



an Anderson Dexter novel

Act of Will

M. Darusha Wehm

Act of Will

an Andersson Dexter novel
by M. Darusha Wehm

© Copyright 2011 M. Darusha Wehm

ISBN 978-0-9737467-6-1

Get the audio podcast or buy the complete book in print, audiobook or ebook at <http://darusha.ca/actofwill>

Read the first Andersson Dexter novel, **Self Made**. <http://darusha.ca/selfmade>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial- No
Derivative Works 2.5 Canada license.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca/>

Chapter Twenty-Two

Annabelle arrived early the next afternoon. Dex had taken the train to the airport to meet her at the gate, and he was struck dumb when he saw her spiral down the pole from the arrivals area. She looked so beautiful — she had done something new to herself since he'd seen her in Nice. Was it her hair? Dex thought it looked somehow more luminescent. Her baby blues shone out from under the glinting fringe on her forehead, and Dex marvelled that for someone who wished she could just disappear, Annabelle certainly knew how to light up a room.

Dex was careful to restrain himself when they met. He let her take the lead as she walked up to him. She tentatively tilted her head up toward his, and they kissed lightly. This was only the second time she had let him get that close to her, and Dex thought the whole airport could hear his heart jackhammering in his chest. He let her pull away, and took her bags.

"I can carry them just fine," Annabelle said. "The antigrav chips work perfectly well in here."

"You've got to let me at least try to be a gentleman," Dex said, grinning. "Maybe if I'm lucky the floor on the way to the train will have demagnetized and I'll really have to lug these around." He hefted her two small bags, one in each hand, as if they were heavy.

"Okay, fine," Annabelle said. "If you want to be a big brute, I'm not going to stop you."

"Me big strong man," Dex said, and grunted. Annabelle laughed and walked alongside him as they made their way to the train stop.

After the short ride in, Dex checked her in to her room at the Red Fish Inn, then they went back to his apartment. Annabelle was being a good sport, but Dex could tell that she was anxious. "Having second thoughts?" he asked when she was sitting in his good chair and he was across the room perched on the side of the bed.

"About you?" she asked, nervously.

"No," Dex said softly, wondering all of a sudden if there was more to her skittishness than worrying about the event that evening. "Second thoughts about going to Malone's party."

"Maybe," she admitted. "It seemed like a good idea at the time." She smiled weakly.

"I know you've been doing so much better out here than you were," Dex said, a gentle smile on his face, "but maybe it's too much, too soon. I mean there will be an awful lot of people there, and I doubt that the space will be very big. It could get pretty cramped in there."

"Yeah, I know," Annabelle said, looking at the floor. "I really want to be there for Pat,

though.”

“Were you close?” Dex asked, realizing that he had no idea if she and Malone were friends. For all he knew, they’d been an item at some point. Dex sometimes forgot that not everyone lived as solitary a life as he did.

“Kind of,” she said, relaxing slightly into the chair. “You know how everyone in the organization is supposed to start as part of a street team?”

“Sure,” Dex said.

“Well, I didn’t really want to do that, as I’m sure you can guess.” Dex smiled at her. “Anyway, I explained things to Pat and he was very kind to me. He helped me talk to Zizou and they let me in without having to do a tour on the streets. We’ve been friendly ever since.”

“I’m not surprised they bent the rules for you, kiddo,” Dex said. “You’re so damn smart, and it’s not like people with skills like yours are falling out of the sky. They needed you a lot more than they needed to follow some dumb rules.”

Annabelle smiled. “That may or may not be true, Mr. Flattery Will Get You Anywhere, but Pat went out of his way for me, and I really don’t want to miss his party. I know it’s just a question of willpower; mind over matter.”

“I think it’s technically mind over mind, don’t you think?” Dex said.

“You really can be pedantic, you know,” Annabelle said, laughing. Dex was glad to hear that sound. He missed it so much when they were together in the physical world.

“So, what do you want to do?” Dex asked.

“I want to go, I just don’t know how long I’ll be able to handle it,” she said, looking down at her lap.

“Why don’t we turn up fairly early?” Dex suggested. “Hopefully it will be quieter, fewer people.”

Annabelle nodded. “Good idea. I’ll be able to talk to Pat without too much competition. I’ll stay as long as I can, but I don’t think I’ll be in it for the long haul.”

“Just let me know whenever you want to leave and we’ll make our tree act.” Dex said.

“You don’t have to leave with me,” Annabelle said, “I don’t want to spoil your fun.”

