



an Anderson Dexter novel

Act of Will

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an Andersson Dexter novel
by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Thirty-Six

They didn't want to be alone, so they went to Monte's. No one had organized anything, but they found half the squad already there when they arrived. Annabelle got a round for the table, setting Dex's no-stim dark and storm in front of him. On a private channel, she said, "You might want to fix a real one."

"I'm already ahead of you, kiddo," he answered.

The table was full of the usual crowd, with the addition of the captain. When everyone had gotten drinks and made the usual noises, she called for attention. "This wasn't exactly a surprise," she started. "We all knew that Pat didn't have much time left, but I for one had hoped that it would be longer than it was." There were murmurings of agreement around the table. "Pat was the street lieutenant when I took on the captaincy, and he was more of a help than I ever let you all know. I think it's safe to say that Pat taught me more about this squad than I ever could have learned on my own. He was a fabulous leader, a great member of the team, and a wonderful man. I will miss him, more than I want to think about now." She lifted her glass high, and in a voice marred by only a slight tremor, said, "Here's to Pat Malone."

"To Pat Malone," a chorus of voices answered her, and everyone took long pulls on their drinks. The talk amongst them turned to their memories of Pat. Jay Shiraishi, one of the longtime goon squad members held court, having worked with Pat the longest.

"There was the one time," Jay said, "we were on this incredibly boring patrol. There had been some muggings on Upland Drive, so we'd been showing the flag, you know, just being present. Nothing had happened in over a week, so there was absolutely nothing to do. There weren't even any bars or cafés in the place — just boring residential blocks and minimarts. I was going snake by the second hour of the shift, and I think I was probably annoying the hell out of Malone." A few of the folks who had worked with Shiraishi laughed knowingly.

"So, he decides that we need to do something to make the night a little more bearable, you know? And so he says to me, "Okay, kid, here's the thing. For the rest of the night, no touching the ground. Your feet touch the ground, you owe me a beer. And not a pisswater minimart special or a virtual brew, either. The real thing, homebrewed by a master. You make it, and I swing it so you never have to walk this beat again. Deal?" I'd been stuck on watchman duty for months, so of course I took the bet. And for the whole rest of the patrol, I was jumping from front steps to fence posts, climbing signs and generally making a monkey out of myself. I swear, I never heard a man laugh like Malone

did when I finally was done that shift.”

There were more stories, and more drinks, and after a while Dex found himself alone at a table with Annabelle. He was on his fourth or fifth drink back at his apartment, and he’d lost count of the number of refills Annabelle had had. He never knew what she was really consuming anyway, so counting never did much good. “I’m going to miss him,” Annabelle said.

“Me, too,” Dex said. “I never really got to know him until recently, but he was one of the good ones, you know? I really liked the time I got to spend with him. It’s just a shame it took so long.” He paused and took a long pull on his drink. “You know, it’s funny, I never really socialized with anyone on the squad — well, with anyone at all really, not for a long long time. But these last few months,” he let out a long breath. “Shit, it takes me back, you know?”

“No, I don’t,” Annabelle said, kindly. “You never really talk about your past. It’s like it’s this dark shadow looming behind you. We all know it’s there, but it’s so insubstantial that there’s nothing anyone can do about it.”

“We all have things hiding in our pasts, Annabelle,” Dex said. “Even you.”

“Sure,” Annabelle said. “I think you know most of my secrets, though.”

“Maybe,” Dex said, “maybe not. It doesn’t matter.” He shook a cigarette out of the pack, and lit it. They sat silently for a while, Annabelle watching Dex and Dex staring at nothing.

“So, who was he?” Annabelle said, eventually.

“Who was who?”

“The one who got away.”

“What makes you think that’s what it was?”

“I pay attention to you, Andersson Dexter,” Annabelle said, smiling. “And there are the things you say and the things you don’t, and there’s all the stuff in between. So who was he? You played music together, right? And then he left you and broke your heart.”

“What do you know about it?” Dex said, raising his voice and glaring at Annabelle.

“Nothing,” she said, softly, reaching over and taking Dex’s free hand. “That’s why I’m asking.”

Dex sighed, the anger leaving him. “His name was Maks. Maksym. And it’s not

what you think — we were just friends. Well, it wasn't 'just' anything, but we weren't lovers. I don't know if things would have been any different if we had been. I used to think so, but now..."

His voice faded and Annabelle waited while Dex remembered. After a while she said, "So what happened?"

"He grew up," Dex said, his voice resigned. "And I didn't. Or at least not right then."

"And that's when you stopped playing music," Annabelle said.

Dex nodded. "That and a lot of other things, too."

