

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 Nineteen

The work day at Barrett and Brar was a wash for Dex. He somehow managed to get the minimum number of tasks done, and no one seemed to notice that he was in a daze the whole time. Part of him wanted to spend the day online, poring over the now complete report on Luis Harker and the preliminary work on Hazel. But he knew that there was no way he could focus on that data while under the watchful eyes of B&B's bosses. Usually he was a master at appearing to work while really busy on other activities, but he knew that this day he wouldn't be able to hide. He also was feeling a bit the worse for wear, having talked to Annabelle for an hour, then taking a few more medicinal Jamaica's Bests. It would have to wait for the end of the day and the coming three days off.

Once he was finally back at his apartment, Dex changed and got his supplies ready — a jug of water, a stack of food bricks and pillow for the chair. He ate while he logged in to the Cubicle Men's system, and quickly scanned his messages. There was nothing surprising, just the automated notification about the Harker report and a message from Eduardo Lino letting Dex know that they'd finished with the scene and that Hazel's body had been taken to B&B. As her employer, they were responsible for disposal of her body. The techs at B&B told Lino that there was no next of kin listed in her personal file, so she would be torched later that day. Dex fired back a quick auto-acknowledgment, just letting Lino know he'd read the message but had nothing to add. Then he paged over to the preliminary report on Hazel.

She had been cut, in a similar style to the wounds on Luis Harker, but there were several apparent differences. All of the severed strips of skin were still at the scene, and the cuts themselves were much less straight and even than they had been on Harker's body. Also, there were many fewer incisions — none on Hazel's legs, and only three separate cuts on her torso. She had still bled, and bled enough that blood loss was listed as the probable cause of death. The neuro scans were still outstanding, which would show more specifically the physiological processes that occurred immediately prior to death. Without that detailed information, though, loss of blood seemed the likely cause.

Dex didn't even bother with the images of the body. He had seen enough the previous day, and he just wasn't prepared to go through that again. Not yet. Maybe in a day or two, once the shock of it had faded and Dex could start to treat this just like any other case, he would go through all the evidence again, but it just wasn't something he was ready to tackle yet.

He paged over to the complete report on Harker's body. The marks on Harker's wrists did not match the slight lesions on his upper arms and torso, however they had been made at the same time. The wrists showed a pattern of a particular brand of restraints marketed to Security branches called Hold-Alls. He'd never heard of them before, guessing that they were relatively new on the market, but Dex ran a quick search and saw that they were easily available for purchase by anyone. Plenty of people were into sensation play, and restraints were as popular as they had ever been for that kind of thing. In less than a minute, Dex had found a half dozen online retailers selling the things. He didn't fancy his chances looking for recent buyers.

He moved on to the marks on Harker's arms and torso. Those had been made by polymer rope, probably looped around the man's body a couple of times then tied off. There were indications of abrasion, as if he had struggled against his bindings. The report added, though, that the amount of abrasion was consistent with less than a minute of moderate movement against the rope. Dex doubted that what had been done to Luis Harker could have been accomplished in less than a minute, so for some reason the man had stopped struggling early on. Maybe he had lost consciousness, or been stunned or electrically immobilized. Dex moved on to the neuroscan report, looking for answers.

There was an indication that a low level stunner or electro-compliance tool had been used, but according to the scan, its effects had worn off well before the cutting started. Harker had most certainly been conscious until the moment of his death, which was listed conclusively as exsanguination — he bled to death. There was, however, a huge spike in naturally occurring dopamine and endorphins in Harker's system. It was a larger surge than was consistent with normal production during peak pleasure experiences, so it was unlikely that Harker was simply getting off on the cutting. In fact, it was a vastly larger amount than the human body usually would produce naturally. The report speculated that some kind of physical neurostimulant could be used to force production of those chemicals, and Dex ran a cross search for the concept while he finished reading the report.

The auto-generated report was designed to be careful not to draw conclusions, but Dex didn't have those constraints. He was certain that Harker had been held against his will, then had something done to him to make him compliant. The neurochemicals in the body were almost certainly delivered or triggered by an outside agent. Also, marks on his arms and wrists did indicate that there had been a struggle at some point in the proceedings, which made it unlikely that the episode had been consensual. And Dex had a feeling in his gut that this was a killer. The same killer who took Hazel to that hellish room, drugged and cut her.

