

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

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 One

Luis Harker was not a particularly emotional man, but he was crying now. Big, racking sobs convulsed his body, straining his bound hands against the back of the chair he was tied to, the cuffs digging into his wrists. When the man had first put the restraints on him, Luis found himself, lucid through the fear for a brief moment, wondering if they were the new electromagnetic cuffs that all the Security guys were talking about at work. It had been a long time since he had been able to think about anything like that.

He barely even noticed the room he was in, on the face of it a tiny anonymous box, like every other apartment he had seen. But a closer look showed the room for what it was missing — there was no storage area, no zapper for heating food. Just a stained mattress, a door that Luis might have guessed led to the lav had he been able to think about it. And the chair. All of Luis' attention was riveted to the chair in the middle of the room.

It was a typical metal chair, the kind you would find in the waiting room of an upgrade salon or a cheap food booth. There was nothing remarkable about it, other than the fact that Luis had been tied to it for what felt like an eternity, bound by thick polymer rope that seemed to get tighter the more he struggled. He had stopped struggling a long time ago; now the uncontrollable movement of his body as he sobbed was the only tension against his restraints.

When the man had first grabbed him, Luis had put up a fight. He had been leaving work, the sky already dark but the lights of the city bright enough that he felt he should have seen the man crouching in the small alleyway. But while Luis was walking to the train stop, he was going online after a long day at work, checking his messages and scanning the news boards. He had made that walk 260 days a year for three years and he barely even watched where he was going any more. With his display overlaid on his vision, he could see just enough to avoid the other commuters while he surfed the boards and answered mail, but that had always been enough before.

Luis was in the middle of reading an article about a new brand of food bars which promised increased mental acuity and focus as well as the usual nutritional supplements, when he felt the wind go out of him. He was dazed, but he could still see through the words and images on his display, and he saw a figure duck in front of him and take what looked like a small metal box from a pocket. Luis had no idea what was happening, but instinct told him it was not a good thing, so he tried to knock the box from the other

person's hand.

Even though he worked in the physical upgrade industry, and wore the body of a fashionable young man about town, Luis had never been all that interested in physical things. Like many people, he lived his recreational life online, in the virtual world Marionette City which he accessed through his neural implants. So, he was completely unprepared for the pain and loss of balance that came when his hand made contact with the metal box, and in the moment of his confusion, the other person found an opening. The box swung up and Luis felt rather than saw an arc of electricity shoot from the box toward his face. Everything slowly faded to gray and Luis felt himself fall to the ground. He felt hands holding his wrists together and binding them with the lightweight restraints that his addled mind incongruously focussed on. Then he was out.

When he opened his eyes, he was in the room, tied to the chair with his wrists behind his back. He was alone. Of course, he screamed for help, tried to go online and call for help, but his screams went unanswered and he found his connection to everywhere net scrambled. The small, still lucid part of his brain guessed that whatever hit him from the metal box had screwed with his implants, but he kept trying to connect, over and over again until the full implication of his situation caught up with him, and he began to cry uncontrollably. He was going to die, after that crazy fucker did god only knows what to him first. Luis threw up all over himself.

He waited, alone and afraid, smelling the stink of his vomit and sweat. With every minute that passed, he became more afraid, less able to think clearly. By the time the apartment door opened, Luis couldn't even speak. He simply thrashed at his bounds as the man entered, grunting incoherently as the man slowly walked toward him, Luis' eyes wild with pure animal terror. Even though he was looking right at the man, there was no way Luis would ever have been able to identify him, even if he lived. He never even noticed the knife.

It gleamed as if it were a brand new laser edged cutter, but it was old. The short handle was made of fossilized bone, worn smooth and shiny by the sweat of untold numbers of hands. The blade, Damascus steel, was inlaid with an intricate pattern — wavy like water — as it had been folded and forged by hand. The steel was honed to a razor edge, its tip a dagger's pinpoint. It was beautiful.

The hand which held the knife, loose and comfortable, belonged to a man who was as ordinary as the weapon was remarkable. He had a body sculpted by the nutrients and

chemicals in budget food bars — young, thin, muscular, healthy and utterly nondescript. His face was dotted with the small metal studs most everyone wore, implants which upgraded the neural interface with everywhere.net. He could have been anyone; Luis could easily have been his brother. Even his voice was unremarkable, but Luis jumped when the man spoke.