"You know," Annabelle said, squeezing Dex's hand, "someone once told me that people change. It's what we do. You're not the same man who lost Maks, but you are who you are partly because of him. He's still in your life, just like you're still in his, just like Pat Malone is still in ours. You never really lose anyone, Dex. They're just hiding."

Dex looked at Annabelle. "Sometimes, I don't know what I did to deserve you," he said, smiling at her in the half light of the bar.

"Same to you, buster," she said. "Same to you."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

The day after the impromptu wake for Malone, Dex woke with a raging hangover and an unshakable feeling of urgency to find the cutter. He even checked his messages as soon as he was upright in case he'd missed a notification while he was passed out, but there was nothing. For the next two days, every time his system pinged, he jumped, thinking it was Annabelle's script notifying him of a match. Every time it was something else, he was filled with a sense of foreboding and worry that they still were not on the right track. And in between these worries about trying to stop the killer, Dex did some serious thinking about his life.

He thought he had figured out a plan which was, if not foolproof, at least something which solved some of the obvious problems in his current existence. He spent his evenings researching his options, and eventually came to a decision. It would take some doing, but Dex had figured out a way to get free from the crushing treadmill of crappy jobs. And he thought it might have the pleasant side effect of making things easier with Annabelle. Maybe.

Dex was at work at B&B when Annabelle's flight arrived. Dex didn't know where she found the extra days off, but he wasn't about to complain. They would meet at Annabelle's hotel after he was done for the day — neutral ground. It wasn't even lunch time, and Dex was already nervous.

The nervousness only got worse. By the time he was on the train back to his apartment, he was a mess. He showered and changed, and as he dressed he could barely close his suit, his hands were shaking so hard. His eyes strayed up to the cabinet with the bottle of rum, but his stomach rebelled at even the thought of a drink. He was on his own.

The walk to The Red Fish Inn felt somehow both infinitely long and instantaneous. Dex paused before walking through the hotel's big steel door and took a deep breath. Come on, man, he chided himself silently. It's only Annabelle. She likes you, remember? He sighed and walked in to the lobby.

He bypassed the check in kiosk, with its small ID chip reader/writer, and started looking around for Annabelle. He found her sitting on the small settee in the lobby. She stood when she saw him, and came toward him. She stepped into his arms, and they embraced lightly. "Wow," Dex said. "What is happening to us?"

"Evolution?" Annabelle said, as she broke away. "I don't know. But I think it's a

good thing. It mostly feels like a good thing." She took Dex's hand, and they both sat on the small couch.

"When are you leaving?" Dex asked.

"Day after tomorrow," Annabelle said. "First thing in the morning."

"So we have all day tomorrow, then," Dex said.

"Yes, and two nights," Annabelle said, looking away.

"Right," Dex said, squeezing her hand involuntarily. "Well, we can cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Which will be in a few hours," Annabelle said.

"But we have a few hours to put off that conversation," Dex said. "What do you want to do until then?"

Annabelle thought for a moment. "How busy do you think that place where Pat's party was would be about now?"

"I doubt it will be empty," Dex said. "But it won't be like last weekend."

"Why don't we try that?" Annabelle said.

"Are you sure?" Dex said. "We could just hang out here, or at my place or..."

"No," Annabelle said. "I want to go out, do something normal. We don't have to stay long if it gets weird."

"Okay," Dex said. "Let's go."

The Cog and Sprocket was fairly quiet that early, and they found themselves a table near the door on their own. Dex ordered a pint of the fine dark ale, and Annabelle stuck with the bubbly water. "How's this?" Dex asked when their drinks arrived.

Annabelle took a sip. "Actually, this is pretty nice," she said. "It's almost like being in Monte's."

Dex laughed. "It is, isn't it," he said. They sat together in companionable silence, watching the other people in the bar and sipping their drinks. Finally, Dex broke the silence.

"So," he started, "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately."

"Are we going to have another big state of the relationship talk already?" Annabelle asked.

"Actually, no," Dex said. "This is something else." He took a pull on the beer. "I know you've suffered through me complaining about my job many times."

"Many, many times," Annabelle agreed.

"And I've told you a few times about how I didn't always live this way, like a regular working stiff."

"Back when you were a musician," Annabelle said. Dex just nodded, and Annabelle just waited for him to continue.

"I feel like a large part of who I am is trapped in my past," Dex said, eventually. "I have this strange feeling like I want to lose myself in my memories of that time, but there's a lot of pain back there, too."

"I'd be happy to hear you talk about it," Annabelle said, her eyes full of concern.

"I know," Dex said. "Maybe one day. But that's not what I want to talk about now. No, I just mentioned it because for a long, long time I've felt like my life isn't the one I'm supposed to be living. You know what I mean?"

"Dex," Annabelle said, reaching out for his hand. "You know I do."