He paged over to the search results, and saw that there was a device you could buy which used electrical impulses to stimulate implanted nodes into forcing production of various neurochems. They were mostly used to simulate pleasure, but they could be programmed for anything. They functioned as light stunners or painsticks as well, and Dex found several boards devoted to their use and configuration. There were a couple of different manufacturers branding the things as Joybuzzers or Stimsticks, and it looked like the devices, while expensive, were easy to come by. Another dead end, Dex figured. At least he was starting to piece together a plausible scenario of how the killer had done it.

The killer had lured Harker into the room, or grabbed him off the street, subduing him with a stunner jolt from the Stimstick. Then Dex figured that the wrist restraints had come out, and he'd been tied further with the polymer rope. He'd come to while bound, and before the killer could administer the Stimstick again, this time with its pleasure creating feature, Harker had struggled in his bonds, creating the wounds Dex saw on the man's wrists, arms and torso. Dex wondered if the cutting started before or after the Stimstick was used the second time. He hoped it was after.

Dex went back over the report on Harker's wounds. He had assumed that the killer used a laser cutter, but the report indicated that the weapon had been, in fact, a steel blade. Tiny fragments of steel had been found along the edges of the wounds, and the cuts were not consistent with the clean, cauterizing beam of a laser. Dex was surprised. Steel knives were not common, and the use of the Stimsticks make Dex think that the killer was not averse to modern conveniences. He thought about the dichotomy — the killer was happy to use brand new wrists restraints and Stimsticks, but the cutting was done with an ancient tool. Dex guessed that there must be something special about the knife. He wondered if there was any way to trace the blade.

He ran a search on the Cubicle Men's system for any information on steel blades, and on a hunch, on any deaths that were similar to Harker's and Hazel's. It would be a while before the results were in, so Dex refocused on his apartment for a few moments. He stood, worked the kinks out of his neck and stretched. He visited the lav, and refilled his jug of water. He was feeling like a human being again, and didn't have to go in to B&B for another three days. Three days of blissful relief from the boredom and banality of answering customer enquiries for things that no one needed anyway. Dex pulled down the bottle of Jamaica's Best and a container of gingapop. He mixed a drink, and took a sip.

Back in the chair, he accessed his personal system and dimmed the lights in his apartment slightly. He sent a ping to Annabelle, and when she answered asked if she wanted to go out. "I've spent the night with the reports on Hazel and the other victim," he

said, "and I could use a change of scenery."

"So they are related?" Annabelle asked.

"I think so," Dex said. "I'll know more when the full scan on Hazel comes in, but it really looks like they were both murdered."

Annabelle let out a breath. "Murdered," she repeated.

"Again, it's not certain," Dex said, hedging.

"But you think they were murdered," Annabelle said, and it didn't sound like a question.

"Yeah," Dex said. "There's no doubt another person was involved, almost certainly the cutter, and there's good evidence on the Harker body that he was coerced at a very minimum. Like I said, I'll know more when the scan comes in on Hazel." He took a sip of his drink, then said, "but I'm sure you'd rather get out of the house to have this conversation, so let's go somewhere."

"Sure," Annabelle said, "I don't have much in the morning — I can afford to be a little out of it tomorrow."

"Aw, shit," Dex said, "I forgot that we're not on the same week schedule. I'm on weekend now."

"Yeah," Annabelle said. "I still have a day. But then I'm coming over for Pat Malone's retirement, so that will be good at least."

"It sure will," Dex said. "So, you're still up for heading out?"

"Sure," Annabelle said. "Meet you in Monte's?"

"You bet," Dex said, and ended the call.

## Chapter Twenty

Dex linked into Monte's as soon as he ended the call with Annabelle. He used to come here even before he started seeing her. He didn't think of it as the same as really going out — it was just something to look at other than the four bleak walls of his apartment, like some folks watched vids or played games. They offered a good set of canned music at Monte's; there were usually four or five playlists to choose from, and Dex often was spoiled for choice. Other people were good about leaving you alone there, too, but in a pinch he could usually find someone from the squad hanging around in the joint if he needed a conversation.

He had sometimes wondered if spending time at Monte's was a way to help him get used to the virtual world, or if it actually made it harder for him to integrate into the online community. Monte's, while obviously part of M City, felt more like a throwback to the online world Dex grew up with, a world where you could socialize or not on your own terms; where no one, other than an admin, knew you were there unless you made yourself known; where you were essentially alone, just alone with most of the rest of the known world.