“I’m sorry about this,” the man said softly, tracing the polymer bounds with the tip of the knife. “I don’t usually keep people like this for so long, but I was unavoidably detained. I’m sorry; it must be very uncomfortable.”

Luis struggled to make sense of the man’s words, tried to formulate something to say, something to get him out of this. “Please,” he croaked, his voice hoarse from shouting, “please. Let me go.”

The man laughed, the sound surprisingly light. There was no trace of cruelty in his voice when he said, “I’m sorry, but I can’t do that.” He drew the knife absently across Luis’ arm, a thin line of blood welling up in its wake. “Make no mistake,” he said, “I am going to kill you. But there's no reason why we can't both enjoy it.” He pulled the small metal box from a pocket and Luis felt the spark of lightning again. One of the nodes in his face burned for a fraction of a second, then he felt the sensation change to one of intense pleasure.

The man began the work with the knife, and Luis felt physical ecstasy like he never had imagined. He spent twenty glorious minutes before he finally died.

Chapter Two

Andersson Dexter was having a bad day, and it wasn't even noon yet. Things had started out well enough — his room had brightened for him just the way he liked, waking him easily out of a deep sleep. He didn't even have a twinge of a hangover. But then he opened his eyes, and saw the walls of his small room, and he remembered that he wasn't in Europa any more. He was back in the city, alone, and Annabelle was thousands of clicks away again.

He had been back for nearly two weeks, and every morning was like this, though some days were better than other. This one was worse. When he got to work he was already in a sour mood. He sat at his desk, and logged into the office's network a couple of minutes early. Right on the dot of nine, a little light flashed at the corner of his vision, and a customer's details began scrolling before his eyes. A chime sounded and Dex could hear the faint hum of an open voice line. "Barrett and Brar Upgrades," he said, faux-cheerfully, "How may I help you make a better you?"

Dex had put in a decade at B&B and he'd been working as a CSR for a long time before he got that job. He'd been threatened, sworn at, bullied, despised and mocked more times than he could count, and like anyone in that business, it rarely gave him a moment's pause. But he was cranky, and the last thing he needed to hear first thing in the morning was the stream of invective this customer unleashed. It was twenty minutes before he got the woman to calm down and an hour before he finally resolved the call. A good long time over the twelve minutes that headquarters expected each call should average and another black mark next to the name Andersson Dexter.

Dex grabbed a food brick from his desk drawer and tore it open. He took a large bite of the glutinous cube and slowly chewed while he typed up the notes from his call with Miss-Not-Ms. Mary Stiles, nemesis customer of the day. While he typed, he activated his covert program that allowed him to have access to the everywhere-net from inside the B&B system. The firms kept their systems locked down, ostensibly for security reasons, but mostly to keep employees from wasting company time on other activities. Like Dex was about to do now.

While finishing his tasks for B&B, Dex logged into another system, this one for an organization with no official name, but which he and his cohorts called The Cubicle Men. When he wasn't enduring calls from customers like Mary Stiles, Dex was a detective, solving cases for people who had no legitimate place to turn. The only law enforcement was the private Security arms of the firms, and they only cared about problems that

affected them. If you had no job, or only a low level one, there was nowhere to fight for you if you were cheated or stolen from. And if your problem was in an area that the firms disapproved of, then you had no chance. Except with people like Dex, who were employed at places like B&B but, unbeknown to their employers, were really on the clock for the Cubicle Men.

There was no new case for him, though, which soured his mood even more. He sighed aloud, and his new office neighbour, a mousy looking man whose name Dex had never bothered to learn, sharply looked up. Dex scowled at the man, who quickly ducked his head down again. Dex checked the clock just barely visible in the corner of his vision. It was only ten minutes past eleven.

After his shift at B&B, Dex rode the train home. Before he even reached the sidewalk in front of Barrett and Brar's fifty-storey building, he was logged into M City, headed for Three Card Monte's bar. Monte's was in a seedy part of Marionette City, the virtual world that was becoming more and more the social hub for most people. Dex liked the virtual neighbourhood; it was dark, a little gloomy, and nothing like the rest of Marionette City, with its bright, shiny animations and impossible designs.