“Kiddo,” Dex said, his voice low, “you are my fun.”

Annabelle smiled, a little sadly. “You are a sweetheart,” she said, “but honestly I might be

better off on my own. I think we'll just have to play it by ear."

"Okay," Dex said. "It's your call." They sat, Dex looking at Annabelle while she kept her gaze out the small window.

"So, now that that's out of the way," Dex said, forcing his voice to be light, "what should we get Pat for a retirement gift? There will be plenty of real ale at the pub, so that's not the best choice."

"He likes Scotch, too," Annabelle said. "The real stuff, imported from Europa."

Dex whistled low. "Good thing you're made of cash," he said, "that stuff costs a fortune."

Annabelle grinned. "If you go out and get it, I'll split it with you fifty-fifty."

"You drive a hard bargain, woman," Dex said. "Luckily, I'm a stereotypical cop, and I know of a real liquor store in town; I'll just check to make sure they have some in stock." He took on the thousand metre stare people get when they are going online, and looked up the place. They had two different kinds of real whisky in stock, and Dex had a bottle of the Glenross put aside for him. He logged off and said, "It's going to take me about a half hour to get there, so do you want to hang out here or head back to your hotel until it's time to go?"

"I don't mind staying here," Annabelle said, "if it's okay with you."

"I like having you here," Dex said, his voice soft. Annabelle glanced up at him, flushed and looked away. "Okay, I'll be back in ninety minutes or so."

"See you," Annabelle said, as Dex walked out the door.

Dex returned just over an hour later, with only a very expensive bottle of amber fluid in his arms. He'd had to restrain himself from buying one of the bottles of 7 year old rum the place stocked — he wasn't poor by any manner of means, but one bottle of the stuff cost three days salary and he just couldn't justify that kind of a purchase. It was awfully tempting, though.

He stepped into the apartment, and saw Annabelle in more or less the same position she'd been in when he left. She was obviously online, and Dex tried not to disturb her. He stowed the Scotch in the food cupboard, then he slipped into the lav. The autoclave had an access port from inside the tiny room, so he could stuff his clothes into it without bothering Annabelle. He showered quickly, and pulled out some clothes from the small cupboard access in the room. He was amazed how this tiny apartment had all the necessary features for two people to share the space. Even Dex couldn't imagine living there full time with another person.

He dressed and tidied the lav, then stepped out of the small room. Annabelle was focussed

on the apartment, and she grinned at Dex as he emerged from the room. "You sure do clean up well," she said, her voice loose and easy.

"It helps to have a reason," Dex said, smiling, and walked over to the cupboard. He took down the bottle of Scotch, and showed Annabelle. "This is where all your money has gone," he said. "Take a good look, because that's all you'll get to do."

"Pat might share it," she said, dubiously.

"If he does, he's insane," Dex said. "I came perilously close to buying a seven year old bottle of rum in that store, and I wouldn't share it with anyone. Well, I'd offer to share it with you, but only because I know you wouldn't want it."

Annabelle laughed. "I'm happy to stick with the neurostims," she said. "I had a snort while you were gone; I hope you don't mind. I figured it wouldn't hurt to get a little loose before the party, you know, build a little fuzzy wall between me and reality."

"I know exactly what you mean," Dex said, pulling down the bottle of Jamaica's Best. "This stuff bears about as much resemblance to that bottle of seven year old as I do to an elephant, but needs must when the devil drives." He poured a small shot into a glass, topped it off with a splash of water then toasted Annabelle. She raised an empty hand in return, and Dex downed the drink. He grimaced, then said, "Nothing like getting a little head start, eh?"

"You are so strange," Annabelle said, laughing.

Dex bowed theatrically, and said, "You wouldn't have me any other way, I'm sure."

"No," Annabelle said, "no, I wouldn't. Okay, let's go and get this over with."

"A more rousing pre-party speech has never been heard by man or beast," Dex said, as they left the apartment.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The pub was dark and small, but Dex's guess had been right and there were only a handful of people in the place. The invitation had included an image of Pat Malone for those who had only ever met the man in M City, and Dex could see that he was sitting on a stool at the long bar, chatting with a man Dex recognized, but couldn't quite name. Both of them had tall glasses of dark beer in front of them on the wood-image panelled bar. He glanced back at Annabelle, and saw that she was still smiling as she slowly moved deeper into the bar. She caught up with him, and they walked together to the man of the hour.

"Pat," Annabelle said, leaning in to plant a light kiss on the older man's cheek.

