



an Anderson Dexter novel

# Act of Will

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an Andersson Dexter novel  
by M. Darusha Wehm

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## Chapter Seven

Dex linked in to the meeting just as the roll call was getting started. He was never a lover of meetings, and the weekly meeting was an unnecessary chore, but he had to admit to himself that he had grown to like the camaraderie of the group. He preferred to work alone, and usually he did, but over the years he had come to rely on the other men and women in the squad. You don't spend significant portions of your time with a group of people without making a few pals.

Squad captain Zahara Zhang checked attendance quickly, and asked Pat Malone about one of his people who wasn't present. "Vonruden?" the captain asked.

"Conflict with the day job," Malone replied. "I'll fill her in later." The captain nodded sharply and began the meeting. The first item on the agenda was a report from Malone about the week's activities on the goon squad. Street fights and muggings didn't usually have much to do with Dex's cases, but he found the work interesting. Usually there wasn't much to report from the street team, so Dex's ears perked up. He had enjoyed his time as a goon, and no one was more surprised than he when he ended up as a detective. Even now he missed the rush of walking the streets, dealing with people face to fleshy face, the visceral realness of blood and sweat and skin.

"There's the usual petty stuff," Malone said, after the captain gave him the floor. "A bit of a decrease in stupid violence since the stim bar in brown sector shut down last month. But the interesting thing is this..." Malone sent everyone a small file with a brief written report and some images. "We found a body in one of those abandoned buildings in brown."

"One of the buildings the squatters have been using?" Jay Shiraishi, Malone's second in command, asked.

"No," Malone said. "It's that derelict one that's missing a wall, on the south side of Simcoe Street." There were nods of recognition among the street team. Malone continued. "There is a small room in the interior of the building that is actually intact on all sides. A stimed out streeter was poking around in there looking for a nest when he found it. We got the call pretty quick, and I don't think anyone touched anything."

"So some malnourished streeter just found a little hidey hole to curl up and die in?" Shiraishi asked again.

"Take a look at the file, Jay," Malone said, not bothering to hide his annoyance. "Last I checked, it takes more than missing a meal or two to lose huge strips of skin like that."

With that there was a long pause as everyone opened the file Malone had sent.

“Jesus Christ,” a voice near the back of the room said. “What the fuck happened there?”

“Tests on the scene indicate that this guy died of loss of blood. There was quite a lot of blood on the scene and you don’t take off that much skin without spilling a drop of two. We also found marks on the deceased’s wrists which indicate that he had been restrained at some point, and there were small traces of polymer rope found at the scene.”

“We’re treating it as a possible homicide,” Captain Zhang said.

“Possible?” someone exclaimed incredulously. Malone whipped around to the sound of the voice.

“It’s possible that this was a consensual thing,” Malone said. “If you look closely you’ll see that the deceased has a big grin on his face, and we found elevated levels of endorphins and dopamine in his system.”

“A stim junkie?” Dex asked, drawn in to the case along with the rest of the squad.

“Doesn’t look like it,” Malone said. “The drugs were all naturally occurring. There was none of the telltale branding of commercial neurostims, and home brew uppers look totally different to the sniffers than the real things. We’re thinking either direct node stimulation or this guy really got off on being flayed.”

Dex could hear several people murmuring. “Jesus,” someone said, and another person said, astonished, “It takes all kinds to make a world, I guess.”

“Enough chatter,” Zahara Zhang said, and everyone shut up. “Malone’s people are on this for now, until we determine who this guy is. Chances are some firm’s Security team will take over from there. Now, in other news, there’s the big ugly house. Annabelle, an update?”

Annabelle had been working on trying to determine the rightful owner of a piece of virtual property in M City. This kind of case had become the bread and butter of the organization, now that so many people used the virtual world as their primary recreation area. Businesses were flourishing there, and an entire underground economy had been created. Outside the sphere of influence of the firms, there were no private Security forces in M City, so the Cubicle Men found plenty of work among the avatar designers, virtual hookers and gambling houses.

