



an Anderson Dexter novel

# Act of Will

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an Andersson Dexter novel  
by M. Darusha Wehm

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## Chapter Thirty-Two

Back at his apartment, Dex started to get the feeling back in his lower lip. It didn't hurt exactly, but it felt odd. He ate a food brick, and that was fine, so he figured he'd better try out the new node. He was nervous — he had never wanted this upgrade and he was afraid of what it would be like. But he had done it now, and rolling back would be an expense he didn't need. He knew he could just get a dampener if it was too much. But he needed to know what to expect before he met Annabelle in M City.

He linked in to Three Card Monte's, hoping that the familiar environment would make the experience easier. At first, everything seemed pretty much the same, but he knew that it wouldn't last. He walked, successfully over to one of the tables in the darker corner, and sat. He managed the maneuver perfectly well, but it was profoundly disconcerting to feel the softness of the banquette's seat hit his ass, when he was already seated in his chair in the apartment.

It got weirder when he ordered a drink. The glass appeared on the table in front of him like usual, but when he went to pick it up he yelped. The glass was cold and wet. Dex tentatively reached out for the glass again, and forced himself to hold on as he felt the cold, hard, damp container. It was just a glass. It felt just like a glass. But it wasn't real, and Dex couldn't get past that. He kept going, though, and brought the glass up to his lips. He could feel its coolness before he touched it, and he could smell the dark spicy sweetness of the rum and ginger beer he'd ordered. He took a sip, and felt the cold, wetness of the glass on his lips, then cool liquid splash across his tongue. He swallowed, and felt the drink go down his throat and into his stomach. It was utterly surreal.

He pulled up his pack of virtual cigarettes. He felt the box in his hands, so real he refocused on his apartment to see if he was grabbing the table or something. But, his hands were still, sitting on the sides of the chair, holding nothing. He could still feel the small box in his left hand. He was starting to acclimatize to the strange sensations. It reminded him of the first visual displays — in fact it wasn't anywhere near as bad as learning to read a screen overlaid in front of real vision. But he had learned that trick more than thirty years before, and even though he was nowhere near Malone's age, he still felt like an old dog.

He unfocused, and went back to his pack of cigarettes. He pulled one out, and sniffed it. A tangy, toasted smell seemed to permeate his nostrils. He put it between his lips, feeling the spongy tightness of the filter. He lit it, and drew in the smoke. He didn't taste much, since he still only had the basic node for translating virtual taste, but as he

inhaled he could feel something in his lungs. It wasn't a burning sensation — it didn't feel like smoke at all, just a pleasant tingle. He blew out a plume of blue smoke, and felt his lungs contract again.

He sat at his table in Monte's smoking his cigarette and finishing his drink. By the time he was down to the last few melting ice cubes in his glass, he felt like he could handle a basic experience without freaking out. He had learned to tune out the sensations in his physical body, of him sitting in his chair in his apartment, and focus only on the feelings created by the combination of M City's simulators and his new node. He set his glass down on the table, and stood. He walked out of Monte's and on to the street in Chandler's. It was raining, as usual, and the drops were cool on Dex's skin. He put on his hat, and felt the circumference of the band tighten on his head. He walked, for maybe a half hour, just getting used to the feeling of his new virtual body.

When he logged out of M City, and refocused on his apartment, Dex found that his body was cramped and tired. He stood, and stretched, then drew a large glass of water. As he drank, he thought that his experiment hadn't gone so badly. Tomorrow night with Annabelle, though, would be very different. He wondered if he'd made a terrible mistake.

As he was thinking dire thoughts, his system pinged. "Speak of the devil," he said when he answered.

"Talking about me?" Annabelle asked. "To whom? And what do you mean, devil?"

"It's just a figure of speech, kiddo," Dex said. "And I was actually just thinking about you, not talking about you."

"Well, that is what a girl likes to hear," Annabelle said. "I'm almost done with the list you gave me," she continued, "and there's still no hits. I've got about ten names left, so I hope we get lucky on one of those..." Her voice trailed off.

"I think that might be a dead end," Dex said, excitement in his voice. "But it's okay. I may have stumbled on to something, thanks to my good buddy Pat Malone." Dex explained Malone's guess about the killer being an employee of Gractor Devices, and his own investigation of their existing and upcoming products. "I bet I've got the list of their local employees in my messages now," Dex said, "Let me just check." He logged in to the Cubicle Men's system and copies the list over to Annabelle's mailbox. "I've sent it over to you."