"Annabelle Lewis, I presume," Malone said, a mixture of surprise and genuine joy in his voice. "You made it. I know it wasn't easy..."

"I said I'd be here, didn't I?" Annabelle chided. "Besides, flights are cheap right now." She grinned, and Malone smiled back, obviously remembering that Annabelle had had to overcome more than mere distance to be there. Malone turned to Dex, and clasped his hand warmly.

"It's good to see you, Dex" Malone said. "I'd recognize you anywhere." He grinned and jerked his head toward Annabelle. "That's some woman you've got yourself."

"Don't I know it," Dex said, smiling. "So let me get a taste of this incredible brew they've got here." Malone looked up and waved his arm at the man behind the bar. The barman came over and Dex ordered a pint of the house special. He turned to Annabelle, who shook her head, and Dex asked for a soda water for her.

Malone raised an eyebrow when Dex passed the water over to Annabelle, but didn't say anything. "Don't want to mix my uppers and downers," Annabelle said, smiling, as she raised her glass. Dex lifted his frothy ale and they clinked glasses with Malone.

Dex turned to the other man sitting with Malone. He looked familiar but in the dim light Dex couldn't recognize him. He was about to introduce himself, when the man said, "Andersson Dexter,"

"Yeah," Dex said, and stuck out his hand.

"Eduardo Lino," the other man said, shaking Dex's hand. "Good to see you again."

"You too," Dex said. "I didn't recognize you in civvies." Lino was dressed in a bright one-piece that Dex guessed cost more than that bottle of seven year old rum. "I never thanked you and your partner for your help the other day."

"It was nothing," Lino said. "You know, it's just what we do on street."

"Yeah," Dex said, "but you don't always have a soft old detective looking over your shoulder and getting all woozy at the sight of blood."

Lino laughed. "You were fine," he said. "I remember my first stiff — I spewed all over the scene. It's a good thing Malone here didn't find out, or I'd have been out on my ear."

Malone was talking to Annabelle, but looked over to the two men. "I heard that," he said, sternly, "and if you really think I didn't know about that incident with the Maxwell body, you're a long way from making detective squad, Lino." He grinned at the younger man, who raised his glass in a silent toast to his outgoing boss.

Malone turned back to Annabelle, and Lino asked Dex, "So, what is going on with that? I've been following the case file, and I saw that you merged it with the other body we found last week. You think they're related?"

"No doubt about it," Dex said. "Hey, speaking of which, do you know anything about physical neurostims?"

"I know what they are," Lino said, "but that's about it. However, I do know someone who knows a hell of a lot about those kind of things."

"Who?" Dex asked.

"Melissa," Lino said.

"Melissa..." Dex tried to put a face to the name.

"Vonruden, my partner," Lino said, laughing. "She works in a stim joint. She's got all the inside dope on that stuff. They don't handle online delivery, though, if that's what you need."

"Nope," Dex said, smiling. "I just need to know about the physical stuff; Stimsticks, Joybuzzers, that kind of thing. So, is she planning on coming out tonight, or should I just message her in the morning?"

"I'm pretty sure she's going to be here, but probably not until later," Lino said. "She's a bit of a night hawk."

"Great," Dex said. "Thanks for the help. Again."

"No problem," Lino laughed. "I'm happy to do it." He drained the last of his beer, and gestured to the barman for another.

"I've got that one," Dex called to the bartender, as he was filling Lino's glass. He turned to Lino. "Least I can do."

The other man smiled. "Not necessary, but very much appreciated." Dex grinned, and turned back to Malone. He saw that several other people had arrived in the pub, and looked around for Annabelle. He couldn't see her.

"Oh shit," he muttered.

"What's that?" Malone asked, turning to Dex.

"Annabelle's gone," he said, miserably.

"No, she isn't," Malone said. "She's over there talking to Zizou." He pointed at a table near the door, where the two women were seated.

"Christ," Dex muttered. "That had me worried for a second."

"The way she's looking at you, I think she'll manage to let you know if she's going to bail," Malone said. "Though if she were my woman I'd probably stick a little closer, if you know what I mean." The old man grinned, and Dex felt his face flush.

"Probably a good idea," he said, and walked over to the table.

"...but I never expected to see him look so, I don't know..." Annabelle was saying as Dex approached the table.

"'Haggard' is the word that came to my mind when I saw him," the captain said, sipping some kind of tall cocktail.