The house in question was indeed sprawling, and of a design that most people would have guessed issued from the mind of an architect well pickled by an intense and

expensive cocktail of drugs, but was described by critics as incomprehensible genius. It was used as part night club, part brothel by one of M City's most successful entrepreneurs, Anthony O'Rourke. The trouble was that O'Rourke hadn't designed the big ugly house himself; he had bought the plans from a designer named Tisha Chiou, and had the thing created from those specs. The designer was now trying to argue that the plans were merely leased to O'Rourke, and that the actual look of the thing still belonged to her. Chiou wouldn't have had a leg to stand on, except that O'Rourke used images of the house in his advertisements, and a tiny version of the thing was his corporate logo. Chiou argued that O'Rourke was entitled to one instance of the big ugly house, and that was it. She had hired Annabelle to find a way to prove that O'Rourke had overstepped the limits of his license.

"I've been going through the code for the logo, trying to find something that proves that it's just a copy of Chiou's design," Annabelle reported. "O'Rourke's people are clever; they've stripped out all the obvious stuff, but I've come across several indicators. There's a particular syntax that Chiou uses for doorways, and while it isn't unique, it is unusual." Zahara Zhang's face had the blank look avatars get when the person behind them has stopped paying attention, and she was sure no one else was listening either, so Annabelle pressed on quickly. "Anyway, I think I'm a day or two away from having enough to go after O'Rourke."

"Good," the captain said, snapping back into action. She spent the next few minutes rounding up the other outstanding cases, then said, "And, finally, I have something for you Dex." He perked up his head and felt his heart rate pick up a little. He'd been riding the pine for too long, he felt, nothing coming up for him since the Velasquez case. Dex was ready for a new puzzle to solve. He felt his head grow heavy as the new case file downloaded to his system, and he opened up the summary file. He scanned it quickly, then refocused on the squad room.

"There must be some mistake," he said, already sure that there was, in fact, no mistake at all, seeing the smirk on the captain's face. "This is a case for the Housing Bureau or something, not for us."

"There is no Housing Bureau," the captain said, the smile on her face widening. "These people are living in terrible conditions, and they've tried everything they can to get their employer to fix them without success. They are out of options, so they've come to us. That's what we're here for, and everyone has to take a turn — even on the more mundane cases." Dex sighed, and closed his eyes. He tried not to sound like a petulant child, and almost succeeded.

"But this is a compensation and benefits issue," he said. "What am I supposed to do

about internal policies at..." he scanned the file again, looking for the name of his clients' employer, "at Aspertech?"

"You figure it out," the captain said, "that's why you get the big bucks."

Dex sighed again and said, "Other than the complainants quitting their jobs and looking for something else with better digs, I'm kind of at a loss as to how to help them."

"Well," the captain said, "you're not getting another assignment until you close out this one, so hopefully that will motivate you to use some of your legendary creativity to find a solution." She grinned at Dex, whose avatar scowled while his real cheeks burned in embarrassment. "Okay, people," the captain said. "That's all I have this week. Off you go to your bitch sessions."

Most of the squad met after the meetings in one of the bars in Chandlers for drinks and bonding. These unofficial meetings were where most of the real work got done — favours and information were bartered between rounds. The goon squad tended to stick together at Sally's Slipper, a rough honkytonk where they could easily knock back several neurostim enhanced drinks, get a little rowdy and still be welcomed back the following week.

Pat Malone wasn't one of the regulars at Sally's Slipper. The lieutenant didn't hold his rank over the other members of the goons, but he knew that his role was different from theirs. He knew that the goons needed to bond with each other, and that sometimes that would be at his expense. He was a social man, though, so he would often tag along with the detectives to Three Card Monte's after the meeting. He caught Dex's eye after the captain had dismissed the squad. "You going to Monte's?" he asked.