His thoughts were interrupted as Annabelle materialized at Dex's table, looking beautiful as always, even though she wore just her simple outfit of brown pants and a shirt patterned with some old painting on it. She had a whole wardrobe of them, and Dex had given up trying to identify each piece. He thought this one might be a Mondrian, but art was never his strong suit.

She pecked his cheek, and slid into the booth beside him. "Hey, handsome," she said, her voice low even though they were on a private voice channel and no one else could hear them.

Dex chuckled and said, "Hey, yourself. You've sure got a funny sense of aesthetics, but I guess anyone could tell that just by looking at your chest." He gestured at the red, black and white squares and rectangles of her shirt. "There are two things in this world I will never understand — art, and what a wonderful woman like you sees in a cantankerous old man like me."

Annabelle giggled and slid her avatar a little closer to Dex's. He didn't have a full body simulation activated, so he couldn't feel it, but he could see what she was doing. He was pleased to notice that it hadn't started to bother him yet. "Art, beauty, porn — it's all the same," Annabelle said, "you can't define it, you just know it when you see it." She beamed up at Dex, and he smiled in both the virtual and physical worlds.

He slipped an arm around her, grateful that he couldn't feel the jarring sensation of simulated touch, and sighed happily. "Aw, kiddo," he said, shaking out a cigarette with his free hand, "I needed this tonight. What a godawful couple of days it's been. I just feel old, useless and tired."

"You're not that old," Annabelle said, suddenly serious. She pulled away from his embrace, and looked him in the face. "I mean, I've never asked, but you just don't seem that old."

Dex had stopped paying complete attention to the avatars, and was missing Annabelle's concern. "I feel ancient, kiddo," he said, sighing deeply. "One step away from decay."

"Damn it, Dex," Annabelle said, raising her voice and forcing his attention back to the representation of them both. "Do I have to be planning your retirement party soon? Are you going to wake up some morning next year or, christ, next week with wrinkles and bad knees? I need to know."

Dex looked at her, and was surprised to see the concern on her face. He had been unfair, he knew, complaining when he was miles away from old age. He tried to soften his face, and said, "Honey, I'm sorry. Full disclosure: I'm 68 years old."

Annabelle's face relaxed visibly. "Damn it, you scared me. Here I was, all of a sudden terrified that you were on the south side of a hundred and I had to start worrying about you falling apart any day now. Thank you. I'm glad to know that there's a few clicks left on you yet." She beamed at him.

"Glad to appease," he said. "Now, I know it's impolite to ask a lady her age, but I do feel that turn around is fair play."

"I hope you don't think you're robbing the cradle," she said, coyly. "But I only turned fifty-five a couple of months ago."

"My god," Dex said, mock mortified, "you're just a child! I've been corrupting a minor. Whatever will I do?" They both laughed, and another drink appeared in front of Annabelle.

"This will have to be my last," she said, lifting the glass to her lips, "I do need to work tomorrow."

"I shall have you in bed by midnight," Dex said, gallantly.

"If only that were so," Annabelle muttered to herself as she took a sip of the stim cocktail.

They stayed at Monte's another half hour, talking about anything but the case. Annabelle linked out, and Dex found himself awake and uninterested in just staring at his apartment or forcing himself to sleep. He pulled a schedule from The Dog and Pony, hoping there would be a decent band. He didn't recognize the name of the group playing, but decided it didn't matter. He linked over and listened as he materialized to a wailing horn overlaid with some kind of tribal rhythm. It was odd, but it would do. He found a table near the back, and sat.

The music washed over him, and after a couple of songs Dex had forgotten all about the case. He had forgotten about most everything — his job at B&B, his work with the Cubicle Men, the struggles he and Annabelle were having. He was simply buoyed along by the music. The band was a three piece: a pair of horn players and a seemingly multi-armed drum machine operator. The horns were fabulous, long and loud and very analog sounding. Dex wondered how the virtual instruments got that sound — he liked to think that he could tell the real thing on a recording, and this sounded like the real thing. If the horn players were swinging, the drummer was rocking. He was waving his arms around like crazy, moving from drum machine to synth and sample deck and back again. It was a strange counterpoint to the crooning horns, but it sounded great.

In the break between the sets, Dex made his way up to the stage and cornered one of the horn players. "That was great," he said to the strange looking avatar. It was nominally female shaped, but very tall and large, with a wolf's head. He had seen stranger avatars, but it was still a little unusual.

"Thanks," a melodious but androgynous voice said.

"That really sounds like a physical trumpet," Dex said, feeling foolish. "I've never heard a virtual horn like that."

