

A black and white photograph showing the back and head of a person from behind. The person is bald, and the lighting highlights the contours of their neck and shoulders. The background is dark and textured. The text "M. Darusha Wehm" is overlaid in white at the top, and "Self Made" is overlaid in white at the bottom.

M. Darusha Wehm

Self Made

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by M. Darusha Wehm

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Chapter Twenty Five

Monte's, while being Dex's first choice as an interview location, wasn't going to do. Ivy had been there several times, and Dex had even met both Ivy and Bellinger there before. No, he needed a neutral location, so he asked Annabelle. She named a few spots that fulfilled all of his needs — quiet, public but out of the way locations. Dex logged into Marionette City and scouted out Annabelle's bars, finally deciding on a place called Lucky's. It was dark, with an old fashioned dark wood and burgundy leather decor. The place was small, but there would be no problem getting a table, and the most important feature was that there was a back door. It meant that Annabelle could track Bellinger's movements if she tried to run.

He got there early, and found a secluded table near the back. He had received a confirmation ping from Bellinger earlier, and he sent her a link to the

bar. He had reviewed the recording of his earlier meeting with her, but he was still unprepared for her arrival. He had been expecting the subdued redhead that he'd met at Monte's with Ivy and the others, not the silver coated creature who linked in to Lucky's.

The face of the avatar was the same, but that was about all. Where she had been ordinary and quiet before, she was shiny and glowing now. Even her hair glittered in the low lights of the bar. She scanned the room, and Dex pinged her so she would more easily find her way to the table. She walked over to him, and he thought that maybe strutted was a better term. She reminded him a little of the dancers that Mickey Udo had visited with Reuben. It was disconcerting.

She approached the table, and the avatars shook hands. She sat across from him and Dex watched as a virtual White Russian appeared in front of her. He sipped his dark and stormy, wondering if she was getting her drink with or without the neural stims. "Mr. Dexter," she said, her voice low and even. "It's nice to see you again."

"And you, Ms. Bellinger," he answered. He studied her, and saw that she kept fussing with her appearance. A hand to the hair, slight corrections to the rate of shine on her silvery skin, expecting fabric where there was none. Dex guessed that the new look was, in fact, quite new. She sipped her drink and then looked around the small bar.

"I see that your good taste in drinking establishments hasn't diminished any," she smiled.

"It's not a bad little place," Dex said, smoothly.

"So, what did you want to see me about?" she asked, stirring her drink absently.

"It's about the case I'm working on that Ms. Velasquez helped me with," Dex lied. "I was hoping you could clear up a few things for me."

"Oh?" Bellinger said, the pitch of her voice rising slightly. She continued to stir her drink rhythmically.

"You're a programmer at the same firm as Ms. Velasquez, isn't that right?"

"Yes," she answered, guardedly.

"What's your specialization there?"

"I design three dimensional interactive virtual user interfaces."

"Avatars?"

"Usually," she smiled, and sipped her drink. When she replaced it on the table, she began stirring it again.

"Good," Dex said. "That's exactly what I need. I was hoping you could take a look at some code for me. It's part of a case — I can't talk about that, of course — but I could really use a professional's eye on it. May I send it to you?"

Bellinger stirred her drink faster, and said, "Sure." Dex pinged her system and sent her a copy of the code that his attacker had used against him, the code that had killed Reuben. He watched as she stirred her drink, then all of a sudden her avatar went completely still.

"Ms. Bellinger," he said, but there was no response. He opened up a voice channel with Annabelle, who was already in mid sentence.

"... still there, she just isn't sending any input. If you just wait, she'll come

back. I think."

"Okay," he subvocalized to Annabelle, "I'm going to turn you off again. Use the emergency channel if you need to talk to me." He cut the connection and waited for Renna Bellinger to unfreeze.

It didn't take long for her avatar to start responding again, but her demeanour had changed so much it was as if she were a different person. She no longer stirred her drink incessantly, instead she completely ignored it. Rather, Bellinger focussed intensely on Dex, her head cocked slightly to the left. She seemed calmer, almost serene somehow. It threw Dex off.