"I think we should just abort the current search," Annabelle said. "I can't do them concurrently, and this Gractor thing seems like a way more likely lead."

"I agree," Dex said. "There are a lot of names on this list, more than the previous

one. Is there any way to speed this process up? I don't know if we can afford another week, let alone two."

"The only way is to run the script from multiple sources," Annabelle said. "I've been using my own system, but I can run a clone out of the organization's box, too. I might be able to pull in a few favours for a few cycles elsewhere — I'll see what I can do."

"I know you will," Dex said. "So, we're still on for tomorrow?"

"You betcha," Annabelle said. "I've got a surprise for you," she added, in a coy voice.

"You do, now," Dex said. "Well isn't it just a small world. I've got a surprise for you, too."

"Ooh," Annabelle said, "battling surprises. How exciting. So we'll meet at Monte's then see where things take us?"

"Exactly," Dex said, nervous at the thought of what he was planning, doubly nervous at the thought of Annabelle's own surprise.

"Good," Annabelle said. "I'll get started on those scripts and I'll see you tomorrow." She ended the call, and Dex drew a deep breath. What had he gotten himself into? Now that he'd said something to her, there was no way to pretend that nothing was up. He had no Plan B to fall back on. He got up, and poured himself a drink. Nothing like a little liquid courage, he told himself. If only he could figure out how to drink in the real world while doing — never mind.

He went back online and started organizing things for the following night.

## Chapter Thirty-Three

There was nothing new or different about the place — it was just Monte's, the same as it had always been. But to Dex, it felt as if it were unfamiliar territory. He dressed in his usual outfit: charcoal pinstripe suit, black shirt, matte wingtip brogues on his feet, battered felt fedora on his head. For amusement, nostalgia and maybe even some kind of lucky charm, he'd worn what he once thought of as his "date tie." It was bright crimson, and when he'd put it on for his first date with Annabelle back when they'd been working the Velasquez case, he'd realized that he looked whorish at best and idiotic at worst. She seemed to like it fine, though, and ever since she'd always been happy when he wore it. It seemed appropriate this night.

He'd warmed himself up at the apartment with a pair of stiff shots of rum, since he wasn't about to add experimenting with stims to the night's festivities. He could feel the strange combination of his physical stomach warmly working on the Jamaica's Best and what he thought of as his virtual body sipping a stim-free dark and stormy. He found himself nervously playing with the pack of cigarettes on the table, flipping the pack over and over with the fingers of his left hand.

Annabelle materialized in the middle of the room, where Monte's link brought people in. She had dressed up, too; not quite as fancy as she had for their first date, but very nice nonetheless. She wore slim gold trousers with a gauzy cream coloured top that Dex swore was transparent when he wasn't looking right at her, but that he clearly could not see through when his eyes were on her. It was a great effect.

She walked up to the table, and came around to the side where Dex was sitting. She leaned toward him, and Dex could smell some kind of spicy perfume. He'd never noticed that before, though he didn't think the new node had adjusted anything in his sense of smell. Dex closed his eyes, and felt wisps of Annabelle's hair on his face as she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. He didn't even know how to describe that sensation. It definitely did not feel like the times she had kissed him in the physical world, but it wasn't exactly bad. He was going to be okay, he thought. He could do this.

"Are you okay?" Annabelle said, a puzzled look on her face, and Dex wondered what it was that had given him away.

"Sure," he said, smiling. "It's just, you know, a little weird."

"Yeah," Annabelle said, sighing. "You'd think that by now we'd be past all this juvenile drama, but things do seem a little odd between us, I admit."

"It was a pretty odd weekend," Dex said, smiling.

"That it was," Annabelle agreed. "But I've hatched a plan to make things better. Maybe."

"Oh," Dex said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Annabelle said. "Look in your messages." Dex frowned, and paged over to his inbox. There were two copies of notifications, one of a reservation for the following weekend at The Red Fish Inn, and one for a transatlantic flight.

"You're coming back?" Dex asked, bewildered.

"Yeah," Annabelle said. "I figured that the next physical world meeting is going to be even worse than this, so we should just get it over with. Besides, we didn't actually talk all that much last weekend." She grinned, and Dex blushed. "I really do think we're making progress, it's just gotten all weird all of a sudden. The only way to fix that is to spend time together, and it can't all be here."

