

A wooden chair with a ladder back, set against a red background. The chair is the central focus of the image, with its backrest 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 Four

Dex barely made it in to work on time. He and Annabelle had stayed at Monte's until the wee hours, and he'd poured himself more than his fair share of refills at his apartment in that time. He'd had to take a shot of Flying Fish Tonix just to get himself moving, and he could barely remember the last time he'd been such a mess in the morning. He hoped he wouldn't have another terrible call like the Stiles woman again. He couldn't trust himself not to respond in kind if someone called him a shit-loving meatfucker again.

He rubbed his sore eyes as he logged into the B&B system, and caught a glimpse of his neighbour's sour expression turned his way. "Never seen a morning person before, sweetheart?" Dex growled, and felt his spirits life slightly as he saw his co-worker's face turn a violent shade of crimson. He didn't even care if the guy told on him. He'd probably make things worse for himself if he did go to management — employees were encouraged to work out internal differences between them on their own. Less work for the suits that way, Dex figured.

Dex ignored the guy he'd started to think of as Mister Mouse and began methodically working his way through his assigned tasks. Days like this made him glad he'd never had any real ambition. A job that really ought to have been done by a half intelligent program instead of poor saps like him was ideal for mornings like this. It was only four drinks, he told himself incredulously. Used to be that he could put away twice that much plus who knew what other pharmaceutical goodies and still perambulate correctly the next day. Dex wondered if maybe it was time he started shelling out for higher quality food bricks. He didn't expect the old meat sack to start giving in already.

At lunch, he headed for the break room and his third cup of the swill B&B served as coffee. He looked up and, surprised, saw an old deskmate standing by the machine.

"Heya, Dex," the woman said, leaning up against the counter. "Haven't seen you in a while."

Dex looked at her, and smiled. They had gotten on much better than he did with Mister Mouse, and he hadn't realized how much he had missed her. "Jeez, Hazel," Dex said, "it's got to be an age since you moved up to the sales floor. What are you doing down here with us schlubs? It can't be the gourmet java we brew down here." He grimaced and shoved his large mug under the spigot. Hazel watched the brown water pour into Dex's cavernous cup and laughed.

“Sales is a harsh master, but they don’t remove our taste buds,” she said. “All the meeting rooms upstairs were booked, so they sent us down here for the day.” She pointed at Dex’s cup. “How can you drink that stuff?”

Dex took a sip and wrinkled his nose. “It’s not so bad if you don’t smell it,” he said. “Besides, on mornings like this, I need something to stop me from going on a rampage. Or falling asleep on my desk.”

Hazel laughed again. “I hear you loud and clear on that one.” She leaned in toward him and said, “If you’re really desperate, I can drop some Lightning on you.”

Dex raised an eyebrow. “Hazel, you rebel, you. I never would have suspected.” She shushed him, even though they were alone and both of them were well aware that performance enhancing stimulants were expressly permitted by B&B’s drug policy. “No thanks,” Dex said. “I prefer to suffer.”

“That suits you,” Hazel said, smiling. “Anyway, I’ve got to get back to the world’s most boring staff meeting. It was good to see you again, Dex.”

“Yeah, you too, Hazel.” She turned to walk out of the break room, but stopped and turned back to face Dex.

“You know,” she said, “if you hadn’t said anything, I never would have known.”

“Known what?” Dex asked.

Hazel laughed. “You just look pretty good for a rough morning, that’s all. What happened to you in the last six months?” Dex felt his face flush, and he mumbled something. “Oh, it’s none of my business, I know,” Hazel said. “I’m just happy to see it. Whatever it is, don’t stop doing it.” She turned and left the break room.

When Dex got back to his desk, he started on a couple of tasks, and then activated his surreptitious program to access everywherenet without his bosses knowing what he was up to. He pinged Annabelle, just wanting to hear her voice. She answered after a long pause and before Dex could say anything, said, “That’s the last time I let you keep me out past my bed time. What a day I’m having! I’m working with this team in Namerica, and the one person I need couldn’t be bothered to show up today. And I have a headache. And I haven’t had enough sleep. You are a bad influence, Mister Dexter. A very bad influence, indeed.”

Dex laughed, and saw his desk neighbour try to hide a disgusted look. Dex was subvocalizing, so Mister Mouse wasn’t eavesdropping exactly, but Dex was sure that the

smartass was well aware that he wasn't on a client call. He didn't care. Maybe getting shitcanned from this job wouldn't be so bad. To Annabelle, he said, "And I'm sure you were just little miss "early to bed, early to rise" before you hoodwinked me into keeping time with you, is that it?"