"I suppose you're very proud of yourself," she said, finally, with only a hint of malice. "Catching the big bad killer." Her voice was sarcastic, and Dex wondered for the first time if she might be under the influence of some drug. "What gave it away?" she asked. "Was it my coding style? Did you find something that tied me to the bot that tried to pass the code to your avatar? How did you figure it out?"

"You told me," Dex answered.

"How?" Bellinger said, her voice getting louder with equal parts curiosity and anger. "We've hardly ever even spoken. When did I say anything that could have tipped you off?"

He answered quietly, "About twenty seconds ago." She looked at him with that calm silent gaze and Dex waited for her next move.

"You didn't know," she finally said, her voice suddenly quiet. "You were just

trying to find out what I knew, what I'd say. You never knew until now."

Dex shrugged. "I hate to ruin the illusion, but most of good detective work is just watching and waiting. And being at the right place at the right time to find the answer. So, now that I do know, do you want to talk about it? Tell me why you did it?"

Bellinger leaned back in her chair, a cigarette materializing between her fingers. Dex wondered if there were some kind of neural stims involved here as well. "She never even told you that I'm her wife, did she?" she asked, her voice hard with bitterness now. Dex shook his head, hoping that he was successfully concealing his surprise.

"We met through work, at one of those awful mandatory parties for all employees. They sat us together by classification and I ended up next to Ivy. We hit it off right away. Maybe it was because we were doing the same kind of work, or maybe it was that we both liked to talk about ideas — what things meant, how the world was changing, how we were a part of it all.

"We started to spend a lot of time together in Marionette City. We'd been together a couple of years when we decided to get married. I know it's an antiquated notion, but we felt like we needed something, some event to mark the occasion. It was one of the things we liked to talk about, how virtuality had created a renewed need for ritual and structure." She took a drag off of her cigarette, and looked off somewhere over Dex's left shoulder. Her voice took on a wistful quality, replacing the bitter tone she'd had.

"It was such a beautiful day. We flew over the great canyon on Tropical

Island, hand in hand, watching the sun go down. We were both so happy; I thought I was the luckiest person in any world, physical or virtual."

Bellinger refocussed on Dex, and pinged his system. He accepted the download and opened an image of Ivy's and Bellinger's avatars, each dressed in beautiful gowns, grinning under a canopy of flowers and bells. "You both looked lovely," he said.

As if she hadn't even heard him, Bellinger continued. "It was wonderful at first. We were even happier after the wedding than before. But then Ivy started getting distant. We started to meet less often, and she wasn't as interested in me, in my ideas, in my form." She ran her hands over her shimmering body. "I tried everything — leaving her alone, paying more attention to her; I even changed my avatar for her in case that was it." She began to cry, virtual tears flowing down her cheeks, and her voice fought against a sob.

"It was a long time coming," she said, "and at first I didn't notice. But she was changing, and she was changing into someone who didn't want me. I had been moonlighting as a contractor with Stella Bish, and I heard about a new hot shot UI developer who'd started — some guy named Reuben Cobalt. I was impressed, so I checked him out. I never would have guessed..."

"At first I thought she was in love with him. She never mentioned him, of course, but I knew the boards she read, the company she kept. Just because her name wasn't there, that didn't mean anything. She would have to know him, and he was everything she would want. I was convinced that he was stealing her away from me." Her voice broke, and she swallowed hard. "I didn't realize

how right I truly was.

"I followed him around the 'nets, and of course, I broke into the logs. I saw where he went, who he talked to, the things he likes to look at. I should have seen it long before I did. It didn't take long to have the proof, and I couldn't pretend any more that I didn't know. He was her multi. He was what she wanted to become. And he didn't even know me.

"I don't know how she thought she could keep it from me," Bellinger frowned at the thought, and the sob she'd been trying to stifle nearly broke through. "I'd know her code anywhere. Did she really think I wouldn't notice that it was her? I loved everything about her, of course I'd see her in his code."