"Hey now," Dex said, "I don't look that bad. I took a shower and everything." He grinned at the women and pulled up a seat.

"Not you," Annabelle said, seriously. "Pat Malone. He looks like hell. I can't even remember seeing anyone look like that. You?" she asked Zahara Zhang. The captain shook her head, long dark curls bouncing over her slim shoulders.

"Well, it's been a while," Dex said, "but back when I was living as a free man there were plenty of old people around. Most of them were throwbacks or nature freaks, who only ate food they grew themselves or whatever. It was kind of scary — guys who were less than my age now looking a hell of a lot worse than Malone, let me tell you. Wrinkles, white hair, thin skin, the whole death's door routine."

"Malone's no anti-tech freak," Annabelle said. "This isn't like that."

"Yeah, I've seen folks like Malone, too," Dex said. "They're just so damn old that the supplements don't cut it any more. It only lasts so long, they say. How old is he, anyway?"

"His personnel file says he's a hundred and twenty-seven," the captain said.

"Sounds about right," Dex said, sadly. "Even the expensive DNA-tailored supplements and tonics only give you a hundred and fifty tops. And I'm guessing none of us has enough dough for that kind of regime."

"It's so sad," Annabelle said. "He's still so full of life. I can't believe he's just going to decay until he dies. In this day and age you'd think we could come up with a better way."

"It used to be a lot worse," the captain said. "We've got it good in comparison to people just a hundred years ago."

"Sure," Annabelle said. "It still just seems wrong that you're perfectly fine one day, then you wake up the next morning and you're old." The three of them sat in silence with their thoughts, sipping their drinks. Their melancholy reverie was broken when a tall, blonde woman came over to their table.

"Anyone mind if I borrow Mr. Dexter here for a moment?" Melissa Vonruden said, flashing a wide smile. Annabelle shot a glance over to Dex, but he didn't seem to notice it.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said, rising from the table. As he turned away with Vonruden, he didn't see Annabelle's smouldering eyes on his back.

"Eduardo tells me you want to know about Stimsticks," she said, as she led them to a dark corner in the interior of the bar. Dex brought her up to speed on the similarities between Hazel and Harker's deaths, and the information he'd learned about physical neurostimulators.

"Well, here's what I can tell you," Vonruden said, taking a long pull on her beer. "Joybuzzers and Stimsticks are the same thing. Slightly different packaging, different markets, but they function exactly the same way. Both are user configurable, though Stimsticks offer more options out of the box. If the user knows what they are doing, though, both units are easy to open up and adjust. They both deliver any kind of neurostim available from a node implant."

"I've only got the basic stim implant," Dex said. "What's a guy like me going to get out of one of those contraptions?"

"Well," Vonruden said, "your basic implant isn't going to get much out of a 'buzzer or Stimstick. The basic node just recreates a half dozen light intoxicants from online stims, and mild pleasure plus the stunner reaction from a Stimstick. A decent upgrade, though, would simulate virtually anything from an online jolt, plus a very wide range of physical sensations."

"So, Harker and Hazel would have had to have upgraded nodes in order to get the goodies

from the Stimstick, right?"

"Right," Vonruden said.

"But you can't tell by looking at person's nodes what each one is for," Dex said, "they all look pretty much the same."

"That's true," Vonruden said.

"So how would our killer know that the Stimstick was going to work?" Dex asked.

"Maybe he works in an upgrade salon?" Vonruden suggested.

"Maybe," Dex said. "What about a stim joint? Everyone who works there must have upgraded nodes."

"Sure," Vonruden said. "Hell, everyone who comes in the door would have them; nothing we sell would be any good without an upgrade. Same for the stim joints in M City."

"Huh," Dex grunted. He slapped Vonruden on the back, and said, "Well, that's twice in a week I owe you a drink. You've just given me the first real lead in this mess. Why don't I get started on repaying you what I owe?" He left his hand on her shoulder as the two walked toward the bar.

From the table by the door, Annabelle watched as Dex bought the tall, beautiful, confident and very physically present Melissa Vonruden a drink.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Annabelle didn't remember leaving the pub, or how she got back to the Red Fish Inn. She did remember the feeling of vertigo as she watched Dex with that woman from the goon squad. She remembered feeling like the walls of that horrible place were closing in on her, and she remembered thinking she was going to lose consciousness. She must have found her way out of the bar then, found a train and made her way back to the guest house. She must have, because that's where she was now.