"Hoodwinked!" Annabelle said, mock appalled. "I'm not even sure what that word means. Where did you get your dictionary, an antique store?"

"Verily," Dex replied, and smiled as Annabelle chuckled. "Anyway, I was just calling to remind you of the gig tomorrow night. The Dog and Pony bar, in Chandlers. You'll be there?"

"Wouldn't miss it for all the beauty sleep in the world," Annabelle answered, and Dex couldn't help but grin.

"I'll see you there, then," he said, and ended the call.

After he'd let slip to Annabelle that he used to be a musician, she wheedled him into trying the virtual mandolin. He had been apprehensive, for many reasons. But as much as Dex still felt out of place and uncomfortable in the virtual world, he had found a surprisingly large amount of pleasure in playing the fake instrument. Remembering his old bands, he wondered if it were possible to find the same joy in playing with others in M City as he had back in the hovels of the streets. After weeks of badgering by Annabelle, his curiosity finally got the better of him and he went to an open jam session one night.

It had been very strange, and not entirely in a pleasant way. But Dex could hear the music they were making together just as well through his implants as he had once heard live music with his ears. And while he would be the first to admit that playing a program with virtual bandmates was nowhere near as good as the real thing, it was a fine substitute. He went back the next week, and at the end of the evening, Javier, one of the keyboardists who had been playing with Dex, asked him if he'd be willing to play in a band a night or two a month. Talking to Javier, Dex found himself getting excited in a way he thought he'd never feel again. Of course, he said yes.

This was going to be Chemical Celeste's first show since Dex joined. He was nervous and happy and a little sad. Every time he played with the band it reminded him of his old friends, and the life he had lost. When he tried to remember why he had given it all up, the memories of scrounging for food and a place to live and always being on the fringes of society had a romantic tinge to them. He mentally shook his head, reminding himself that everyone has to grow up sometime. He'd started to do it when he got his first

real job, and with it some measure of responsibility. Also, a real apartment, more disposable cash than he'd ever seen before, and a taste for cheap rum.

Dex had had many low rank jobs over the years. His current position was not terribly good, though he had been with the firm long enough that he got a few perks that most CSRs didn't receive. He knew, from the few conversations with his neighbours, that his own building was populated with mainly sales staff, who were at least one rung higher on the corporate ladder than support staff. Even so, he knew all about the problems of underemployment.

There was very little in life that was not tied to employment — pay, of course, but also housing, law enforcement, even funeral arrangements. If, of course, you died while still working or had a good 'retirement' package. What a laughable euphemism that was. The only thing in most retirement packages was a room in a convalescent institution and a plan to get rid of your corpse. Dex was only in his sixties, so worrying about that time of life was seventy or eighty years off at least. It still pissed him off.

Back at his apartment that evening, he thought about the notice he's seen at the organization's news board that morning. Pat Malone, the head of the part of the organization known as the goon squad, was retiring. Everyone who came into the organization started in the goons, who took care of the rough and tumble aspect of the streets. They broke up fights, kept a kind of order in the worse neighbourhoods, and were the first line of contact for the organization. Malone had been a lifer among the goons — there were always a few who really shone there. He'd risen to the role of lieutenant, a title that meant little in the organization other than a mark of respect and a vague indication of responsibilities.

Dex had always liked Malone, though they had never really worked together and spoken rarely. Dex had no idea Malone was so old, but the notice had been clear. Malone was leaving the squad, leaving the organization and going into retirement. Everyone knew that meant he would probably soon be dead. It made Dex sad, and he made a note to remind himself to get Malone something nice for his going away party. Dex wondered what the man liked to drink.

Chapter Five

Dex was early to The Dog and Pony. There were only three other people there — Javier and a woman friend of his, and Annabelle. “We don’t go on for another hour,” he said to her, after enduring her virtual embrace. “What are you doing here already?”

“I just couldn’t wait to see you,” she said, the corners of her lips turned up in a grin. She looked him over and giggled when she noticed his flaming crimson tie, which stood out from his dark pinstriped suit like a bloodstain on a sheet. “I remember that,” she said, running her fingers along its length. Dex flushed in real life, and his avatar even managed to look embarrassed without changing colour.

“Well, if it was good enough for you, it should be good enough for them,” Dex gestured at the empty seats at the tables in the small cabaret.