Annabelle Lewis was waiting for him when his avatar walked into the bar. Unlike many people, Dex chose his avatar to look pretty similar to that way he looked in the physical world. He didn't own an antique charcoal three piece suit like the one he wore in M City, and he didn't think you could even buy hats like the one his avatar always had pulled low over his eyes, but otherwise it was just him. Annabelle noticed him arrive, and waved from a table in a dark corner of the bar.

Dex knew that her avatar was a pretty faithful representation of her real physical body, too, but he also knew that it hadn't always been that way. She had visited Dex previously, but on his first trip to see her he'd had quite a surprise when he arrived. He discovered that she had, as she put it, simply had her physical body adjusted to conform to the image she had of herself. Dex wondered if it was really just a coincidence that she'd finally decided to get the work done just before he visited for the first time, but it had never come up in the week he spent in her spacious flat in Nice. He wasn't sure he ever wanted to have that conversation.

He had to admit that Annabelle was beautiful. She had the same slim body that most people wore, thanks to the powerful engineering in the ubiquitous food bricks and tonics everyone but the very rich and very poor lived off. Dex was impressed with the work she'd had done, but it was her eyes that really drew Dex in to her, and they hadn't

changed at all. He wondered how much she had paid some designer for her avatar, since even in M City they danced with the same sense of humour and joie de vivre he saw in the baby blues she wore on the streets. Dex approached the table, and found that his day turned around at the sight of Annabelle. He couldn't help smiling, both with his body and his avatar. He half-watched half-felt himself embrace Annabelle, and felt a frisson of revulsion at the strangeness of the virtual experience.

He hoped that his reaction hadn't been translated into his hug by the complex programming that controlled avatars in the virtual world, and reminded himself that he had been getting much better at ignoring those feelings. He pulled back and smiled at Annabelle, who grinned at him. "Nice hat," she said, her eyes dropping to the dark felt in Dex's right hand.

"It's the same one as always, kiddo," Dex said.

"I know," Annabelle answered, sitting back down. "It's still nice."

Dex sat across from her, and ordered his usual — a no-stimulant rum and ginger beer — from the pretend human bartender program. Annabelle was sipping what looked like a gin fizz and Dex figured was probably a complex cocktail of neural stimulants that she used like Dex used real rum. As if reading his mind, she lifted her drink to gesture at his, and asked, "So, you have a wet dark and stormy going at home?"

Dex smiled ruefully. "Not yet, I'm just walking in the door," Dex said. "Besides, you know I can't afford real ginger beer. It's just Jamaica's Best and gingapop, but after this bitch of a day, it'll have to do." He griped about his day while at his apartment he poured a couple of fingers of cheap rum into a tumbler and topped it off with ginger ale, watching Annabelle's avatar in the forefront of his vision.

"So, have you been playing?" Annabelle asked.

Dex blushed, but his avatar kept his secret. "Yeah, I've been noodling around a bit. I've been playing all the songs for the next gig, hoping that it won't wreck my virtual mandolin playing."

Dex had recently joined a small pick-up band in M City called Chemical Celeste. He played mandolin, which had been his instrument back in his misspent youth. Playing the virtual instrument was quite different from the real thing, but Dex had picked it up fast and he fit in well with the band. When he was in Europa, Annabelle had surprised him with a gift of a cheap real mandolin. He'd been speechless, but refused to play for her until he had practiced.

Annabelle moved her avatar next to Dex on the banquette seat, and leaned in to him.

They sat that way for a few minutes in silence, and Dex was doing a good job of pretending to like it. "I know you probably aren't going to want to hear this," Dex said, his voice a little thick from the rum, "but I miss you."

Annabelle smiled, a little sadly, and squeezed Dex's arm. "It's okay," she said. "I missed you a little when you were in Nice."

Dex controlled the impulse to remind Annabelle that Nice was where she lived, and that he had been there only to see her. That they had been together so much more than they were now, and that that was what he missed. But he knew she knew that, just like he knew that she craved the times they had at Three Card Monte's or places like it in M City the way he craved being together in the physical world.