Though that wasn't entirely accurate. Her body was safely in her room at the Red Fish Inn, but she was really on her way to The Hot Spot, a stim bar in Marionette City. She hadn't been there since she started spending time with Dex; he didn't like stims and she was usually just fine with the stuff they served at Monte's. But she felt like hell, and needed something to make that feeling go away. She needed something special, and The Hot Spot was the place for something special.

The place was as crowded as she remembered it being. She liked that, it made her feel safe. She was alone but not alone, which was the best way to be when you needed to get happy. She pinged the bar for a list of the cocktails on offer, and carefully pored over the menu. There were plenty of new items available since she had last visited, but she wasn't in an experimental mood. She wanted an old standby, a feeling that was as comfortable in its familiarity as it was in its chemical effects. She ordered a mixture they called Cranberry Sky, which was a cocktail made primarily of tranquilizers and endorphins.

What appeared to be a martini glass filled with a light pink liquid took a moment to materialize in her hand, but she felt the hit as soon as her order was in — her body instantly felt like it was made of rubber; even her lungs seemed to be soft and spongy. Slowly, riding the wave of comfort which seemed to roll over her body, came a feeling of contentment. It was as if all of a sudden, everything was right with the world, and Annabelle wondered how she could ever have felt awkward, jealous or unhappy. She smiled, and found a spot for her avatar at one of the small tables around The Hot Spot.

She sat, slowly sipping the drink, her avatar's action controlling the rate the neurostim mixture entered her system. She watched the other customers at the bar, mostly a sedate crowd this evening, mainly clustered together in groups of two or three, but many like her, alone at a table or at the bar, sipping whatever made them happy. Annabelle was about halfway through her drink, and feeling fabulous, when a man stopped by her table.

"Mind if I join you," he asked. Annabelle looked, and the man's avatar was totally bland. Most of the people in the bar had custom bodies, with fancy clothes and accessories. This

fellow was strictly off the rack, but Annabelle was no snob. She knew plenty of people who had no interest in the aesthetics of the virtual world, and she respected their opinion.

"Go ahead," she answered, gesturing to an empty chair across from her.

"So, what brings you out tonight?" he asked after he'd sat down and started sipping a drink of his own.

Annabelle thought. She remembered being so uncomfortable at the pub out there, unhappy with Dex for leaving her alone and going off with that woman. But she didn't feel any of those things any more and it all seemed a little ridiculous, now. "Just felt like time for a little splurge, you know," she said, her voice slow and sensuous. "Sometimes you just need to get out, and get away from it all, don't you think?"

"Definitely," the man said. "I feel like that a lot."

Annabelle noticed that he was paying her a lot of attention, but she didn't mind. It was nice to be noticed, nice to be admired, here where she felt like she truly belonged. Out there, she just felt wrong, like the body she wore wasn't really hers. She had always felt that way, then after meeting Dex she decided to finally do something about it. She had her physical body remade into the image of herself she saw in her mind, the version of herself she had made here, in M City.

She had hoped it would make things better, and to a certain extent it did. When she looked in a mirror she now saw herself, not some stranger's eyes staring back at her. But, there was so much more to it than the way she looked. Regardless of the body she wore, she still felt like a freak out there. And the worst part of it all was that she so desperately wanted to feel comfortable out there now. Not for herself, but for Dex. Because she knew that the way she felt out there was exactly how he felt in here.

"So," she asked the man across from her, "what is it you want to get away from?"

"Oh, you know," he said, noncommittally, "the workaday world, I guess. Bosses, roommates, the whole treadmill."

"Isn't that right," Annabelle said, more for something to say than because she agreed with him. Even with all its complications, she liked her life. Even her problems were the good kind to have; making a hard relationship work with someone who is working just as hard to make it happen. She was lucky, she knew, and all of a sudden felt terrible about running out on Dex.

Something must have shown on her face, because the man across from her said, "You okay? You look like you just got a shot of melancholy in there." He pointed at her glass.

"It's all right," Annabelle said. "I just think I made a really bad decision a little while back."

I should probably go and do something about it.”

“That seems like a good choice,” the man said. “Choices are important. We don’t get to make very many of them in this life, so it’s important to make the right ones.” His eyes bored into her, and Annabelle got the strong impression he was trying to decide something about her. On the other hand, it might have just been the default expression on his bargain basement avatar.

“It’s been nice talking to you,” she said, as she drained the remains of her drink, “but I think I need to be going now. You have a good night, now.” Annabelle stood, smiled at the man, and linked out of The Hot Spot.

The man sipped his drink, and made his choice.

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