



an Anderson Dexter novel

Act of Will

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

In spite of all his wild plans, Dex did go in to work at B&B the next day as normal. The thoughts of quitting, just walking out the door and never looking back, were still there, but they had moved to the back of his mind again. Like most crazy ideas that go against the grain of what everybody does, they sat in the corner and stewed, but Dex stopped thinking about them seriously. Most of the time.

Annabelle's script was grinding away at the list of names Dex had given her, but it was slow going. She'd had to find a way to automate her unauthorized access to the master files on everywherenet which tracked people's movements in the physical world. She claimed that it wasn't particularly difficult, it just meant that each name had to be researched separately, which took time. By the end of the first day, her script had processed almost ten people — none of which had been anywhere near the victims. At the rate it was progressing, she would be finished the list in about a week. Dex just hoped it would be soon enough to stop the killer before someone else was killed.

Dex felt like he was out of leads. His investigation of the steel fragments revealed that the blade used to kill Hazel and Harker was the same one, which was good evidence, but it didn't tell Dex anything he didn't already know. It also showed that the blade was old, quite old, made at least a few hundred years previously. It would be impossible to trace.

Dex had nothing to do. He always hated this part of an investigation, when there's nothing to do but wait to see if the trail you've been chasing ends up somewhere. In this case, the waiting was worse than usual. Dex feared that every second he spent waiting was one step closer to another murder.

A couple of days into the work week, Dex's personal system pinged near the end of the day. Assuming it was Annabelle, he answered without looking. It was Pat Malone instead.

"Pat," Dex said. "Good to hear from you again. How is retirement treating you?"

"Like a bastard treats his worst enemy," Malone answered, gruffly. "I've never been so bored in my life."

"Catching up on the latest vids isn't doing it for you?" Dex asked.

"For christ's sakes," Malone barked, "I'm not dead yet — I've got to have something

to do with my mind. Good thing I talked Zizou into letting me keep my access to the case files, you know just for reading material in my declining years. I've been following your case — it looks like a humdinger."

"And then some," Dex agreed. "And there's only one lead and it's taking forever to run it down. I kind of feel like I can relate to your conundrum — there's plenty going on but nothing to do."

"Well, if you're looking for a way to kill a couple of hours, how about you join me for a beer at the Sprocket tonight? You work day shifts, right?"

"Yeah," Dex said. "I don't have anything going on tonight. Sure, I'll meet you there."

"Name your time," Malone said. "I've got nothing filling my calendar, believe me." They set a date for seven-thirty, and ended the call. Dex wondered if Malone really was just lonely and bored or if there was more to it than that. The old man was far from senile, and over the years he'd been a shining star on the goon squad. Dex knew that it took more than muscle and jive to stay tops on the streets for that long.

Annabelle called Dex later that day, while he was on the train to green sector to meet Malone. He filled her in on his call from the former lieutenant, and she updated Dex on her everywherenet script.

"I'm about halfway done," she said, and Dex groaned. "I know, I know," she said, "It's painfully slow. But we've eliminated twenty-three people already, and that's good, isn't it?"

"No matches," Dex said, thoughtfully.

"There was one person who had been in brown sector several times in the last six months," Annabelle said, "but when I looked at the logs closer she was always going to the same building, staying a half hour, then leaving again. The building isn't one of the kill sites. I checked around and it looks like a stimplay place."

"A what?" Dex asked.

"You can be so naive," Annabelle said, laughing. "It's a place where people go to get whacked out on stims and then do stuff to each other. Whips and chains kind of thing, usually, but there's a whole shopping list of sensations for sale." She giggled evilly. "I can send you an address, if you want to check it out."

"Oh, stop it," Dex said, feeling his face get hot. "You know that's not me."

"Yeah, I know" Annabelle said, laughing. "I do love winding you up, though."

"And you do a fine job, kiddo, that you do."

"Hey, speaking of sins of the flesh," Annabelle said, "are we still on for dinner and whatever in a couple of days?"

"You bet," Dex said. "I'll see you at Monte's at 0300 UTC?"

"Sounds good," Annabelle said, and her voice made Dex smile. It was almost back to normal between them, though they'd only spoken via voice calls since the weekend. This would be their first face to face meeting since the weekend, and Dex was nervous. Even if it was only M City.