Dex said, "After that tongue lashing, I figure I should just get home and figure out something to do with that housing thing."

The lieutenant grinned. "She's just yanking your chain. Come on," he said, "I'll stand you a round and even give you an idea or two on this case."

"Well, there's an offer I can't refuse," Dex said. "But why all the help all of a sudden?"

"Let's just say that you probably won't be getting something for nothing." The two men linked out of the meeting room, and found themselves watching a smoky, dark bar materialize around them. "You grab a table," Malone said, "and I'll get us a couple of drinks. What works for you?"

"Rum and ginger," Dex said. "Au natural."

“Suit yourself,” the older man said, and went off in search of a free bartender.

## Chapter Eight

While Malone was gone, Dex looked through the notes on his new case. The six clients had been complaining to their benefits manager for over a year about the conditions in their apartment complex. The benefits clerk, one Wendell Burstein, had replied to each complaint with the same bureaucratic bullshit: “The units in the building located at 175 Massey Drive are within the prescribed parameters for employees of your rank. Your request for reassignment is denied.” Dex hated Wendell Burstein already.

He looked though the details of the complaints, and began to get even more angry. His own apartment was small, there was no denying that. Just one room, with a narrow bed at one end, a small table and chair and cupboards and a zapper along one wall. His lav was big enough, though, and the water was always hot and the dryer worked just fine. He actually liked this apartment better than all the others he’d been allocated at his various jobs. Maybe it was a perk of seniority or maybe his tastes were just getting more modern.

His clients, though, truly were living in a terrible hovel. There were six of them who had come to the Cubicle Men looking for help. They all worked for Aspertech, a giant firm whose name was on everything from clothes to water to maglev train cars. The six of them shared three rooms in one of Aspertech’s buildings. Each room was hardly larger than Dex’s own apartment and that was where the similarities ended. The lavs were tiny and there was only water half the time. The dryers put out barely a puff of air, so when they did have water they had to dry themselves on towels, which they could never seem to get clean in the broken-down autoclaves in the rooms. The zappers barely worked and the doors barely closed. They also complained that the sprinklers and locking systems were always malfunctioning.

They were the kind of terrible conditions that Dex expected to find in the dilapidated old private buildings that people without any housing benefits at all had to live in, not in a building owned by a firm like Aspertech. He thought back to his youth, when he was still trying to be a starving artist, playing music in grimy physical world bars and living in dumps. He wasn’t sure he’d ever lived anywhere as bad as his poor Aspertech clients. There was no doubt that it was a boring assignment, but Dex was starting to feel like he might have a good time hassling Aspertech about this.

Pat Malone returned with a small tumbler for Dex and a beer for himself. He sat opposite Dex at the small table, and slid the rum and ginger across the tabletop. The

program for the bar simulation created the look of a wet slick where the sweating glass appeared to have passed over the table. Dex picked up the glass, and raised it in a silent toast to the goon squad lieutenant. Malone smiled, returning the salute, and took a long pull on his beer.

“Ah,” he sighed after swallowing. “I’ve never met a beer I didn’t like. Even so,” he gestured at the virtual glass, “this stuff can’t hold a candle to the real thing. That’s why my big farewell shindig is going to be out there. There’s this fellow I know who brews his own ale and runs a pub down in green sector. It will be nice to finally really meet you mucky mucks.”

Dex smiled. It was a shame Malone was on his way out — Dex was beginning to really like the old man. “So, Pat,” Dex said, “you said you might be able to point me in the right direction with this housing problem.”

“I’ve helped a few people out with a similar kind of thing, though it’s not usually a corporate apartment, if you know what I mean.” Dex nodded, and took a sip of his drink. “It depends on what your clients want to get out of it and what they can afford, both in money and hassle.”

“I only scanned the notes,” Dex admitted, “so I’m not sure what their agenda is. Why don’t you lay it all on me, and I can take it from there?”