She looked directly at Dex, her eyes full of tears, her chin quivering. "People change, I understand that. Of course, we all do. But we were supposed to change together." Her voice broke again, but she kept it together. "Instead, she was going to leave me and become someone else, someone entirely different. And I'd never see her again. How could I let that happen? I couldn't just let him take the woman I love away from me." The sob finally broke free and Bellinger hung her head, letting the tears flow freely.

Dex sat there a moment, watching Renna cry. Then, he carefully turned off the video stream to Annabelle, and turned off his own recording. He stood and walked around the table to where the woman sat weeping. He sat down next to her, and put his arms around her. "I understand," he whispered, and held her, slowly rocking her, until the tears stopped.

"What is going to happen to me?" she asked once she had stopped crying.

"I don't really know," Dex said, softly. "What you did isn't technically illegal, so you don't have to worry on that front. But," he paused and lifted her chin so that she looked him in the eye. "I am going to have to tell Ivy." He expected her to start weeping again, but instead she got a stoic look on her face.

"It was only ever a matter of time," she said, resignation in her voice. "Even if she never knew what I did, she'd still leave me. I see that now. Maybe it's better this way — at least she'll see how much I love her."

Dex sighed, wondering not for the first time why so many people think that the best way to demonstrate love is by hurting themselves or others. He asked her if she needed him to call anyone for her, but she said that she would be fine. Then he left her, and wrote a brief report to Ivy. He sent the report, along with a copy of the recording he'd made of most of his conversation with Renna. It was up to her how she dealt with the situation. His part was done.

Chapter Twenty Six

Dex went offline. His mouth was dry and his head hurt, but those were symptoms he could deal with. The dull, empty ache just above his gut was more of a problem. It was a familiar feeling, that he recognized as a twinge he usually dulled with rum. He was accustomed to it flaring up every once in a while, but he had been keeping in check until now. Renna's story was typical enough — a woman scorned — but for some reason her particular struggle hit home to Dex. He thought he could almost sense her feelings of rejection and isolation, of being left behind.

He knew it was his own memory giving him the false empathy for his client's killer, but that only made the feelings worse. He stood, and walked the few paces to his small kitchen. He drank a glass of water, and then filled his tumbler with half of the dregs of the Jamaica's Best. He didn't even bother with the

gingapop before he drank it down, grimacing as if it were medicine. He went to the lav, and when he returned to the main room, he refilled his glass with his more typical cocktail mix, and went back to his chair. He still had that melancholy jangly feeling, but the edges, which had been razor raw a few moments before, now held only the dull throb of a day old wound.

He went back online to file his final case report, and saw that he had several messages from Annabelle in the last half hour, all increasing in urgency and tones of panic. "Shit," he said aloud, and pinged Annabelle. She answered immediately, and Dex had to turn the volume down as she harangued him.

"What the fuck is going on?" she demanded, her voice rising in pitch. "All of a sudden the feed cuts out, and there I am wondering what the hell is happening. Did she take a shot at you again? Are you okay?"

"Jesus," Dex muttered under his breath. "No, she didn't try for me, I'm fine. I didn't mean to worry you."

"Well, what happened to the feed, then," she asked, notes of panic still evident in her voice.

Dex debated making up some tale about the feed just cutting out, but he knew that he'd never be able to snow a pro like Annabelle. He swallowed hard. "There was just something I didn't want," he paused a moment, "something I didn't want on the record. For her sake and for the client. But everything is fine. It's over now."

"Huh," Annabelle grunted. Dex thought she was going to grill him about why there would be something he didn't want on the record, but she let it pass. "You

really had me worried there," she said, her voice sounding like she was barely winning a hard-fought battle with her emotions for control. "That nut was pretty unhinged."

"I don't know if she really is a nut," Dex said.

"What?" Annabelle asked. "She put in a lot of effort to delete her honey's little side project, when they could have just had a conversation like normal people. Sounds a little nutty to me, I have to say."

"She was hurt," Dex said, quietly. "Ivy was all she ever wanted but she wasn't enough for Ivy. That's a killer feeling, kiddo. It really is."

"Oh, come on. Ivy wasn't really going anywhere," Annabelle said, incredulously. "You don't make a multi to change your life. It's just an easy way to pretend to be someone different for an hour or two. I've seen it a thousand times." Her voice had taken on a bitter tone that Dex didn't like very much.

