

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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an Andersson Dexter novel  
by M. Darusha Wehm

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

Dex didn't know how long he'd been talking to Melissa Vonruden when a couple of other people he knew from his time on the goon squad turned up. He hadn't seen either Buster Takahasi or Jay Shiraishi in the flesh since he'd left the street, but neither of them had changed much in the intervening years. By the time they turned up, Dex was on to his fourth pint, and was feeling as gregarious as he got. He even was wishing he'd brought his cheap mandolin to the pub.

He got to talking with Buster and Shiraishi and it must have been a couple of hours before he noticed this bad feeling in the back of his mind. Annabelle. She couldn't possibly still be in the bar; the place was wall to wall with bodies now. He excused himself from his spot by the bar, and started to weave his way through the pub grid-style, asking everyone he recognized when they'd last seen Annabelle. Half the crowd couldn't remember seeing her at all, and those who had seen her were among the few early birds. Finally he found Zahara Zhang at a table in a far corner, and she told him that she thought she saw Annabelle leave a few hours back.

"I think it was while you were talking to Vonruden," she said. "She didn't look too happy about it, either. I didn't think she was the jealous type, but you never know with people, do you."

"Oh, shit," Dex said for the second time that night. Only this time he knew he had fucked it up, and Annabelle really had left. All because he was on to something on this case. He should have known better. It could have waited a day, or he could have talked to Vonruden with Annabelle there. He had promised to take care of her and at the first sniff of a lead, he'd abandoned her. He was an asshole, and now he'd gone and ruined the best thing that had happened to him in decades. He sat at a small table, and put his head in his hands.

Time stopped, it seemed. No one came over to see what was wrong, and Dex didn't want them to. He didn't know what he could do to fix this. He was too scared to even ping Annabelle, because he didn't want to find out that she was blocking him. Between the beers, his overactive imagination and the knowledge

that it was all his fault, he had worked himself into a solid state of despair, when he felt a hand light on his shoulder.

“Go away,” he said, without looking up.

“I tried that,” a familiar voice said. “I don’t think it was such a good idea.” Dex looked up and saw Annabelle’s face looking down at him, smiling sadly.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, his voice cracking. “I never should have left you alone here. I don’t know what I was thinking; please forgive me.”

Annabelle sat down next to Dex and put her arm around him. “And I never should have left without telling you I was going. There, we’re even.”

“Not even close, kiddo,” Dex said, turning to look at her. Their faces were so close that he could feel her breath hot on his skin. He tried not to think about it, tried not to think about what he would do if she were only different, only more like him. He didn’t want to fuck it up again.

He nearly fell off the chair when he felt her lips on his, her mouth hot against his own. Time stopped again, until he heard a voice from what sounded like a million clicks away yell, “Get a room, you two,” and raucous laughter from the bar. They pulled away from each other, and Dex said, “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“Me either,” Annabelle said, laughing. “Though, to be fair, I do have a lot of chemical help right now.”

“You’re doped up?” Dex asked.

“To the virtual eyeballs,” Annabelle answered, smiling goofily.

“Well, let’s hear it for better living through chemistry,” Dex said, and Annabelle laughed again. “You want to stay here or are you done for the night?” He didn’t want to hope for anything, but he couldn’t help himself.

“I figure I’ve got about three hours of joy juice in me,” Annabelle said. “It’s your call. You want to spend those hours here, I’m happy to tag along. If you’d rather go back to your apartment,” she lowered her eyelids and looked him squarely in the face, “I’m happy to tag along there, too.”

Dex blinked twice, then stood. Annabelle put her hand in his, and together they walked over to Pat Malone, and gave the man a quick salute. “Great party

man, and I wish you the best in your golden years. However, my lady and I have to make like a tree and get the hell out of here.”

Malone clapped Dex on the back, and said, “Good man.” To Annabelle, he said, “You’ve got a keeper here, honey. But don’t do anything you’ll regret later, it will just make things harder in the long run.”

“Thanks, Pat,” she smiled at him, and kissed him on the cheek. “For everything.” Then she and Dex walked, hand in hand, out of the pub.

Two and a half hours later, Dex walked into the lav, and ran the tap in the sink for a moment. He washed his face, and looked in the mirror at his naked body. Nothing special there, he thought. Not like her. She was perfect, the pain and expense of the body moulding she’d endured had seen to that. But it was more than just the shape of her body, the feel of her skin — it was everything. For a couple of hours, he had been happier than he could ever remember being. But now Annabelle had left to go back to her hotel, and she was going to be on an early flight the next morning back to Europa. He didn’t know when, or if he would see her again.

Dex had never felt so confused — on one hand, he felt wonderful. Being with Annabelle, really together, was fantastic. It was the best thing he could ever have hoped for, it was so much more than he ever dreamed they would have together. But he also knew that when the chemicals wore off, she was still the same Annabelle who was terrified of the party, who could barely stand to give him a kiss. She hadn’t changed, but things between them had.