He was just finishing up his call with Annabelle when he reached the heavy glass door leading in to The Cog and Sprocket. Dex pushed it open, and while the place was nowhere near as full as it had been for Malone's party, the wall of sound that hit him as he walked over the threshold was intense. So many people, in such a small space, make an awful lot of noise.

Dex pushed his way into the bar, and found Pat Malone on what Dex now thought of as the man's usual stool near the middle of the long bar. He perched on a free seat next to Malone, and signalled the barman for a pint. "Am I glad to see you," Malone said while Dex waited for his beer.

"It's good to see you, too, Pat," Dex said, trying not to stare. He had been the worse for wear when he'd left the bar the night of the party, but he surely remembered what Malone looked like. The man had visibly aged in the few days that had passed. The wrinkles around his mouth and eyes had etched more deeply, and a whole swarm of new ones had appeared on his face. His skin seemed to be becoming thinner and more translucent, and his hair was now completely white. It was like looking at an ancient ancestor, rather than the man himself.

"I know," Malone said, reading Dex's expression, "I'm a scarier looking brute now than I ever was back in my nose breaking days." Malone took a long pull on his beer, while looking at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. "Getting old is shit, Dex. I don't even know how much time I have left. Probably a couple of weeks."

"Christ, man," Dex said. "How can it be so fast?"

"That's the price of long life," Malone said, ruefully. "When the magic stops working, it's a fast ride downhill on a speeding train." He took another sip of the amber brew.

"Maybe it's for the best. I can't imagine years of this fucking half life," he gestured with his half empty glass. "Retirement — ha! I honestly would rather be dead than have to do nothing for years."

"I'm sorry," Dex said, lamely.

"No," Malone said, his voice taking on a tone of forced cheerfulness, "I'm sorry. I didn't ask you down here to listen to me bitch and moan; I asked you down here to cheer me up. So, there's two topics of conversation bound to get me out of this self-pitying wallow I've gotten myself into — your nasty poseur sushi chef murderer and that sweet thing you were glued to last time I saw you. You pick which one you start with."

"What's a sushi chef?" Dex asked.

Malone laughed, a big guffaw straight from the gut. "You young people," he said. "Never mind, it's before your time. Anyway, give me the goods."

"I've got nothing," Dex said, miserably. "You've read the case file, right?" Malone nodded. "Well, that's pretty much all there is. I've got a list of all the people who bought one of those Stimstick things and who also bought the kind of wrist restraints that were used on Harker and Hazel. Annabelle's cross referencing everyone on that list to see if they were in brown sector at the time of the murders. It's taking forever, though, and she's gotten absolutely no hits so far. I'm starting to feel like it's going to be a dead end, and then I'm fresh out of ideas."

"Hmm," the old man thought for a moment. "Did you check to see if you can trace the knife?"

"Yeah," Dex said. "It's old. A couple of centuries — like maybe from your era," he added, grinning.

"Very good," Malone said, laughing again. "We're even for the sushi joke then, junior. So no joy from the blade. What's Annabelle's project again? Cross referencing what?"

Dex explained about the use of Hold-Alls and either Joybuzzers or Stimsticks in the murders, and what he was getting Annabelle to do. "Hrm," Malone grunted. "Pretty clever. What about that note I saw from Vonruden? The Ramer case was different somehow, wasn't it."

"Yeah," Dex said. "It looks like some kind of homebrew upgrade was done on the Stimstick. The levels of neurostims were through the roof."

"I thought I saw something else in there," Malone said. "Mind if I take another

look?"

"Please," Dex said. "I'll take all the help I can get." He watched as Malone's eyes took on the glassy stare of someone going online. Less than a minute later, Malone was refocussing on the bar, and his mouth was twitching into a smile.

"You're going to have to buy me a beer, junior," Malone said, grinning now. "I think I maybe just found you another lead."

Chapter Thirty

"It wasn't a homebrew upgrade," Malone said, lifting his newly refilled glass to his lips.

"What?"

"Vonruden, who knows her stuff in this area, let me tell you, said that neither 'buzzers nor Stimsticks can deliver the punch Ramer got," Malone said. "Not with any amount of screwing and soldering. It had to be something else, something she'd never seen before."

"Well, if Vonruden doesn't know what it is," Dex said, "what the hell could it be?"