"Multis are for the dickless, Dex, for those people who just want to try on a new identity like you'd wear a new avatar or hair colour. Trust me," she said, her voice wavering slightly, "it takes more than a new name to really change your life."

"Don't I know it," Dex said, his eyes clouding over against his will. He took another slug of his drink. "But I think this was the real thing, Annabelle. I'm sure Ivy really was going to leave her old life behind."

"How can you know that?" Annabelle said, snorting.

"Bellinger certainly thought so," Dex said.

"The wife always knows, right?" Annabelle asked, sarcastically.

"In my experience, usually she does, yeah," Dex said. "Besides, Ivy told me herself that she wanted to completely change identities. You should have seen her when she realized Rueben was really gone. It was like someone stole her future away from her."

"Huh," Annabelle grunted. "I suppose it's possible," she conceded. "I'll confess that I watched your interview with her, and she really did look like a little lost lamb there. But, I just don't know who to feel bad for in this one. It takes balls to stand up and do what you need to do to start a new life, and a lot of eggs get broken making that omelette no matter how you play it. But you have to be willing to make those hard choices, to have those terrible conversations, or you never get free. I mean, even if Ivy was trying to come to terms with who she really is, that doesn't excuse cutting Bellinger out of her life without even saying 'see ya'." She paused, and Dex wondered what she was thinking. "But, while I still don't think dusting a multi is the same as murder," she continued, "Bellinger doesn't make herself all that sympathetic with her little code bomb." She paused, as if trying to come up with a way to make it all make sense. Finally, she said, "It's a shit sandwich Dex."

"I know it is," he said, smiling mirthlessly, "but that's life."

After he got done with Annabelle, Dex logged into the Cubicle Men's system. He saw that Ivy had closed out her account with the organization, marking the transaction as successfully resolved. "That's a pretty piss poor definition of success," Dex said aloud to his empty apartment, then finished his

final report, officially ending the case. After his closed out the last file, he went offline. He didn't get up from the chair, but sat looking at nothing but the four, drab grey walls around him. He swirled his drink in the glass, thinking about Ivy and Bellinger and the mess they had each made of their lives. He thought for a long time, long enough to make a casual observer wonder if he'd fallen asleep with his eyes open and his drink in his hand, until he set his glass down on the table and logged into Marionette City.

Dex felt like hell when walked into Uri Farone's storefront. Farone himself was working the shop again, and he must have had a great avatar recognition program running, because he said, "Mr. Dexter, how nice to see you again. Have you decided we can do something for you after all?"

Dex closed his eyes, feeling the pinpricks start under his eyelids. "Yes," he said, "I think I have."

Chapter Twenty Seven

The room was getting lighter, the weak sun coming up and brightening the place. The music had gotten slower, more dreamy and introspective as the evening progressed. By now, Maksym looked like he was fighting off sleep as he lay on the couch, his head barely nodding in time to the music. From his vantage point on the floor, Dex faced the wall and his own tiredness was making it difficult to look elsewhere. His voice sounded overly loud in the small room. "Do you want me to come with you?" he asked. "Do you need a hand on the train or anything?"

"Naw," Maks said, "it's just the one crate. Besides, you'll need to pack up, too. You'll be out of here in a few days yourself." Maks sat up, and rubbing his hands over his face, said, "Andy, we've had some good times here, haven't we?"

"Yeah," Dex had said, "we have, indeed." His voice sounded tired and sad. As he stood to get a glass of water, he cleared his throat. He drew some water, drank it and poured another glass which he handed to Maks. The other man drank the whole glass in one swallow, then smiled at Dex as he gave back him the empty glass. "You should go soon," Dex said.

"Yeah," Maks said, standing up. He ran his hands over his wrinkled clothes and through his messy blonde hair, though it didn't improve their appearance any. He looked uncomfortable, like he was trying to say something but was having trouble finding the right words. "It's not you, you know," he said, finally, looking Dex in the eye. "It's just that things change. I changed. I want a different life now, that's all."

"I know," Dex said, blinking his wet eyes a few times.