Dex was stunned. He wouldn't have been surprised if Annabelle had refused to visit him again, refused to let him see her in Nice. This was totally out of the blue. He didn't know what to say.

"Is this a problem?" Annabelle asked. "I thought you'd be happy," she said, confused.

"It's not," Dex said, "I am. This is great, and strange, and..." He didn't know how to express himself, so he leaned across the table and took Annabelle's hands in his. He squeezed and then just held them lightly. "I have something for you, too," Dex said, as he absently stroked Annabelle's hand with his thumb.

She looked at her hands, then looked back at him. "Something's different," she said. "You've done something, haven't you?"

Dex smiled. "Check your inbox," he said. He waited a moment, then saw the look on Annabelle's face change from one of confusion to surprise.

"I don't know what to say," she exclaimed. "I don't know what baffles me more — that you've booked us a room in a hotel or that you booked us a room in that hotel. That place is so expensive, I don't know anyone who's ever even stayed there."

"Well, nothing's too good for my girl," Dex said, hoping his nervousness wasn't showing through.

"But, you didn't answer my question," Annabelle said. "You've done something to

yourself, haven't you?"

"Just catching up on the upgrade treadmill," Dex said, grinning.

Annabelle stared at him. "Are you sure about this?" she asked, her voice serious now. "You don't have to do this, just because of what happened last weekend."

"That's not why I'm doing it," Dex said. "I'm doing it for a lot of reasons, but the only one that matters is that I'm doing it because I want to be with you. Here, out there, it doesn't matter. What matters is that we're together." He looked in her eyes, and thought he saw them shining a little more than usual.

"You big softie," she said. "Well, let's not waste all that cash you're spending, shall we?"

"Indeed not," Dex said, standing. "Let's blow this joint." He took her arm, and said, "Wanna walk?"

"I'd love to," she answered, and they walked out the door of Monte's and into the light rain of Chandler's.

The walk to the Imperial Palace was not long, but they took their time. They walked arm in arm down the dark street and Dex got used to the heat of Annabelle's body pressed next to him. By the time they got to the opulent front portico of the hotel, they were soaked by the rain. As soon as they stepped under the roof of the entranceway, they dried off. It was an odd sensation, Dex thought, to be cool and wet one second and warm and dry the next.

A bot doorman held open the heavy looking crystal door of the building, and Dex stepped back to let Annabelle go through first. He heard her gasp as he followed behind her. The place was impressive — the first thing you noticed walking in was the waterfall in the middle of the atrium. Looking up, you couldn't see where it came from, and the sound seemed to thunder around them. Around the cataract were jungle foliage, flowers, birds and other creatures from the ancient world or some designer's imagination; Dex didn't know. It was like stepping onto another planet.

Dex followed a path laid out for him over his vision to the concierge, and checked them in. The desk attendant handed him a small glowing jewel, apparently the room key. "Would you like a direct link to the room, or would you prefer to take the scenic route?" the bot asked.

"We'll walk," Annabelle said. "Can I get directions?"



"Of course, madam," the bot said, and smiled.

"Got 'em," Annabelle said to Dex, and took his hand. "Let's go." They walked around the jungle, toward a spiral ramp inlaid with gold. They walked up the helix, which wound behind the waterfall and through the trees and vines. After ascending for about a half minute, they stepped off on another level of the building.

"The room's this way," Annabelle said, squeezing Dex's hand. They walked down the hall, which seemed to be made of ice, embedded with precious jewels. There was a glow which came from behind the walls, bathing the area in a cool light. They came to an ornately carved door, and Annabelle touched the glowing jewel to the jamb. She stopped, and looked up at Dex. "Last chance," she said. "If you want to escape, now is the time."

He looked down at her, seeing the nervousness, hope and desire in her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere, kiddo," he said, leaning down and kissing her full on the mouth. He felt sensation explode in his lips, soon radiating through his body. It was not exactly sexy, but it wasn't all bad, either.

He didn't know how it happened, but all of a sudden they were in the room, the door closed, falling over each other and on to the giant pile of cushions which took up most of the space of the room in lieu of a bed. As he felt Annabelle slide her hands inside his suit coat, Dex had the incongruous thought that it didn't feel like her, like maybe he was with some other woman. He looked at her avatar, recognizing her smile. For a moment it seemed like this was all going better than planned.