Would it be worth it, he wondered, if this was the end with Annabelle? Would those few hours of joy be worth all the days he wouldn’t have with her? He didn’t know.

He left the lav, and poured a shot of rum. He was still a little drunk from the party, but he didn’t care. If he spent the whole next day in bed, that would postpone the talk he would have to have with Annabelle. And at that moment, anything that put off the inevitable was good with him. He slugged down the drink, feeling the burn down his throat and into his stomach. He knew this was nothing like what Annabelle felt when she was on stims, but he thought he

understood how she managed to get over her fears for him. At that moment, he would do anything for her, but she was gone. He could only hope she wasn't gone forever.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

The man held two items in his hands. In his left hand, he held the knife. It had been his great-great-great grandmother's knife. He doubted that she had used it like he did, but he'd never met the woman. She died long before he was born. Back then people only lived a hundred years if they were very lucky or very rich. No one in his family had ever been either of those things. The man never knew exactly how he ended up with Grandma Burback's beautiful knife, or why she had such an object in the first place. He didn't think about it very much. It didn't matter how you got somewhere, what mattered is what you did when you were there.

In his right hand, the man held his new, calibrated Joybuzzer. He had tried and tried with different settings, even hurting himself a few times, but he finally got it right. He was pretty sure that now it would make them feel the way he wanted them to feel; strong enough that they would be compliant and let him do his work, but not so strong that it became about them. The work was not about the candidates, not at all. It was about him. Him and his choices.

He was feeling good. Gerry was out somewhere again, and the man was alone in the apartment. He sat on his bed, weighing the two objects in his hands. The knife was so much heavier than the modern contraption, which he felt was appropriate somehow. The 'buzzer was just a tool, after all. It was replaceable, and while the man strongly preferred the work when the candidates were buzzed up and happy, it was not strictly necessary. The knife, on the other hand, was as integral to the work as he was himself. He often thought of the knife as his partner. They were a team. He was the one who chose, and then the knife did the work.

And he had chosen again. She would be an excellent candidate, he thought. She seemed to understand about the power of choices. It was almost as if she were telling him that she would be a good candidate. Yes, she would be pleased to help him make the choice. He was looking forward to this one. After the last one, which was so unsatisfying, he wanted to make a good choice. He would start looking for her right away. The one who called herself Annabelle Lewis. The man decided that she would die next.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Dex had had worse hangovers. But he hadn't felt much worse in his life. The combination of pounding head, roiling stomach and aching heart were doing a number on him. He doubted that any amount of Flying Fish Tonix would make a dent in how terrible he felt, but he swigged down a good measure just in case. He didn't bother to check the time, or have the apartment un-dim the windows. Morning, afternoon, what did it matter? He felt like hell and knew that he deserved it.

What kind of a man was he? Taking advantage of Annabelle when she was high as the sky on who knew what kind of crazy brain chemical. How could he have let her think that he needed her embodied self so badly that she had to do that to herself? And then to go merrily along with her crazy, drug fuelled plan? He felt sick, and he was sure it wasn't just from the booze.

Thankfully, she would be out of the city by now, so he wouldn't have to fear that she would just show up at the apartment. He didn't want to talk to her, not yet, so he was staying offline. He knew that wouldn't last — tomorrow he had to go back to that pit of depression, Barrett and Brar, and he'd need to go online then. Maybe he just wouldn't go in. Maybe he'd just quit. He had looked over his cash flow the other day, and was surprised to find that he spent quite a bit less than he brought in. In fact, he spent less than he earned from his work with the Cubicle Men alone. It certainly made giving the two finger salute to B&B look pretty attractive.

He knew that he was just avoiding thinking about Annabelle, but fantasizing about quitting work was better than worrying about how much he'd damaged his relationship with her, so he stayed aboard that train of thought. He had quite a lot of cash saved up, so he could afford to have to pay for his own apartment. He wouldn't get anything nicer than his current place, but that was the same as it would be if he just stayed where he was. He guessed that he was just frugal by nature, because he'd always thought that banking the extra cash was better than spending it on something frivolous. That seven year old rum, for example. When he looked at things clearly, he could certainly afford to give up the security and benefits of B&B, but it would eat into his savings, and he didn't like that.

On the other hand, not having to go in to some vile office park every day and endure the bullshit from underworked overpaid middle managers and, even worse, the suck ups like Mister Mouse — now that was maybe something worth spending some cash on. If he lost his income from B&B, and had the expense of his own housing, that would seriously make a dent in his savings, though, and then flying over to see Annabelle would be—

Damn it, Dex thought. I don't want to think about her now.

