and pulled down the bottle of Jamaica's Best. He poured a tumbler half full of the dark brown liquor and tossed it back, downing the drink in one swallow. He grimaced, and refilled his glass, then pulled a bottle of gingapop from the cooler. He splashed the soda into the glass, diluting the drink slightly. He took a sip, and walked back to the chair with the drink in his hand.

He needed something to distract him, or he would spend the whole night trying to solve the case without any information. The rum was starting to burn his belly, and he felt the warmth spread through his body. The familiar feeling made his thoughts start to mellow, and he found himself accessing his video library. He recorded his life as a matter of course, but other than experiences relating to cases, he only kept the interesting parts. There were a great many of those, though, mostly from his youth as a musician. He picked one of those, a particularly smoking night in a terrible bar in the part of town where unemployed people tended to live.

The bar was barely a functional room, its thin walls bleeding the sound of its bands out to the street where there were always people trying to sleep. The stage was nothing

more than a small rise built of junk that the bar's owners had found in the alleys behind the building. Dex always worried that the stage was going to break under the weight of himself and his three bandmates. The drinks were watered down and food was nonexistent. But Milo's New City Lounge consistently had the best audience of any of the venues Dex played. It had been his favourite place in the world.

The video Dex chose was from one of the first gigs he'd played at Milo's, and before he even started the file playing, he remembered the combination of nerves, booze, and excitement. He started the video just before they had gone on stage, and watched himself sitting in a chair at a table offstage that Milo's provided for the musicians. He saw himself drain the last of his beer, and slap the glass on the table across from Jennie, the mixer and synth player. "Let's get it on," he heard her say, as he saw her stand. The view shifted as he had stood himself, the recording taken from his own perspective. It wasn't exactly like being there, but the combination of memory and the video made watching the events almost seem like it was happening to him all over again.

He walked behind Jennie, Maksym pulling up the rear, as they climbed on to the rickety stage. Jennie's small deck and keyboards were already set up, while Dex carried his mandolin and Maks had his guitar slung over his back on a strap. The crowd roared into life as they made their way to their places, the ovation huge even though Dex was sure that hardly anyone in the place had heard them play before. He remembered that the three of them had been playing weekly at their regular watering hole, J.T.'s, and that they'd been invited to play a cancellation slot at Milo's when the owner had stopped in one Thursday. They didn't even have a name for the group.

Dex watched as he, Maks and Jennie played to the smoky room, the video a little dark and grainy. It must have been before he'd gotten the upgrade which compensated for poor lighting. Even so, the audio was crystal clear and by the time they were into the third song, he wasn't even really watching any more. He was letting the music wash over him, the riffs of his mandolin merging with the twangs from Maks's guitar, with the strange sonic waves that Jennie created sweeping over both of their instruments. Dex found himself fingering the arms of his chair as he listened, between long, slow sips of his drink.

At the back of his mind, Dex knew that he was in for an unpleasant morning if he kept this up, but at that moment he just didn't care. He wanted the memories, the release from his present. He didn't want to think about his job at B&B, about Hazel or even about Annabelle. He wanted to be lost in his past, back in a place where he maybe didn't have a lot of security but he never felt out of place. With the video still running before his vision, he picked up the mandolin Annabelle had given him when he was visiting her. It was nothing like the one he watching himself play in the video — that one had been an

antique, made of real wood. He'd sold it when Maks left; he wasn't going to play it alone and it was just a reminder of a life he was trying to leave behind him. At least that was what he'd thought at the time. Later he regretted losing the instrument almost as much as he regretted everything else.

He had told Annabelle about his old days as a musician, but he thought he'd always made it clear that those days were in his past, that he didn't miss playing. But when he was in Nice visiting her, she pulled out a large parcel on the day before he was going to leave. She had made a particular effort that night, Dex remembered. She had sprung for a take out meal made from real ingredients, not the ubiquitous nutrient blocks that Dex, like most people, lived off. The dinner was strange to Dex, who was unaccustomed to even vat grown or synthesized food. He didn't think Annabelle cared for it much either, but he knew it was the thought that mattered. She was trying — trying to be with him in an embodied, physical way, even though she recoiled from the physical world as much as Dex did from the virtual one.

After the bizarre dinner, she sat near Dex on the small sofa in her apartment. Her place wasn't really that much bigger than the one Dex lived in, but it was worlds away in terms of its appointments. She had a separate bedroom, and the main room had a couch as well as a table and chairs. The furniture looked like it actually had been designed for human beings, and Annabelle told Dex that she'd been allowed to choose her own things from a catalogue her personnel manager gave her when she started her job. "So that's what it's like at the top," Dex had said, smiling.

"I'm not at the top of anything," Annabelle had answered, chiding Dex but laughing. "I'm just a working stiff just like you, they only pay me more."

"Well, you're tops in my books," Dex had said, waggling his eyebrows. Annabelle had rolled her eyes, but Dex could see that a slight flush had appeared at the edges of her cheek. He'd begun to recognize that this was a sign that she was flattered. He'd begun to really like seeing it. He wanted to reach out and touch her, but he knew from experience that it would ruin the mood. She would flinch and shrink from his hand, or worse, try to pretend that everything was fine while she suffered. He had stopped trying, hoping that one day she would come to him. He was starting to think that it would never happen, and he tried to imagine a way for him to be happy without it, without her touch. He wasn't sure it would ever work, but at times like these he was willing to try.

She had shuffled a little on the couch, and looked at him shyly though lowered eyelids. He often wondered how someone who so clearly disdained the physical world could be so good at communicating without words. "What?" he'd asked, unable to keep a curious grin from his face. "What are you up to?"

"I've got a surprise for you," she had said, and for a brief moment Dex's heart flipped and he thought she was going to touch him. But instead, she reached behind the couch and retrieved a large box, wrapped in some kind of thin film. She handed it to Dex and he raised an eyebrow. "Just open it," she said, smiling shyly. "I hope you like it."

When he first saw the mandolin in the box, Dex was shocked. He never thought he would play again; it had never even occurred to him to try. Music for him was locked in the past. But he couldn't help but pluck one of its strings, and the sound resonated in his chest like a thousand memories. Annabelle was looking at him, expectation and concern clear in her eyes. "Is it okay?" she asked, nervous all of a sudden.

Dex's mind was churning, trying desperately to come up with strategies to hide from Annabelle what a terrible mistake the gift had been when he realized that he wasn't feeling the overwhelming sadness he associated with things that reminded him of those days. Amazed, he looked into her eyes and said, honestly, "Yes. It is okay. Thank you."

He had played the mandolin a few times since he'd returned to the city, but never like this. He played along with the video memory, the notes coming back slowly but steadily as he moved from song to song. He stopped every couple of songs to refill his glass, and as the level in the bottle dropped he began playing with more feeling, more freedom. He played through the whole video, the full three hours that he'd played in Milo's so many years before. After the video was done, he played on his own until he could barely see the strings, let alone carry a tune. He left his glass on the arm of the chair and fell into the bed, still wearing his ugly one piece.

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