He watched as she deftly removed his jacket and threw it on the floor next to the cushions. He felt his heart race as her fingers worked the edges of his shirt; tiny feathers on his skin. Who designed these sensations, he wondered. How was this exact feeling programmed? His mind was all over the place, and when he felt Annabelle's lips on his bare chest, he had to force himself not to pull away. He let her kiss him, then when she tilted her head up to breathe, he slipped his hands under her blouse. She wore nothing underneath, and Dex marvelled at how much it almost felt like warm human flesh under his fingers. He tried to put the strangeness of the sensation out of his mind, as he carefully watched Annabelle's reaction to his touch.

Her eyes were closed, and when his hands found her breasts, they fluttered for an instant. Dex smiled, and for the first time that night felt something real in the pit of his belly. When his thumb grazed her nipple, Annabelle made a soft noise halfway between a moan and a gasp. And Dex stopped being able to think about anything after that.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

The man was angry. The candidate was no longer in the city. It turned out that she had only been visiting when he'd chosen her, and now she was halfway around the world. In Europa, of all places. She might as well be on the moon.

He had never failed to work with a candidate before. Even that horrible woman who thrashed and fought, who he'd had to beat with his fists to keep quiet, even she had been successful in the end. This was not acceptable.

It had been a bad day. He was scouring the nets for information about his candidate in the morning before work when he'd stumbled over her real location. He had spent the workday fuming after he had learned that Annabelle Lewis, his candidate, his choice, was gone.

As he was walking into his apartment, he was still looking at the proof of his failure. "How can this be?" he'd exploded. Gerry, home early, was just coming out of the lav.

"Whoa," Gerry said, stepping back. "Are you okay, man?"

The man hadn't expected his roommate, and now confronted with his presence, his rage found a target. He moved quickly to the surprised man, and let his momentum carry them both into the still slightly damp lav. Gerry was much larger, but surprise and hate made up a strong advantage. The man looped his right foot around Gerry's ankle and jerked. The two of them went down, the man falling hard on Gerry's ribs. He heard the bigger man let out a small grunt of pain, which fuelled him on even more.

He grabbed Gerry's head and bashed it against the solid floor of the lav. He hit the man two, three, four more times, until the back of his head was pulpy. He thought he could even see a few of the small silicon implants coming out in the goo. As soon as he saw the blood, the rage abated, and soon left him. He stood, stripped off his clothes and washed himself. The autoclave would get the blood off his clothes, as it always did. He would have to deal with Gerry later. Now, he needed stims. Lots and lots of stims.

The next morning, when he got to his workstation, he found that he had a new product for testing, and was expected to start right away. He stormed into the manager's cubicle, and slammed his hand on the small desk.

"This is bullshit!" he'd screamed. "How am I supposed to test these things?" He threw the tiny wrist mounted stunner on the desk. "No one gave me specs, no one gave

me the calibrations scripts. This is bullshit," he repeated.

The manager, a giant of a woman the man knew only as Hayes, barked out his name in a dismissive tone. She thumbed the door close button, and the wall behind the man closed off as she stood behind her small desk and towered over the small man. "Calm down. The specs and calibration scripts are on the bulletin board. There's no need for this kind of behaviour. What is wrong with you?"

Her stern tone ripped the man out of his rage, and filled him with shame. "I'm sorry," he stammered. "I've been under a lot of stress, and it just seemed..." he struggled for an excuse. "I don't want to get in trouble," he finally said in a small voice, his eyes locked on the floor.

"You're a good employee," Hayes said, "but past performance doesn't excuse this kind of stunt. This is going on your record with a warning. This is your only free pass. Anything, no matter how trivial, after this, and you're out on your ass. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," the man said, looking at his feet.

"Now I want you back at your station and get started on these tests. We have a large order from an important client and need these shipped as soon as possible." Hayes sat back down, and dismissed him with a look.

He went back to his station, and downloaded the specs and scripts he needed. As he started updating his equipment, he began to feel angry again. Hayes had made him feel small, made him feel insignificant. He knew that he wasn't small or insignificant, though. Gerry knew, too. He was powerful, with important work. He would show them.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Dex didn't exactly feel like a whore. It was much more pleasant than that. He had had a surprisingly good time with Annabelle, though he was tired now. Dex had hired the room for six hours and they had determined to get the most out of it. Now, the morning after, he sat at his station at B&B, doing his job as well and with as much enthusiasm as an automaton would, but his mind was on the events of the previous night.