"Totally homemade, from scratch," Malone speculated. "Or a new product that isn't on the market yet."

"Right," Dex said, getting excited. "A prototype. They do that that all the time at B&B. When a new thing comes up, employees get first crack at the can. Customer Service and Sales need to know what the product does, the gung ho types can start the buzz machine, and if there's a problem, we're cheap and easy guinea pigs."

"Vonruden's note mentioned that the word on the street is that the outfit that makes Joybuzzers, Tractor or something, is coming up with something new soon," Malone said.

"No, not Tractor," Dex said. "I bet it's Gractor. I know them; they are competitors in my employer's market. They make good stuff, actually. I have a few Gractor nodes myself."

"Well, you and your killer might have something in common, then," Malone said. "And now that I've given you a new lead, you can give me all the gory details about you and sweet Annabelle Lewis."

Dex didn't want to talk about his bizarre relationship, but if dead men tell no tales then almost dead men don't tell that many. And he knew he could use some advice, since he couldn't trust his own judgment any more.

"So, Annabelle told me that you helped her out when she first joined the organization," Dex began.

"You better get to the good stuff soon, son," Malone said, a twinkle in his eye. "Sure,

I greased a few wheels for her, but it's debatable that I needed to. She's one in a million that one."

"You don't have to tell me," Dex said. "But then you know about her, how shall I put it, locational preferences?"

"I know she's freaked out by the physical world and only lives online," Malone said. "Or at least, that was what I thought she was like. Recent events seem to belie that assumption."

"Yeah, recent events," Dex muttered. "No, that's Annabelle, all right. The trouble is that I'm the exact opposite. I'm okay being in there, obviously. But it's totally fake to me. And relationships — well, I don't exactly have a stellar track record, but I've always known one thing: it's all about the real world for me. I've never cared much about the details of the body, but there's got to be one, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah," Malone said, kindly. "I know exactly what you mean. So how did this thing with Annabelle ever even get started? It sounds like you just shouldn't be into each other from the start."

"You know how it is," Dex said, ordering another beer when the barman passed by. "We knew each other from the squad, and for some reason she took a shine to me. She didn't know about my... tastes at the time, but I always blew her off, anyway. And that's how it was. But then, we were working together on this case, and one thing led to another..."

"And you fell for her," Malone said.

"Yeah," Dex said. "It's been hell on both of us. She's tried harder than I have, though; that's obvious after last weekend."

"It looked to me like she was doing more than just trying," Malone said, his eyebrows waggling.

"Yeah, well," Dex said, "it wasn't all flowers and kisses, I'm afraid."

"You didn't fuck it all up, did you?" Malone asked, glowering at Dex.

"Miraculously, no," Dex said. "But... it's complicated."

"For christ's sake, boy," Malone exploded, "it's always goddamned complicated. If love were easy we'd all be pie eyed and gooey the whole damn time. It sounds to me like you've got yourself someone who wants you bad enough to change her whole life for you. And you're sitting here with this old decrepit bastard, when you could be taking her for a

ride to the moon. What kind of an idiot are you, anyway?"

"The kind of idiot you called and invited down here, asshole," Dex shot back.

Malone laughed his big belly laugh and slapped Dex on the back. "Right you are, junior, right you are. Well, then, let's not waste our time here, shall we. Let's get ourselves good and shitfaced, then tomorrow you can go and give that wonderful woman who is way too good for the likes of you a little of what she gave you last weekend."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Dex said, confused and embarrassed.

"Who cares if it feels like a cardboard box to you?" Malone said. "If she wants to be together in M City, then make it happen. Trust me. If you really care about her, making her happy will have an amazingly similar effect on you, even if what you're doing isn't exactly your thing."

"You sound very certain," Dex said.

"Oh, I am, son," Malone said. "I wasn't always this lonely old man you see before you, lost in a pint of very fine expensive ale. I once had a great love of my own, you know. And he liked opera. I will still, for the life of me, never understand why. But he ate that shit up. So I sat through it, and not just online either, where I could turn off the sound and do something else. Oh, no, this was back when there were real theatres and everything out here. And we would go once or twice a year, and my ass would go numb, and he would be glowing he was so happy. And goddamn it," Malone said, staring off into the mirror, "so would I."