"I expect it will be a long time before you do," the trumpeter said. "It is a real trumpet. Both the trombone and I play in the physical world, and pump the sound through to here."

"Wow," Dex said. "Are you playing a gig out there, too?"

"Not today," the musician said. "But sometimes we do. Double the exposure, right?"

"Right," Dex said. "Well, that's all I wanted to say. You all are really tight."

"I appreciate it," the sultry voice said. The wolf's head cocked a little at Dex, then he

thought he saw the mouth curl into a smile. "Didn't I see you playing here last Thursday? Celestial Chemical, isn't it?"

"Chemical Celeste, actually," Dex said, grinning. "It was our first gig. I hope we didn't stink up the joint too much."

"Not at all," the wolf's head said. "I seem to remember you started out pretty tentatively, but pulled it together right off. It was good. You're the mandolin, right?"

"Yup," Dex said, beaming.

"You play out there?"

"I used to," Dex said, "a long time ago. And I just started again. It's coming back, but slower than I'd like."

"Yeah, it's like that," the wolf said. "Well, don't give up; you guys were good."

"Thanks," Dex said, and turned back to his table. He spent the next set thinking about Chemical Celeste and wondering about the logistics of feeding the sound from a real instrument into M City. He was sure he didn't have the equipment, but that was easy to change.

He stayed until the music was over, then logged out of M City. He fell into bed, buzzed on rum and music, and managed not to think about death, neurostims, blood or steel blades even once.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Dex slept in. He normally had his apartment turn off its waking settings for his weekends, but he was usually up within an hour or two of his typical wake up time anyway. Not this day. It was approaching noon when Dex finally opened his eyes. He didn't notice the time at first, and just went about his usual morning routine, but when he was sitting down to a cup of coffee and a breakfast bar, he went online and nearly choked when the clock appeared on his display.

He took a second to panic, then realized that he had nothing urgent to do. It felt urgent, working on the case of Hazel and Luis Harker's killings, but they were already dead, and no amount of speed was going to change that. Dex guessed that the if killer had struck twice, there was a good chance that more killing would follow, but he wasn't sure he could prove that Hazel and Harker were murdered, let alone figure out who did it and stop them from doing it again. As wrong as it felt, there was really no reason why Dex couldn't sleep until noon if he wanted to.

Now that he was awake, though, he wanted to get cracking. He logged into the Cubicle Men's system, and paged over to the complete report on Hazel's scan. He skimmed it, looking for what he expected would be the similarities to Harker's killing. There they were — an electrical neurochemical stimulator was used, the cutting weapon was a steel-edged blade, Hold-Alls and polymer rope were used to bind her. This was enough, Dex knew. These two cases were obviously related. He sent a merge request to the Cubicle Men's system to create a new case file which combined all information on both cases. It also automatically scanned for similarities and differences, and Dex would review that report when it was done, in case he'd missed something.

While he waited, he went through the report on Hazel's scan again, this time he read it word for word.

Neuro-physical scan on deceased Hazel Ramer case # 234857-AD

Time of death, physical: approx. 0200-0400 UTC

Time of death, neuro: 0307 UTC

Primary cause of death: Exsanguination

Other contributing factors: None

Toxicology: No foreign chemicals found in blood or tissue

Neurochemistry: Extremely high dopamine and endorphin levels; evidence of excessive node stimulation on two facial nodes from a single high power blast; delivery system unknown

Physical state: Three long longitudinal shallow lacerations on torso (epidermal layer breached, muscle layer intact), two approximately 120 cm<sup>2</sup> patches of skin removed, but still attached to the body; microscopic fragments of steel found in the wounds; ligature marks on both wrists, consistent with Hold-All brand restraints; ligature marks on upper arms and upper torso, consistent with three strands of polymer rope; light bruising on back in two parallel horizontal lines, consistent with consistent pressure with 2 cm diameter round objects

Notes:

1. Lacerations made within one hour of death.
2. Ligature marks made within one hour of death.
3. Ligature marks indicate very little movement of subject against restraints.
4. Neurochemical level inconsistent with natural production.
5. Neurochemical level inconsistent with chemical stimulation.
6. Lacerations consistent with cuts by steel blade, approx. 0.5-1 mm in width, 10-20 cm in length.
7. EXCEPTION: Neurochemical level inconsistent with any known physical stimulation, however evidence of facial node stimulation indicates physical stimulation.