“You’ll knock ‘em dead, honey,” Annabelle said, winking. “See, you’re not the only one who can hit up the antiquarian dictionary market.” She moved to a table near the front, and sat. Dex noticed that he wasn’t the only one who had spent some time in the wardrobe. Annabelle had done herself up for the evening, too. Her hair came just below her earlobes, and where it was usually a light brown it was now a luminescent deep gold colour. It didn’t just catch and reflect the light at the bar, but it created its own glow. It set off the almost violet eyes she was wearing very nicely. She wore a simple cream coloured dress, which in a virtual world where half the denizens wore wings or horns as accessories, stood out more than a glittered gown ever would have. Dex had not been won over by Annabelle’s looks, either in the virtual or the physical worlds, but he admitted to himself that he was proud to be seen with her.

Slowly the rest of the band trickled in — Suzi on the trumpet, Arvind on the drum kit and Kandace on the mixer. They joked around nervously; Dex knew that for all of them except himself and Javier, this was the first time they would have played for a real audience. Javier was giving a warm up talk while he set up his keyboards. “I’m not going to pretend that this isn’t a big deal, because it is. Playing for a crowd isn’t the same as jamming or playing for your friends. The audience is part it, the vibe they give you will influence your playing. Don’t try to fight it, but don’t over think it, either. You’re all good enough. Just play.”

They all grinned at each other as they finished getting their virtual instruments set up on the small stage. Dex knew that, like him, they were all busy setting up their programs in their apartments, probably alone, maybe even in their pajamas. Even he found it easy to forget his real surroundings, as he watched the virtual bar slowly fill with people. They

took their places on the stage, and the lights dimmed slightly. A disembodied voice, that Dex was fairly certain was a program, announced the name of the band. As the voice said the first syllable of 'Celeste', Arvind gave a quick "one, two, three, four," and they started to play.

There were a few missed cues in the first song, but the audience didn't seem to mind. By the time they were finishing the first set, they were tight and in the groove. The small space filled with applause as they left the stage, each of them buzzing with the thrill. Dex sat across from Annabelle, who had acquired another three people at the table. Dex recognized Evan and Fredrick, a couple of Annabelle's friends that Dex had met a few times before in M City. He thanked them for coming, then looked over and saw that the fourth person at the small table was Zahara Zhang, his squad captain. "Zizou," Dex said, using the captain's nickname, and sounding a little flummoxed. "I didn't think anyone on the squad knew about this." He shot Annabelle a look.

His captain grinned. "As far as I know, they don't," she said. "I had no idea it was you playing tonight. I just come here every Thursday for the bands." She took a sip of her drink. "You were pretty good. I'm glad to see you aren't wasting your talent."

"Thanks, Cap," Dex said, looking sheepishly at Annabelle.

"I'll drink to that," she said, smiling at Dex. "Here's to making use of what you've got."

"To realizing potential," Evan said, lifting his virtual beer bottle, and the others raised their glasses to the centre of the table.

After the second set, Dex had a drink with the band, and Annabelle said goodbye to her friends who were leaving, and joined Dex and the others. Zahara Zhang stopped by briefly to compliment the band, then left. "See you two tomorrow," she said as she walked out of the bar, reminding Dex and Annabelle of the weekly squad meeting. Annabelle couldn't stop grinning, her arm linked with Dex's as the musicians conducted a happy post-mortem on the gig.

After they were done, Dex and Annabelle walked out of the bar, and strolled arm in arm down the streets of Chandlers. Most people linked directly into and out of specific locations in M City, but some areas were decorated well enough outside the rooms and buildings that there were always some folks just walking around. Chandlers was one of those neighbourhoods, and Dex was more comfortable on its dark, lamplit streets than he was anywhere in the virtual world. Annabelle had become a wanderer herself in recent

months, looking for any way for both of them to be happy when they were together.

“You look like the cat that got the bird,” Dex said, after they’d walked about a block.

“What does that mean?” Annabelle asked, still grinning.

“So you haven’t memorized my dictionary yet,” Dex said. “I mean you look smug, like you just cracked into the most secure system on the nets, made off with a virtual suitcase full of cash and twenty-three priceless secrets and no one is the wiser.”

“Oh,” Annabelle said. “You mean, why do I look happy? Can’t I just be enjoying a night out with a handsome and talented man? Does something have to be up just because I’m happy?”

“Nice try, kiddo,” Dex said, smiling. “You’ve got the look. Spill it.”

Annabelle laughed, and squeezed Dex’s arm. “I’m just still kind of amazed that you really did it. Playing with the band and everything, here, like a regular person.” Dex couldn’t stop his reaction in time, and Annabelle felt him go stiff. “Oh, shit,” she said, stopping and turning to face him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, it’s not like I’m exactly normal myself.”

“I know what you meant,” Dex said, dropping her hand and stepping back. “And you’re right, it was a big step for me tonight. And I never would have done it without you. But you must know that it’s not easy for me. None of this is. It’s getting better all the time, but I still feel like a fraud here.” He gestured around him at the street, but Annabelle knew that he was referring to M City, to the virtual world which was the only place where she felt like a complete person.