He'd been doing all this pondering while still in bed, and he finally got up. The room was only spinning very slightly, which he took to be a good sign. He walked into the lav, showered and dressed, then wandered over to his box of food bricks. His stomach flipped a little, but he steeled himself, and opened up a bar. He took a nibble, and waited to make sure it stayed in place, then ate another bite. It wasn't long before his head and stomach seemed almost normal, but he still felt like shit.

Work, he thought. Work was the answer. He had a lot to look at on the Hazel case, and the sooner he got on it the sooner he could catch the sick fuck who was behind the killings. He stretched, cracking his neck, and after pulling a large glass of water, he got comfortable and logged in to the Cubicle Men's system.

He checked his messages, saw that there was one from Pat Malone thanking everyone for the party, and one from Melissa Vonruden. Dex opened Vonruden's message, and read it.

"After our talk, I took a look at the case file on Harker and Ramer. I noticed that the physical evidence of neurostimulation on Ramer was quite different from that found in Harker's system. I ran a scan on it, to see if I could get the specific patterns and match it to something I've seen before. It was totally off the scale. There is nothing on the market which can even be DIY'd into something that could give that kind of jolt. However, there are rumours of new buzzer models coming out. Maybe there's something I just don't know about out there. Sorry I couldn't be more help. —MV"

Dex was disappointed that Vonruden hadn't turned up anything more concrete, but he couldn't make evidence out of nothing. So he just flagged the message to the case file, and then started going through the automated search responses from his queries.

He couldn't see anything useful from his request for information about steel blades. There was the usual history and composition data, which he ignored. There were boards for collectors of the things, but they were all full of information about trading the items or maintaining them. He found one link to a woman who was making the things, but she was located in Afrika. It gave Dex a thought, though, and he ran a request for an analysis of the steel fragments found in both Harker and Hazel's bodies, to see if the blade could be aged. If it turned out to be a recently made item, he might be able to trace the killer that way. If it was old, though, he didn't think he'd have a hope.

As opposed to the feeling he got when he saw the cross reference results for people who had purchased either a Joybuzzer or Stimstick and a set of Hold-Alls wrist restraints. There were hundreds of names on the list, but when he drilled down to show only the

people who lived, worked or traveled to the city, he got it down to a list of only forty-eight. It was plenty of names, but he knew that with time he could find out if any of those people were in the areas where Harker or Hazel were killed at the times of their deaths. Rather, he knew Annabelle could do it. The thought made his stomach clench up again.

He knew she would help him, regardless of whatever came of the previous night. She was a professional, and he knew that this case bothered her almost as much as it bothered him. But he also knew that he couldn't ask her to help with the case without talking to her about other things. And he just wasn't ready for that. He knew he couldn't delay forever, but he could put it off for now. So he moved on to the next report.

As soon as Dex paged over to the file, he felt his stomach drop. Four. There had been four other killings which fit the same evidence as Harker's and Hazel's deaths. Three men and a woman had been found dead in abandoned buildings in brown sector over the last six months. Each had been cut with a steel blade, each had been bound with polymer rope and each had neurostimulants in their systems. The two earliest victims didn't fit the pattern exactly — both had traces of synthetic neurostims rather than naturally occurring neurochemicals; and the second victim, the woman, had been severely beaten before she died. The two later victims, though, might have been blueprints for Luis Harker's murder. The evidence was identical. Dex wondered why the pattern hadn't been noticed before now.

He looked at the victims' files, and saw that two of the male victims were not employed, at least not in a conventional job, and were well known to be active in the intense stimulation scene. No one was missing them, no one paid for their deaths to be investigated, and it was easy to chalk their deaths up to stimulation play gone wrong. The beaten woman was a middle manager at one of the firms, and their Security had looked into her disappearance and eventual death. They discovered that she'd had a gambling habit, and assuming that her death was related to debts, they had dropped the investigation. The fourth victim's death had been only perfunctorily investigated by his employer's Security team, then dropped without any conclusions being drawn. No one had realized that the deaths were related, because no one agency had investigated more than their one area of interest. It was typical, Dex thought, angrily.

He added the information from the other deaths into his composite case file, and requested the neuro scans from the two victims whose deaths had been investigated. He didn't expect much, especially from the Security files on the man's death. But he had to see if there was anything on the files which could help him find the killer. He knew the killer had struck at least six times — six times in as many months. And Luis Harker's death had occurred within a few weeks of Hazel's murder, so it appeared that the killer's pace

was increasing. It had been a week since Hazel had been killed. Was the killer preparing to strike again?

Dex was finishing up his request for access to the files from the two corporate Security teams, when his system pinged. He was so embroiled in the work that he had forgotten everything else that had occurred in the last twenty-four hours, and he automatically answered. Of course, it was Annabelle.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

"How were you feeling this morning?" Annabelle asked. Dex felt his heart pounding so loud that he could hear the blood in his ears. He felt a little bit like he was going to lose consciousness. He fought to keep control.