The two men said nothing for a while, each of them sipping their beers. Finally, Dex broke the silence. "What happened?" he asked.

"What happened when?" Malone asked.

"To your man," Dex said. "What happened to him?"

"Same thing that's happening to me," Malone said bitterly. "About a decade ago."

"I'm sorry," Dex said.

"So am I, junior," Malone said. "So am I."

Chapter Thirty-One

Dex felt like someone had taken a pair of extra capacity disk nodes and screwed them right into his eyeballs. Just blinking hurt. And his head pounded. And his stomach felt like a very excitable octopus was living in it. That Pat Malone was a bad influence, he thought.

A half bottle of FlyingFish later, about a quarter of which finally stayed down, and Dex was ready to face another day at Barrett and Brar. He had other goals than just making it through another workday. Between client calls and inane internal reports, he was going to be snooping on the competition. Gractor.

Dex knew about the node implants that Gractor made — they were mostly for the same purposes as the ones that B&B made. Among the more popular ones were those for neurostims, of course, but they also made disk nodes, video and audio recorders, network speed upgrades, and physical stimulators for online interaction.

Companies like Gractor and B&B were huge; everyone who used a neural connection to everywhere net needed at least a couple of node implants. Even guys like Dex, who was pretty meat and potatoes when it came to the interface, wore more than the basic package. And of course, the upgrade treadmill was the real money maker for them — as the network expanded and more and more could be done online, people wanted better connections and a more robust experience. It kept Dex and his co-workers employed, and it kept the shareholders of Gractor and B&B in luxury.

Dex knew B&B's product line inside out and backwards, but he only had a consumer's knowledge of Gractor's offerings. So, while he was helping a new customer adjust a new taste simulator node, Dex electronically snuck out of the office. He went online, and found the full listing of Gractor's products. He skimmed past the nodes, and found an entire section of completely different items. The company's full name was Gractor Devices, and Dex had assumed the second word was just a remnant of an earlier era. Instead, it turned out that Gractor still made devices. And rather a lot of them.

Dex quickly scanned the list of typical consumer products: implantable

viewscreens, food brick processors, fabric shapers, pigment applicators — the usual. Then he got to the section of more niche products, which included Joybuzzers. He found the marketing page about them, and read the hype carefully. As he had seen before, the marketing spiel was heavily weighted toward the pleasure creating aspect of the products. But even then, the technical details made it clear that the 'buzzers were easily user configurable to deliver a 'wide variety of 100% safe physical stimulation, unattainable any other way.' Dex rolled his eyes, and in the process caught a glimpse of some small print near the bottom. It was a Valued Customer login for more information.

Dex knew about that sort of thing. It was primarily for employees, so you could get access to your discount and the new products. At B&B at least, there were no outside Valued Customers at all. It was just a carrot the marketing folks dangled at repeat buyers. Dex didn't have the login credentials for Gractor's VC area, but that wasn't much of an impediment. The Cubicle Men's system would be able to get him in, just like it got him access to B&B's Security files on Hazel's death. He sent a request for the access, then paged over to the rest of Gractor's catalogue while he waited.

The corporate hand had fingers in a lot of pies, it seemed. They also made a series of non-lethal weapons targeted to the Security market — stunners, knuckledusters, disabling spray, the usual. Dex noticed with some considerable interest that they offered several comprehensive packages, each of which included a couple of weapons, an armour suit and restraints. He guessed that the idea was for a firm to simply order one of these packages for each of its Security members. It certainly made the procurement easy.

He opened the details for one of the packages and found what he had started to suspect — the restraints in the higher quality packages were Hold-Alls brand. Dex checked into it further, and saw that it was a subsidiary of Gractor which manufactured the restraints, along with the body armour and other assorted Security related materials. Dex had no proof that the killer had even used a Joybuzzer brand tool, but it still seemed like too much of a coincidence to ignore.

Dex didn't like coincidences. He paged back over to his Cubicle Men account, and waited impatiently for his Gractor VC access to come through.

Staring at his message inbox wasn't helping anything, so Dex took a breath. He was between calls, so he got up and walked over to the break room. He poured a cup of brown water, and sipped. He made a face, and dumped it into the recyclatron. He was tired of drinking that swill. Tired of trying to sell people shit they didn't need and tired of putting up with co-workers spying on his every move in the hopes that they would catch him in some unapproved activity they could report.