"Of course," he said, flushing. "Obviously, you understand. Anyway, I've been doing a lot of figuring and research and I think I've made a decision. It's a big decision, so I wanted to talk to you about it before I did anything I couldn't get out of. But I need you to know that I think my mind is made up." Dex looked at Annabelle, and he was sure he could see her heartbeat as she worried about what he would say next.

"I'm going to quit my job," he said, finally.

Annabelle just stared at him for a moment, then burst out laughing. "That's all?" she said. "After all this preamble, I was sure you were going to say something, I don't know, a lot more shocking than that."

"I don't just mean I'm going to get another job," Dex said. "I'm quitting the whole thing, this whole stupid life that I hate. I ran the numbers, and I make enough to keep myself afloat from the cases alone, and I have enough savings to get myself into one of those new freelancer housing cooperatives in Europa." He paused, and took Annabelle's hand. "I've already put in an application and it's been provisionally accepted. I'm moving to Nice."

Annabelle was stunned. "You're what?" was all she managed to get out.

"There are three completed freelancer housing complexes in Europa — one in Edinburgh, one in St. Petersburg and one in Nice. Since one of the problems I had was that with the severely reduced income, I wouldn't have enough spare cash for trips to see you, it seemed obvious to just pick the one in Nice. Things wouldn't really have to change much; I bet I could even get the same deal that you have and stay on the same squad. And you wouldn't have to travel so far either." Dex looked at Annabelle's shocked expression. "I thought you'd be happy," he said, confused.

"It's just so... so sudden," Annabelle said. "I wasn't expecting anything like this. I mean, we've been doing well, but I don't think we're at this stage yet. I mean, it wasn't too long ago that we were both terrified of even talking to each other. Hell, Dex, don't you think you're moving a little fast here?" Annabelle had sat back in her chair, even moved it away from the table a little bit.

"I don't understand," Dex said. "I mean, this doesn't have anything to do with us, not really."

"Moving to Nice doesn't have anything to do with us?" Annabelle countered archly. "Moving half way around the world, to the town where I live, every day, every night, doesn't have anything to do with us? Come on. You can't really believe that."

"I'm not trying to move in with you," Dex said, his voice rising now. "Things wouldn't have to change at all, except for the flights. I mean, you came all this way to see me just now, with all the hassle and expense. When I live there, it would just be a short train ride at most. But I'm not expecting that we'd be hanging out every day or anything. I don't understand why you're so upset."

"No, you don't," Annabelle said, and stood. "And I can't seem to explain it to you, so I'm leaving."

"What?" Dex said, shocked.

"I'm just going back to the hotel," Annabelle said. "I need a little time to think things over — I'm not leaving town. I'll see you tomorrow," she said.

Dex stood. "Let me walk with you—"

"No," Annabelle said. "I said I need time, and that's what I mean. I'll be fine; I'm not some delicate flower who needs protecting. Just leave me alone for a while, okay." She was almost pleading, so Dex just sat back down, dejected. "We'll talk tomorrow,"

Annabelle said, as she walked to the door. "I promise."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Annabelle was angry with herself. She wished she hadn't walked out on Dex, but she just couldn't stay in that place anymore. She needed time — time to deal with his decision, time to deal with her own feelings. She knew Dex didn't understand why his plan to move to Nice bothered her so much, because she never wanted to tell him that the very fact of the distance between them was one of the things that helped her continue on in their relationship. She could always get away, she could always go home. With him living in the same city, there would be no escape.

Annabelle got off the train, and started walking the few blocks to the hotel. She knew she had overreacted, and there was nothing for it but to talk it out with Dex. He'd been honest with her after last weekend, and she knew it wasn't easy for him. It was her turn now. She just wasn't ready for it yet.

She was lost in thought, and focussed on the map overlaid on her vision as she turned the corner to the street with her hotel. She didn't hear the shushing sound of the electric motor, the scooter stopping behind her or the footsteps of the scooter's rider. So when, all of a sudden, she felt someone's presence behind her, it startled her out of her thoughts and brought her focus fully and completely on her physical self.

She turned toward that feeling of another body much too close to hers, and without even thinking about it, she brought her right arm up, the fist balled. She felt it connect with something soft before she even saw the man. She heard an oomph sound, and felt a hand lock on to her arm. Automatically, she twisted away, and out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of something metallic near her face. She felt a crackle of electricity and jerked her head away. The hand was still a vice grip on her arm.

"You came back," she heard a voice hiss out of the darkness. "You came back for me. Why are you fighting?"

The voice snapped her out of fight or flight and she paused, trying to make sense of the words. She could see the man close to her, his face nearer to hers than she could stand. She was scared — there was no doubt in her mind that this man meant her harm. But driving her more than her fear was her disgust at his closeness, the sheer heat and smell of him, so she mindlessly tried to pull away from him. He tightened his grip on her arm, and started dragging her toward the scooter. She could see an expandable case on the back of the scooter, and knew that the man was trying to pull her toward it.