“Okay,” Malone said, and took another drink of his beer. The frosty pint glass was about half empty now. “If they just want the deficiencies fixed, that’s the easiest. I know a couple of folks who can fix just about anything, and they are pretty cheap about it.” Malone lowered his voice, even though their conversation had been on a private channel all the time they’d been at the table. It wasn’t just the atmosphere which drew the detectives to Three Card Monte’s, it was the various private and encrypted channels available for use there. “They’ve got a printer.”

Dex let out a breath. Printers had been hard to come by his whole life, after one of the major firms had managed to win a patent suit against the much smaller manufacturers. The official story was that all printers had been destroyed, but everyone knew it wasn’t true. Even so, Dex had never seen anything that had been made by a printer, as far as he knew, and he’d certainly never seen an actual printer.

“Isn’t that a bit risky?” he asked Malone. “I mean, these clients of ours are really an unknown quantity — who’s to say that they don’t see a bigger payoff in turning these guys of yours in.”

“That’s where you come in,” Malone said, grinning. “Your clients don’t need to know

who's fixing the problems or how. You just tell them how much it costs and arrange for the work to get done. Problem solved."

"Okay," Dex said. "What if they can't even afford your guys? Or they really want to stick it to their employer?"

"Well, that gets a lot more tricky," Malone said, frowning. "You'd need to start by getting a copy of their employment contract, the long one. Housing arrangements will be spelled out in there. If it turns out that the conditions of their apartments are consistent with what's in the contract, they're screwed. Otherwise, they have to try and prove breach of contract, and that's tricky. Especially because then their employer is going to go over their records with a magnifier, looking for anything they could use as breach of contract against them. They could just as easily lose their jobs as get the lavs fixed."

"That's pretty much what I guessed," Dex said. "At least I've got a second opinion on it now. As much as I'd really like to take these Aspertech bastards down a peg or two, I think I'll give them the hard sell on just fixing the problem and dropping the complaint."

"It's a shitty deal," Malone said, polishing off his beer. "That's one of the good things about this gig — you might get stuck at a lousy job with a crappy employer, but you've got enough extra cash to make the rest of your life decent."

"And if the job's really terrible," Dex added, "you can always leave and the Men will find something else."

"We got it good here, my man," Malone said. "We're definitely the lucky ones."

"Amen," Dex said, as a smoldering cigarette materialized between his fingers. He brought it to his lips, inhaled and then shot out a plume of blue smoke.

Malone gestured at the smoke. "Is that delivering, or just for looks?"

"Just looks," Dex admitted. "I don't really like neurostims. I'm more of your fifth of cheap rum kind of guy."

"Yeah," Malone said. "That's what I figured. But I didn't figure you for the accessorized type."

Dex smiled, but there was little warmth to it. "Me neither," he said. "Things change, though. Sometimes you have to be willing to change along with them."

Malone's face grew dark. "And sometimes you don't get the choice."

Dex thought about the other man's imminent retirement. "I'm sorry, Pat," he said, genuinely.

"It's what it is," the older man said, then his face changed back to its usual jovial look. "Where has that pretty lass of yours got herself to? You'll both be coming to my big party, I trust."

"I wouldn't miss it," Dex said. "It might be tough for Annabelle, though. She's physically in Europa."

"What?" Malone asked. "Holiday?"

"No," Dex said. "She lives there. In Nice."

"What's she doing on our squad, then?"

"She lived here when she first joined up," Dex said. "Her day job moved her to Nice, but her hours are still on Pac time, so she never transferred. She's a cracker; all her work is done online, so it really doesn't matter where she is."

Malone grunted. "Must matter now, though," he said. "The two of you..."

Dex ground his cigarette out on the heel of his shoe and dropped the end. It disappeared before it hit the floor. "It's difficult," he said, not looking at Malone. Before he had to say any more, Annabelle joined them at the table.

"Well, speak of the devil," Malone said, smiling broadly. "Dex here was just telling me that a little thing like the Atlantic ocean was going to stop you from coming to my retirement party."