"I wish everything would be the same for you once I'm gone, but it won't," Maks said, sadly. "It's a different world out there, and I want to be a part of it now. I know it wasn't supposed to end this way, but I can't pretend that this is enough for me anymore."

"I know," Dex repeated. "I just wish it were."

Maks smiled, and moved closer to Dex. He put his arms around the man, they embraced. "You can't hold on to people forever," Maks said, softly. "We're all in motion, constantly. Sometimes, when we're lucky, we're moving in the same direction at the same time. But, if you try to hang on, all you do is grab on to thin air. It's no good." He broke the embrace and Dex could see a tear brimming in Maksym's eye. "You have to find your own way, same as I did. But

you'll be fine — you've always been the strong one, anyway." He smiled, and picked up his crate. "Take care, Andy."

"You too, Maks," Dex said, as Maks walked into the hall and closed the door behind him. Dex could hear footsteps as Maks walked down the hall, footsteps that got quieter until the video went silent.

The video still made Dex feel sad every time he watched it, but those times had become fewer and further between. The first year after Maks moved out and Dex had started working at a firm he had watched the old videos almost every night. But now he couldn't even remember the last time he'd pulled out one of the recordings. He wondered what it was about today that made him want to relive those old memories. It was probably the case he'd just finished — poor Renna Bellinger and her inability to let go. It must have been hard for her. Not that it excused anything, but Dex found that he had a strong sense of sympathy for the woman that he couldn't quite understand.

He shut down the viewer and poured a glass of gingapop. He pulled out the brand new bottle of Jamaica's Best he'd picked up on the way home from work, and broke the seal on the cap. He splashed a bit of the sweet dark liquor into his soda and swirled the mixture around in the glass. He sat back down in his comfortable chair, and pinged Annabelle.

To his surprise, they had kept in touch in the three days since the case ended. They'd spoken in some way every day since then, and while Dex didn't see himself getting over his discomfort at being together only virtually, he was

enjoying their growing friendship.

Annabelle answered the ping and opened a voice channel. "Hey, there," she said, her voice light as usual. "How's it going?"

"I'm good," Dex said. "Just enjoying a tasty beverage and taking a breather after a short day at work." Annabelle laughed, and Dex grinned. "Between no new cases to pick up and these short days, I almost feel like I'm on holiday. It is kind of nice having a few days off, though. I know I'll get bored soon enough, but right now I'm really liking having nothing to do in the evenings."

"Must be nice," Annabelle said. "My work is pretty much never done. I've got an intellectual property theft case of my own on the go, and there are a few people who call on me every once and again for technical help."

"It's tough being popular," Dex said.

"Don't I know it," Annabelle agreed, laughing. "The good news is that I decided to take my two weeks' vacation from the day job, so I've got a nice bit of spare time to play with."

"Good for you," Dex said. "What are you planning to do with it?"

"I thought I'd go visit a friend," Annabelle said, and at that moment Dex heard a banging sound coming from his hallway. He got up and walked to the door. The noise sounded again, and he realized that someone was knocking on the door. He tentatively opened it. A man stood there, smiling shyly. He was medium height, medium build, face full of metal — extremely ordinary-looking. He blinked a few times, and said in a low, quiet voice, "Hey, Dex."

Simultaneously in his ear, Dex heard Annabelle's light voice say the same

words. He blinked a few times, opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

"Yeah, it's me," the man before him and the voice in his head said, at the same time. "I know I'm probably not what you expected.... but can I come in, anyway?" Dex simply nodded, and moved back from the door in order to let the man in.

They sat at the table across from each other, each drinking a strong cocktail which Dex expertly mixed. "I officially changed my gender," Annabelle said, having trouble meeting Dex's eyes, "almost ten years ago now. I never got around to doing anything with the meat." She indicated her male body sitting across from Dex. "It just never seemed to matter."

Dex said nothing for a moment, trying to take it all in. "It's none of my business," he said finally, "but is this maybe why you have such trouble in the physical world?"

Annabelle shook her head. "No. I was like that before," she said. "That's why I never bothered with changing my body. It really didn't matter to me. Not to mention that the procedure is very expensive. And not without a fair amount of discomfort, I'm told."