“It’s real,” she said, certainty making her voice hard. “What we have is real, no matter how hard it is for us to be together. You know it is, Dex. I know you feel what I feel, or you wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re right,” Dex said, looking past Annabelle. “If I didn’t feel it, I wouldn’t be doing any of this.” He looked at her, then looked away again. “But wanting to be with you so much, and knowing you want to be with me, then having to settle for — this.” He spat the last word out like it was rotten. He felt a lump form in his throat and he choked it back. “It’s hard,” he simply said, finally.

Annabelle looked up at Dex’s eyes, the eyes she saw in her mind when she imagined him. Eyes that were darker, more uniform than physical eyes could ever be. She never thought of Dex’s physical body, only his avatar. Even when they were together in the physical world, where he was finally comfortable, Annabelle still imagined the virtual man

when she struggled to endure his touch. "This is just as hard for me," she said, her voice cracking. She felt Dex's avatar touch her cheek, the sensation soothing and sensual and heartbreaking.

"I know it is, kiddo," Dex said. They stood like that for a moment, two representations of people appearing to face each other in the dim simulated glow of a streetlight, their real bodies separated by one ocean of water and another of incompatible desire.

Chapter Six

The man woke early, the sound of his roommate in the lav startling him out of sleep against his will. He never bothered to set his system with an alarm, since Gerry was always up early, always in the lav first thing in the morning. He would never have chosen to live with a man like Gerry — there was nothing wrong with him, but they had nothing in common, nothing to talk about. At least he didn't get upset or ask any questions when the man was out at night. It could have been worse.

After Gerry left for his shift, the man cleaned himself and ate, then walked to the train stop and rode the forty minutes to the factory. He had forgotten how he'd even gotten this job. This job was like all the others he'd had all his life — something that he just fell into. His jobs were always crummy — he had no formal training, and wasn't burly enough to get work as a roughneck or labourer in the physical world. This one wasn't that bad; the work was easy, his apartment was fine and even his roommate was tolerable. He'd had worse, certainly.

The man sat at his workstation, running tests on the new equipment. He was just putting each device in the machine, pressing a button and checking the readouts. It wasn't a real test, not like if he put the tiny metallic tube up to his face and thumbed it on. He guessed someone else got to do that, someone who didn't work in this dark basement for a tiny shared apartment and just enough for food. He wouldn't have minded that job — these new Joybuzzers were supposed to deliver anything from a mild sense of well-being to orgasmic rapture with just a few milliamps. Better than stims, the marketing people said, though the man didn't believe anything they said.

One of the few perks of his job was that he got a good discount, so he'd used Joybuzzers plenty, on himself as well as on others. The model just before this one was pretty good — the sting didn't last long and the feelings were intense, but he always found the sensation to be more external than he would have liked. It always felt like something was being done to him, which of course, it was. But with stims, the feeling came from the inside out, as if you made it yourself, as if it were natural. You always knew with the 'buzzers that it was something that was given to you. And things that you were given could be taken away.

He often thought about things like this while he performed his tests. He was really just a button masher — he often wondered why they even bothered using people for such dull work. He supposed it must just be cheaper to employ him to put the tubes in the testing machine and turn it on than it would be to make a robot. And there were no

maintenance costs. When he broke down, he would just be replaced. At one time a thought like that would have filled him with a blinding rage. Now, it just made him chuckle. It was amazing the things that stop seeming important once you have a purpose to your life.

A purpose. That was something he definitely had now. It made him think of the woman from the stim bar. He wished he were with her now, with his knife and his plan, instead of at this workstation, pushing buttons like a drone. He toyed with the small tube in his hand and wondered how expensive these new 'buzzers were. The last candidate had had some expensive upgrades that had come out during the process, and the man had managed to sell them at one of those places in brown sector. He'd gotten a little cash out of the sale, and he thought he ought to reinvest it. These new 'buzzers were much less bulky than the one he used now, and they were supposed to give an even greater level of pleasure. He had no desire to cause pain. That wasn't his purpose.

After the shift he would see about getting a new 'buzzer. He wondered if he could trade in his old model for an even bigger discount. He couldn't count on the candidates having parts worth selling, and even with his discount the 'buzzers were expensive. But he was a frugal man, and he didn't need much. A little went a long way with him, and he could probably swing a new tool every once in a while. He was careful with his tools. He would sharpen the knife that evening. He used an old whetstone, and it took a long time to keep the edge right. But it was good work, better than pushing a button all day. And while he honed the edge he would decide when he would take her. When his work would begin.

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