"Oh, I think I can find a way over that," Annabelle said, looking at Dex. "I'm willing to put myself out a little for something important."

Dex looked at her face, which had hardened into an unusually serious expression. He reached across the table, and took her hand. "Thanks, Pat," he said to Malone. "For the help with my case."

Malone smiled, and Dex thought he could catch a little trace of sadness in the look. "Always did like helping out my fellow man," he said. "And I think with that I shall be off, and leave the night to you young ones." He stood, and Dex reached over to shake the man's hand.

"See you at the party," Dex said.

"I'll hold you to that," Malone said, then winking at Annabelle, he linked out of the bar.

"You're really going to come all this way for Malone's party?" Dex asked, incredulous.

"It's on my weekend," Annabelle said, "and I can afford the flight. Besides, it will give us an extra couple of days together. I thought that would make you happy."

"It does," Dex said, "oh, it does. But you're going to hate it. There will probably be maybe fifty people at this thing. How are you going to handle it?"

"I don't know, Dex," Annabelle said, her voice thick. "But I'm going to try. I really am trying to make this work, you know. You aren't the only one who is sacrificing here. Besides, I like Pat Malone a lot. He's a lot like you, I think. And I'm sad to see him go, and I want to be there. For him, not just for you."

Dex didn't know what to say. "Should I book your usual room?" he asked, trying to keep his voice light. Annabelle thought a moment.

"Yes," she said, softly. "I'd really like to stay with you..." Her voice trailed off. "Well, what I'd really like is to really want to stay with you. But I'm not quite there yet." She looked away. "I'm sorry."

"Me, too," Dex said, and squeezed her avatar's hand.

## Chapter Nine

Dex was starting to wonder if he had done something horrible to mornings in the past, and they were now out for revenge. His head pounded and his mouth tasted like something had died in it. What had he done last night? He remembered the squad meeting and his chat with Pat Malone after — and then the conversation with Annabelle. And the two large tumblers of rum he'd had after he logged out of M City. Had he eaten anything? He couldn't remember.

He grabbed the bottle of Flying Fish that he'd had the presence of mind to leave beside the bed, and took a healthy swig. As soon as the viscous liquid hit his stomach, he started to feel better. Or at least well enough to get out of bed. He managed to shower and get a bite of a food brick in him, and decided that he could possibly face the day. He dressed and headed out of his building to the train stop.

He got to his desk, grinned evilly at Mister Mouse, and looked forward to another boring day at the office. Working with a hangover was one of the perks of a dull job — he was just at the right mental state for his work when his head pounded and he could barely think. Is that how the rest of them get through the days, he wondered. He slowly and methodically began his work day.

He even read the internal news bulletin. Word for word, unlike his usual quick scan if he bothered to open the thing. He later wondered if he'd even have noticed the piece if he hadn't been in such a rough shape. It was buried a couple of paragraphs down, after some junk about a new food brick supplier for the canteen. Hazel Ramer was missing.

Missing? Dex had just talked to her the other day. Apparently, she had missed work the previous day, and the logs from her apartment showed that she hadn't been back since the day Dex had seen her. She hadn't taken anything from her apartment, and there was no activity on her bank accounts. The post asked people to come forward if they saw her or knew anything, but it was just a formality. They must think she was gone for good, Dex thought. They wouldn't want to start a rumour of an opening in sales if they thought she was coming back.

He had a bad feeling about it. Dex knew plenty of people over the years who just stopped turning up one day. He'd even done it once himself at a truly terrible job when he found something better. Dex knew Hazel didn't love sales, but he also knew she didn't hate it. Or at least she didn't hate it enough to just fly without even taking her stuff from her apartment. He hadn't really known her very well, but this seemed out of character.