He was still trying to get her with his stunner, or whatever it was, so she was twisting

to keep her face as far from him as possible, but it was keeping her off balance, and making it easy for him pull her toward the box. The lid of the box was hanging open, the interior like a dark cavern she knew he was trying to get her into. She also knew that if she went into that box, she would never make it through the night alive.

In what felt like a thunderbolt, she suddenly remembered training from what seemed like a million years before, when she was in the army. Once she had left the service, she always thought of that time with regret, as years wasted on a future she never even really wanted. Now, though, she thanked all those men and women who had beat into her a sense of physical survival.

She let the man pull her again toward the box, trying to act as if she were tiring from the game of tug of war. When she saw his attention wander off her for a moment, she stepped in toward him, letting his own strength propel her toward him. As they got closer, she threw out her left arm to block his hand and its metallic stunner. She knew she only had one shot at this, or he would get her with the device for certain. With all her weight and momentum behind her, she dealt him a vicious head butt, connecting her forehead with the bridge of his nose.

He yelped, dropping the stunner as he brought his right hand up to his ruined nose. Her blow hadn't knocked him out like she'd hoped, but had loosened his hold on her arm. She twisted out of his grip, and aimed a swift kick at his midsection. He dropped, and she turned and ran without stopping to see what happened to him.

She was in her hotel room, sitting on the floor with her back to the locked and bolted door before she fully understood what had happened. Her hands were shaking and her heart pounded in her ears. She felt like being sick, like laughing, like crying until her body ran out of tears. Instead, she just sat on the floor, staring at the small bed with its silver sequined cover, hugging her knees tightly to her chest.

She didn't know how long she had been sitting there when she finally recognized the soft noise in her ear. Her system was pinging her, had been pinging her relentlessly for a better part of an hour. She blinked a few times, and realized that her eyes were wet, that she had been crying without even knowing it. She wiped her eyes, and focussed on her display. It was Dex calling. He had been calling for most of the night.

She answered, finally, and when she heard his voice say, "Annabelle, finally. I'm so sorry..." she burst into tears again.

"I don't really understand," he said, "but obviously this isn't going to work. I'll move

to St. Petersburg; I'll find a way. Maybe I'll get a part time job, I just don't want—"

"I think I met the cutter tonight," Annabelle interrupted him, her voice stronger than she imagined it could be after her ordeal. "He tried to put me in his box, but I got away. I got away," she repeated as her voice broke. "I got away."

"Oh my god," Dex said. "Where are you? Are you okay? I'll be right there. Wait, do you need to be alone? Do you need a doctor?" His questions came in no particular order; he realized he was babbling.

"I'm okay," Annabelle said. "I'm not cut; he didn't get me with the stunner." She sniffled and got a hold of herself. "Dex, I'm at the hotel. Please come. I need you here with me."

"I'm on my way."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The man lay on the ground, doubled over. The pain in his nose was sharper, but the pain in his gut was what consumed him. He heaved, but nothing came up. It felt like an eternity before he was able to get himself to his knees, and even longer before he could stand.

He limped to the scooter, blood still pouring from his nose, staining the front of his shirt. He thumbed the scooter to life, then pointed it in the direction of his apartment. He needed to get cleaned up, needed to get control back. How could this have happened? She had come back, come back for him. Why else would she have come back to the city, if not for the work. If not for him?

He hadn't even planned on doing the work tonight. He had intended to do something with Gerry, who was still occupying the lav in the apartment. But when he had brought the scooter up to load Gerry into the trailer box, his system notification had gone off. He'd forgotten that before he'd discovered that Annabelle Lewis actually lived in Europa, and wasn't just going to be gone for a few days, he'd tagged his system to notify him when she returned to the city. After he'd learned that she was probably never coming back, he'd forgotten all about it.

But then the ping sounded and everything changed. She was back. He was in control after all, his choice would be honoured. He left Gerry, and taking only the tools he needed, he'd straddled the scooter and headed out into the night.

He'd found the dark corner near her hotel, and waited. She had taken her time, but he followed her signal from the pub where she and that man had gone. His heart was racing as he watched her close on to his location, and was nearly vibrating with excitement when he first saw her. He stepped toward her, newly tuned Joybuzzer in his hand ready to make her ready, when he felt her fist connect with his midsection.

None of them had ever fought before, not at this stage. And why would she fight, this one who was lost to him then miraculously returned? He had made his choice, the end was inevitable. She must have known, or else why would she come back to him. Why?

He made it back to the apartment, plugged the scooter into the floor socket to recharge, and managed a shower even with Gerry blocking most of the space in the lav. He crawled to his bed, and passed out.

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