He sighed, and returned to his station. He caught Mister Mouse peeping at him from behind silvered lenses. For a moment he was just about to walk over there and give the annoying little man a shot to the nose, but instead he just sat in his chair and stared at the man. Dex did nothing for a full minute, simply looked at the other man. Mister Mouse looked away, of course, but couldn't help himself and kept glancing Dex's way. Eventually, he just got up and went to the lav. Dex laughed aloud, causing a half dozen other co-workers to glance his way. He didn't care.

He logged back into the Cubicle Men's system, and saw that his access to Gractor's VC area had been opened. He entered the appropriate credentials in the system, and was instantly rewarded. "Get the new Joybuzzer, now!" was emblazoned over the Valued Clients page in large font. "Five times the power, fifty times the pleasure," the copy continued. "The most intense sensation product ever created is now in a device the size of your little finger. Works with Gractor SensationPlus nodes*. Available worldwide next quarter, but get a sneak preview now. Order one now; available for immediate delivery."

He jumped down to the small print, and saw that the items were pretty much universally compatible with any brand of upgraded stim node. He looked at the output figures, and even assuming that the numbers were inflated two or three times, this new 'buzzer was head and shoulders beyond the current model. It sounded an awful lot like what Hazel had been hit with, Dex thought.

Dex paged back to Gractor's corporate information. He knew that the killer had to live, work or travel regularly to the city, so he searched for any corporate presence in town. Finally it seemed like he was really making progress in the case. Gractor had a manufacturing facility right in the city, in gray sector.

Dex had the Cubicle Mens's automated system pull a full employee list for the

facility, and he sat back. He had the feeling that he was close now, and it fired him up like nothing else in the world. He still had the niggling fear that it might be too late, that the killer would strike again before Dex could get to the bottom if it, but he felt better than he had since Hazel disappeared. Honestly, he felt better than he had in longer than he could remember.

He'd been thinking about Malone's words from the previous night all day, and had come to a decision. He pulled up B&B's own Valued Clients area, and scrolled through the virtual sensation nodes. He had only the basic implant which let him move through M City without falling over. He could feel virtual interactions, enough to hold a glass or shake hands, but it was pretty rudimentary. With an upgrade, he'd be able feel more, a lot more. He had never wanted to, and even now he was vaguely disgusted by the prospect, but before he could change his mind, he hit the Buy Now button.

Ordinarily, he would have just chosen the automatic deductions from his pay to cover the cost of the upgrade, but Dex was having the feeling that he might not be an employee long enough to make the payments, and he knew how much of a hassle the paperwork would be if he quit before the debt was done. So he just ponied up the cash for the upgrade, and scheduled an implantation for when his shift ended. They had a salon on site which he knew did competent work, so Dex was fine with having them do the upgrade. Besides, he would need it for the next evening, and he wanted to have tried it out at least once first.

After his workday was done, Dex shouldered his way into B&B's onsite salon. There was no one else getting any work done, so they had him in the chair almost as soon as they walked in the door.

"You want any stims before we start," the pleasantly pudgy young woman operator asked. Dex shook his head, and watched as she shrugged her shoulders. "You sure?" she asked. "The old one will probably hurt coming out."

"Just get it over with," Dex growled, having had second, third and fourth thoughts by now. She looked at him coldly, and clamped a long, thin stainless tool on the node just under Dex's lower lip. It did hurt as the tool emitted an electrical pulse which would separate the two parts of the node as well as the connection to both his implanted silicon and his own nerves. It didn't take long, though, and

when the node popped out Dex felt nothing in that spot.

The technician wiped the little bit of blood off his chin, and sprayed him with a strong smelling mist. "Okay, here comes the new one. This shouldn't hurt at all going in, but the spot will sting for a while," she said, sounding bored. Dex didn't feel anything as she grabbed his lip with a different tool and he heard a sound like a wet towel tearing.

"Alright, we're all done," she said, wiping her hands on her dark blue uniform. Thanks for choosing Barrett and Brar."

Dex rolled his eyes, and said, "Oh, please, not here, too."

The tech did a quick double take, then grinned. "Here too," she said. "Have a good time with that," she said, winking broadly.

"I'll try," Dex said.

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