He wondered about her offer of pharmaceutical assistance. Did that have something to do with it, Dex wondered. He's seen plenty of cases of people who got hooked on stimulants and let everything else slide. He didn't think it was an overnight kind of thing, and Hazel had seemed fine the other day. But you never really know what's going on in another person's head.

Dex realized that his own head was only throbbing dully now. If he'd found a hangover cure in discovering that a pal was missing, he wouldn't be patenting that one. He'd take the pain any day. He started in on his tasks, mindlessly knocking things off his assignment sheet, thinking instead about Hazel. Later, he would poke through the Cubicle Men's files and see if he could find anything out. Zizou had warned Dex that he wouldn't be assigned another case until the housing problem was cleared, but surely she wouldn't stop him from investigating Hazel's disappearance. At least, a little bit.

By the time Dex got home, he was starting to think that he was spending too much time being a detective, and was seeing foul play where there was only impulsiveness. He scanned the identity chip embedded in his hand over the door to his apartment, and heard the click of the lock sliding open. He stepped into his small apartment, and locking the door behind him, undressed. He stuffed his ugly B&B uniform in the autoclave and stepped into the shower. It would be his second of the day, which meant that he'd have to skip a day this month or fork over some cash for an extra hot water ration. Either way, he didn't care right at that moment. He needed the hot water to clear his head.

He stood under the hot spray, rubbing his soapy cloth roughly over his body. He leaned against the steel wall of the lav, and let the two minutes of water pound his body. He didn't even move when the shower head shut the flow off and began emitting a powerful warm jet of air. He let the blower dry him and the room, then padded back into his apartment. He couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible had happened to Hazel Ramer, but he also knew that there wouldn't be any information for him to look at yet. He grabbed a food brick from the large box labelled Econoline next to the zapper, and poured a glass of water. Still naked from his shower, he sat on the edge of his bed, alternately swigging from the water glass and taking great bites of the food bar.

Dex was still sitting there ten minutes later, an empty water glass and food brick wrapper in his hand, trying to figure out why he had this sudden desire to pour a shot of rum and rummage through his old video collection, when he felt rather than heard a chime in his head. He blinked his eyes a few times, and thought the sequence required to answer the call. It was Annabelle.

"Just checking up on you," she said, her voice light and sunny as usual. "See how you're doing after another gruelling day in the salt mines."

"Actually," Dex said, "it was a shitter of a day."

"What happened?" Annabelle asked.

Dex ran a hand over his bald head, feeling the slight stubble under his fingers. "Possibly nothing," Dex said. "I don't want to talk about it yet until I know what's going on."

"Are you okay?" Annabelle asked, concern heavy in her voice.

"Sure, kiddo," Dex said. "It's just something at work. I'll tell you about it some other time. Look, I've got to get started on that housing thing, or I'll never get it done. I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

"Um, sure," Annabelle said. "Look, about last night —"

"There's nothing to say about last night," Dex said, trying to keep his fatigue and frustration out of his voice. "None of this is new for us. I'm sorry if I'm being difficult; I'm really tired these days and I just need a bit of time to get back on track. But we are still good, kiddo, I promise. Just give me a little room, okay?" He heard Annabelle sigh, as if her lips were right next to his ear rather than thousands of clicks away.

"Okay," she said. "But don't take too long, or I'll have to go back to stalking you."

Dex laughed. "I'll do my best not to inconvenience you."

"Good," Annabelle said, mock seriously. "Talk to you tomorrow," she said and broke the connection.

Dex refilled his water glass, and threw on an old one piece that he would never be seen in public wearing. He sat at his table, and opened his notes from his conversation with Pat Malone. He spent the next hour drafting a proposition for his clients that would get at least some of their complaints addressed. When he finished, he sent copies to each of his clients and filed one in the Cubicle Men's system. After that, he logged out of everywhere net, and went to the small cupboard over the water tap. He eyed the bottle of Jamaica's Best for a while, then closed the cupboard door and went to bed. Even without pharmacological help, he was asleep within minutes.

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