He laughed, a tight noise that contained frustration, longing and a strange feeling of hope. "We are some pair, aren't we kiddo?"

Dex saw Annabelle lift her face, and he almost felt for a moment like she was really looking into his eyes. "That we are," she said, "that we are."

Chapter Three

The man sat alone at the bar, looking at the crowd. His avatar looked as if it were simply staring at the row of virtual liquor bottles on the shelf behind the bar, but the man was really scanning the other patrons at the bar carefully. He had his system set to identify the physical location of each person, and highlight those who were in the city. There was no point in getting his mind set on someone only to find out that they were actually located halfway around the world.

The bar was reasonably crowded, but no one noticed him sitting on his own. It wasn't unusual to see someone alone in a place like this — its main draw wasn't the company but rather the goods represented by the items behind the bar. This was the finest neural stim joint in M City that the man knew of, and he was quite the connoisseur. Though this night he was limiting himself merely to a small dram of Focus, since he was, after all, working.

No one paid him for his work, of course, but he had long ago realized that in this world the truly important work was never properly recognized. He was content now merely to see the work done. He had always found ways to make ends meet some other way. That wasn't important. What was important was what he was doing now.

He scanned the room, automatically looking for the people who were in the city. There weren't many — sometimes he'd spend a whole night in a bar like this and never find a suitable candidate. There were no sure things in this vocation, he knew, and while he would be disappointed if he didn't find someone, it was the way of all things. He was a patient man. He had to be.

He watched as a small group near the door began to get rowdy. They starting singing along with the song that was playing, and a few other people at the other end of the bar joined in. He felt a frisson of distaste ripple through his body. Why would they draw such attention to themselves, make themselves so obvious? He had always avoided those stims which contributed to that kind of behaviour. He couldn't understand why anyone would find such a reaction so pleasant it was worth paying for. He felt mortified on their behalf as the song ended and one of their number, a tall, reedy woman, careered around the room. He looked away and sipped his drink, wondering if it were maybe time to cut the night short, when a flash of red caught his peripheral vision.

A woman was entering the bar, her location lit like a beacon. Finally. Someone in the city. Someone he should talk to.

He had never seen this one before, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. There were a dozen or more places like this that he visited regularly, looking for potential candidates. This woman could be a regular here and he wouldn't know. Or she could be wearing a new body. It didn't matter. He himself used a different avatar every time he worked — it paid to be careful. He watched as the newcomer made her way to the bar, and moved his avatar next to hers to eavesdrop on her order. It helped him make his decision if he felt he knew a little something about the possible candidate. This one ordered a particularly powerful cocktail that he knew would make her chatty in a minute or two. Excellent.

She sipped her virtual drink, her avatar's action providing the delivery of the chemical stimulants to the brain. The effects would begin immediately, so he could see no reason to delay. He could feel his heart begin to pound more quickly, and was pleased that his avatar would not betray him as easily as his body did.

"Hi," he said, turning to face the woman. He smiled easily and watched as her look of wariness turned quickly to a smile in return. He knew it was the chemicals, not his charm that effected the change, but that didn't matter. "Seems like everywhere you go you hear that song," he continued, jerking his head toward the video screen where a popular band was screeching out their latest hit. "You just can't get away," he said, grinning again.

"Yeah," the woman replied. "It's catchy, though." They chatted idly for about an hour, about nothing of substance. They never even introduced themselves, which was of no consequence since any name he gave would have been false, anyway. In his experience, most of the people who frequented bars like this were interested in anonymity, so there was little point in introductions. When he found suitable candidates, he knew how to learn everything he would need. It would consume him, the need to discover as much as he could about them. The candidate would become the most important person, the most important thing in his life until it was done. But not everyone was a candidate.

He would choose. They were the finest moments in his life, the moments of choice. He could never have explained how he made his choices — he had chosen men, women, people whose gender he'd never known until the very end. Some had turned out to have fashionable bodies, but most were as generic in the physical as his own throwaway avatars were in M City. It had nothing to do with them. It was all about him, his choices. And he had made one now. This woman would die. He smiled at her as she babbled on about some vid she was describing. He looked forward to her end. In the physical world, he fingered the hilt of his knife.

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