"I'm not asking you to do it," Dex said, and smiled to take the edge of his words. Annabelle smiled back, and their eyes met for a brief moment. Dex sighed, and took a large sip of his drink. "It's true that I want a real body to touch, but I've never been too particular about the specifics of said body."

Dex felt his face flush as he waited for Annabelle's response. "You are a

very strange man," she said, finally, and Dex saw a smile creep over her face.

"Look who's talking, kiddo," he said, grinning back. "It must feel so weird for you to be here."

"You have no idea," Annabelle laughed, and Dex could hear the sound he'd grown so accustomed to in the last few weeks hiding inside this deep voice. She explained that she automatically ran her voice through a pitch adjuster when she talked over the nets. She said she'd been living this way for so long that it wasn't until she was halfway across the world that she realized that she would probably look quite different to what she figured Dex imagined she looked like.

Her smile faltered and she took a large sip of her drink. Not looking Dex in the eye, she said, "So. Here I am. I don't really know what I'm doing here, and I can go back anytime if this is inconvenient." Her eyes darted up to meet Dex's, then she looked away quickly again. "I shouldn't have come," she said quickly, and made as if to stand up. "I'll just go." Dex reached out, touching her arm lightly. She made a noise, and pulled her hand away, as if his touch had burned her.

"I'm sorry," Dex said, lightly, "but I don't want you to leave."

"No, I'm sorry," Annabelle said, her dark eyes shining above a light five o'clock shadow. "This might be a little too much for me... you know how I am about this," she waved her hands, gesturing at Dex's apartment, but meaning the whole physical world.

"I do," Dex said, looking up at her and smiling softly, "and you came anyway."

"I guess," she said, looking at him out the corner of her eye. She tentatively sat down. "I don't know if this is going to work," she said, sadly.

"Me neither," Dex said. "Who ever knows if anything is going to work? It doesn't really matter. What matters is that you came. You tried. I don't think anyone has ever tried that hard for me before."

"You're such a big sap," she said, laughing that laugh that Dex had grown to want to hear. He grinned, and stood up.

"I've got an idea," he said, walking over to his comfortable chair. "You stay there, and just follow my lead, okay?"

"Uh, sure," Annabelle sounded unconvinced, but she didn't move. Dex logged into Marionette City and pinged Annabelle with a link. "What are you doing?" she protested. "I'm right here."

"Just shut up and follow the link." He linked into the restaurant where they'd gone on that awful date, and Annabelle appeared shortly thereafter.

"Oh," she said, a look of realization appearing on both her physical face and her avatar. Her avatar walked over to Dex, dressed in her usual business wear, which soon morphed into the shimmering fabric and bands outfit she'd had on for their abortive evening out. Dex quickly added his horrible date tie to his outfit, and they were seated at a table. A bottle of wine appeared, and Dex poured glasses for them both.

"This way neither of us are happy," he said aloud, causing Annabelle to shift focus briefly to Dex's apartment. She first looked shocked, then smiled, using both sets of lips.

"You are one funny guy, Andersson Dexter," she said, also aloud.

"I try," he said. They sat in silence for a while, Dex looking at the Annabelle who sat across his apartment, Annabelle looking at Dex's avatar.

"It won't be easy for me," Annabelle said, finally. "Every part of me wants to walk out your door and find somewhere to hide where no one can see me."

"It's bad for me, too," Dex said. "I hate having to meet you in this bubble," he waved his avatar's arms in Marionette City, "when I could just reach out..." Annabelle flinched, and Dex and his avatar smiled. He had his avatar reach out across the table and touch Annabelle's hand. She took his hand in hers, and smiled.

"It doesn't feel like anything to you, does it?" she asked, squeezing his hand.

"No, it feels like something," Dex said, sadly. "It feels like fraud, deception and insincerity." Annabelle let his hand go, and looked down.

"We've got a long way to go, you and I," she said.

"Sure," Dex said. "We're all changing, all of us, all the time. People change and they grow apart. But, maybe sometimes it goes the other way, too."