Dex's eyes were drawn to the red exception at the end of the report. This was different from Harker's report, where the scan determined that the neurochemical level in Harker's system was consistent with known physical stimulators. Something had changed between Harker's death and Hazel's killing, and Dex wondered if that would be the break he needed. The Stimstick was the key. Dex hadn't fancied his chances of finding the killer through purchase records, but now he wasn't so sure if this was something so new that the scans didn't recognize it. He sent a request to the system to trace all orders of both brands of node stimulators. He also sent a similar request for a list of purchasers of Hold-Alls restraints. He set the system to cross reference both lists and show Dex the names which were on both lists.

In the meantime, he ran a search for new or upgraded Stimsticks. He started by

looking for information on the two brands of neurochemical stimulators. They seemed to be fairly similar, though the Joybuzzer brand was marketed specifically as a pleasure enhancer, while Stimsticks clearly had the potential to be used for multiple purposes. Dex drilled down into the technical details, though, and discovered that both devices were essentially the same in construction. He wasn't entirely sure that both devices could be used as a stunner, but a quick search of some the boards for users of both tools made it clear that they were multipurpose.

There were some rumours of a new version of the Joybuzzer product, but like most online rumours, there was more speculation than information. Dex guessed that there really was a new product coming, and he wondered if that was what the killer had used on Hazel. The existing products were apparently easy to modify, though, so it was possible that the killer hadn't actually changed tools. Dex didn't know enough about these things to be sure. He would need outside help, and he didn't think Annabelle would be able to sort it out for him this time.

Pat Malone's retirement party was coming up the following night, and Dex could ask around then. He knew that shop talk was inevitable at these things, so he would hopefully find someone who knew more about how these things worked and where they could be found. Thinking about Malone's party reminded Dex that he needed to book a room for Annabelle. If they had been a different kind of couple, she would probably just stay with Dex, even though there was barely enough room for him in the small apartment, but as it was there was no way that she would be able to stay there for any length of time. It was hard enough for the two of them to be in the apartment together for an hour or more.

Dex hated that Annabelle stayed in a guesthouse when she visited, but he was still amazed that she visited at all. Their visits were always strange and awkward. Annabelle was trying, there was no way to deny that, but Dex could tell that every inch of her screamed to get away when they were together. She was one of those people who had always felt out of place and uncomfortable in the physical world, so escaped to the online communities. When Marionette City was realized, those people tended to move lock stock and barrel into the virtual world, conducting every activity they could online. This was Annabelle.

In M City, she was a strong, gregarious woman, competent and bright. She was social, funny and outgoing. In the physical world, though, she was painfully shy, terribly unhappy in the company of other people. Although she was better when it was just the two of them, he found that it was like being with another person, though there was now a spark of her real personality shining through. Dex wondered how she would handle Pat

Malone's party. He was still shocked that she'd said she would make an appearance.

He booked a room for her at the usual spot, the Red Fish Inn, a reasonably inexpensive small hotel two blocks away from Dex's apartment. The rooms there were slightly smaller than Dex's apartment, but they were modern, spotless and some even sported a view of the postage stamp sized neighbourhood park. Annabelle liked it there, and it allowed them to spend as much time together as was feasible, given the circumstances. Given the cost of the jet flight from Nice, it was a drop in the bucket, and Annabelle did quite well between her day job and her work for The Cubicle Men. She certainly never complained about the cost.

Dex sent her the confirmation, and then checked his messages for details about Malone's party. It was set for seven pm, and the address for the pub was given along with a map. It would be a quick train ride to the pub, which was in a reasonably good part of green sector. Dex had worked in the area when he was with the goon, and it had been fairly rough then. In the intervening years, plenty had changed, and the area had become a favourite for the young and differently employed. The rise of M City as a recreational centre also created a new economy, which was outside the control of the firms. There were now entire industries which existed solely in M City, with thousands of people working only for cash. Those people needed housing and other real world goods, but they had real cash to pay for them, too. A lot of previously bad neighbourhoods had been turned over to these independents, and apartments were fixed up and even complexes built in some places.

Since so many of these people were outsiders, they also attracted the artsy crowd, who lived off their leavings. Dex knew that much of green sector would be familiar to him, as he'd lived in places like that for many years. This pub that Malone's party was going to be at, The Cog and Sprocket, was doubtlessly going to be like any number of places Dex where used to shine the bar. Dex hadn't been back to a place like that since he decided to go legit and get a job back in his mid thirties. Part of him was nervous to walk back into that life, but part of him was looking forward to the realness of it all.

He almost wished Annabelle weren't going to be there.

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