He figured that he had been fairly unimpressive as a lover. He'd never done anything like that online before, and moving around in M City isn't quite as simple as just thinking about it like the ads say it is. He'd fumbled his way through, helped along by Annabelle's guiding touch and more enjoyable audio cues, but it was definitely not stellar. After, she had seemed so happy, though, that Dex couldn't help but feel proud. And that made him feel quite strange now.

He knew that Annabelle was no stranger to a man's avatar, and his new node got a workout in that room in the Imperial Palace. He had to be honest with himself, it had felt good. But when it was over, and they lay in each other's arms, the feel of her head on his chest felt just wrong enough to make him remember that he was really in his apartment, wearing the ugly one piece, alone.

It was a difficult feeling, knowing that she had enjoyed herself so much more than he had. As he looked up a user manual for a disk upgrade node, he wondered if that was how she felt after last weekend. He wondered if it was the kind of thing you could ask your lover. "So, it was great for me, but how horrible was it for you?" Though it hadn't been horrible. It had just been fake.

Over the next few days, Dex and Annabelle spoke every day. It was less awkward between them than it had been after Malone's retirement party, but they both knew that their relationship had changed dramatically. They spent most of their time talking about the case. Annabelle had found a handful of other systems to run her scripts, and they were cranking away at a much faster pace. Even so, she projected that it would take several days before she got through the whole employee list.

"I've set a notification for you on all of them," she said. "In case I'm busy or something when a match comes through, both of us will get the ping. I also set up an automated search string to run when I get notified of a match. We'll have a full dossier on any matches within a half hour."

"Great work," Dex said. "Can you copy me on the full bios, too?"

"Already done," Annabelle said. "Anything I get, you'll get."

"I just hope it comes through in time," Dex said.

"Me, too," Annabelle said. There was a silence between them, both of them thinking about the victims and their mutilated bodies.

"What do you think the stims are all about?" Annabelle asked eventually. "Why do you think the killer hits them with the neurostims?"

"I've thought about that," Dex said. "I first assumed it was just to keep them all compliant, but a stunner would do that just as well. I wonder if the killer likes to pretend that they want it, that they are asking for it. I'd guess that with enough neurochems swimming around in my system, even I could be persuaded to be into having my skin flayed off."

"Jesus, Dex," Annabelle said.

"Sorry," he said, chagrined. "But you know what I mean. If our killer is sufficiently nutso, which seems like an eminent possibility, I wouldn't find it too odd to discover that the crazy fuck thinks that it's all a consensual act."

"What is wrong with people?" Annabelle asked.

"I don't know what makes some people do terrible things," Dex said. "Not like this. I've got no sympathy for these kinds of people at all."

"It must just be a problem with brain chemistry," Annabelle said. "I bet with the right drugs, this killer could become normal again."

"And what does that accomplish?" Dex asked, bitterly. "It won't bring back Luis Harker or Hazel Ramer. It won't change anything that happened for them. And what about those people, and the people who cared about them? Nothing is going to make them normal again."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't try to help someone who is sick," Annabelle said.

"I think that's exactly what it means," Dex said. "Someone does something like this, it's game over. No second chances." Neither of them spoke for a moment.

"Well, we just disagree," Annabelle said, with finality.

"I guess that's okay," Dex said. "If we were totally compatible it would be boring." Annabelle burst out laughing.

“Oh, Dex,” she said. “Sometimes I don’t remember why I stay with you. And then there go, being your annoying, difficult, utterly wonderful self, and I can’t imagine life without you. Don’t ever change.”

“Too late, kiddo,” Dex said. “Or have you already forgotten our wild night about town.” He put on a silly voice to cover up for his nervousness. He hadn’t meant to bring it up, but he couldn’t take it back now.

“Aw, honey,” Annabelle said. “You haven’t changed a bit. Gizmos and gadgets don’t make you who you are. You just operate more universally now, that’s all.” Dex laughed, and Annabelle joined him. They were safe for another day.

They kept on chatting for another few minutes then Dex noticed Annabelle pause in mid-sentence. “What’s up?” he asked.

“Have you checked your messages recently?” Annabelle asked, her voice tight.

“No,” Dex said, his heartbeat increasing. “Why? Has your script turned up something already?”

“No,” she said. “It’s a message from Zizou. We all got it. Pat Malone died this morning.”

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