"Not so good," he answered. He didn't know what to say. "You made your flight okay?" he asked, wincing at the lameness of the question.

"No problem," Annabelle said. "I'm home now."

"Good," Dex said. "That's good," he repeated. There was an awkward pause as neither of them said anything.

"I've been working on the case..." Dex said, breaking the silence but not the tension.

"Good," Annabelle said, "did you find anything new?" Relieved to be on safer ground, Dex gave Annabelle a brief synopsis of what he'd found.

"Send me those names," she said, referring to the list of people who had bought both Hold-Alls and Stimsticks or Joybuzzers. "I can get a script together to look for matches on people who were in brown sector at the time Harker or Hazel was killed. It's going to take a while, though..." her voice trailed off.

"I know it will take time," Dex said. "And I'm not trying to rush you. But I am worried that the killer will strike again soon. I feel like we're close to something here, and I don't even want to think about what it would be like if someone else dies while I was investigating."

"I know," Annabelle said. "I'm on it."

"Thanks," Dex said, letting out a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

"So..." Annabelle said.

"Yeah," Dex answered. "This is a bit awkward, isn't it?"

"Look," Annabelle said. "I don't want you to think that you did something wrong last night. I know you, and I bet that you've got this image of me right now as this fragile thing you took advantage of when she was weak and doped up and that it somehow makes you the bad guy. And that's not even close to the truth. I'm a grown up, with a long and colourful history with fine neurochemical substances. I knew exactly what I was taking and what would happen to me. And I knew exactly what I was doing with you, too. You

don't have to feel responsible for anything other than yourself."

"Jeez, Annabelle," Dex said, "am I really that predictable? And pathetic?"

She laughed, but it wasn't with a lot of mirth. "I think after all this time I've got you figured out, mister," she said. "And I don't think you're pathetic, it's just the unfortunate flip side of that wonderful chivalry I love about you."

Dex grunted. "Well, at least you're still saying nice things about me," he said, "so I guess that means we're still on speaking terms."

"Of course, we're still on speaking terms, you fool," Annabelle said. "What happened was — well, it was strange, and not at all what I planned or expected, but I don't think we've completely fucked things up. Not at all. It would take a lot to make me give you up. Don't forget, I liked you for a very long time before you'd even give me the time of day." She paused, and her voice grew serious again. "But I don't think I really realized until now that the you I thought I liked wasn't who you really are."

"And," Dex asked expectantly, "what about that guy? Do you like him?"

"I do," Annabelle said softly. "I still like you, Dex, I still like you a lot. It's just hard." Dex heard her sigh. "You're not exactly the man I dreamed of being with."

Dex said nothing for a moment. Then, he answered, "Neither are you."

Silence. Then Annabelle said, "Okay then. So what about that? You know where I stand, but what about you? Have things changed for you, now?"

"No," Dex said. "Yes... I don't know. Damn it, Annabelle, I can't imagine my life without you any more. These last months have been better than anything I can remember, even with everything being so — tough. But last night..." His voice trailed off. "This is it," he said, finally. "Cards on the table time; no bullshit."

"No bullshit," Annabelle agreed, all the lightness and laughter gone from her voice.

"This morning, when I thought I'd ruined everything between us, I asked myself if it was worth it; if one night with you, here in the physical world, was worth never being with you again."

"And?"

"And I hate myself for it," Dex said, "but it was."

Annabelle said nothing for a long time. Finally she said, "I think that's really a compliment," she said, "but it doesn't feel like it, somehow."

"I'm sorry," Dex said, his voice a croak.

Annabelle said, "It's okay, I get it." She quoted, "'Tis better to have loved and lost..."

"It doesn't feel better," Dex said, miserably.

"But I'm not lost, either," Annabelle said. "Look, I can't say that what happened last night is going to happen all the time — hell, I can't say that it's going to ever happen again. At the moment I still can't really believe it happened at all. But it does prove one thing — the gulf between us is both larger and smaller than we thought."

"So, you're not giving me the boot?" Dex asked.

"You aren't getting rid of me that easily, Mr. Dexter," Annabelle said, the sly twist back in her voice. Dex was happy to hear the sound again. "Not after all the work I put in to get you. Now, I'd better get going on that script for you. There are way more important things for us to be doing than agonizing over doing something we both wanted to do, that was plenty enjoyable at the time. Neither of us has been thirty in a lot of years — we have no excuse for that kind of drama."

Dex laughed, and felt something almost physical in his chest break open. It was relief, a pure release of the tension he'd been feeling trapped by all day. How he ever thought Annabelle could hate him, he now couldn't understand. She was the most forgiving, most patient person he had ever known. And she could make him laugh, always, no matter how grim the circumstances. He couldn't imagine what he wouldn't do for her.

"Right," he said. "Let's get to work."

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