

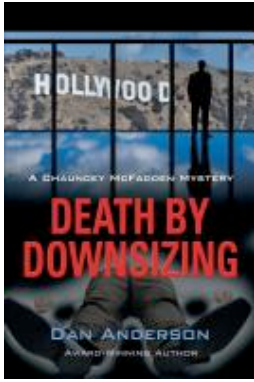
HOLLYWOOD

A CHAUNCEY MCFADDEN MYSTERY

DEATH BY DOWNSIZING

DAN ANDERSON

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



A client begs Chauncey McFadden, Los Angeles PI, to find his gay lover who has vanished. Although LAPD believes the victim is deceased based upon uncovered body parts, Chauncey agrees to investigate and contacts the paramour's former co-workers at a large insurance company. However, the case explodes in scope and complexity as Chauncey discovers each co-worker has also died under mysterious and violent circumstances. Chauncey must find this vicious assassin before the body count escalates.

Death by Downsizing

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Death by Downsizing

Dan Anderson

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First Edition

Dedication

This book is humbly dedicated to Sandra J. Cantrell, a member of my literary posse who generously reviewed my mysteries prior to publication. An avid reader, her critical contributions to the content and quality of my manuscripts were incalculable. Because of tragic circumstances, this dedication is delivered with a heavy heart: Sandra passed away in 2013.

More importantly, Sandra was my sister. A day doesn't go by that I don't struggle with grief at her untimely passing. She never met anyone who didn't become a friend for life. Her dedication and concern for others was well known in her community of Gainesville, GA. That explains why her entire career was spent as a registered hospital nurse providing medical attention and comfort to those with serious illnesses and afflictions. She was a rare individual who lighted up a room by walking into it. She was an inspiration to so many and the world is a sadder place for her absence. Her memory will live forever in the hearts of those fortunate enough to have known her. Thank you, Sandra, for being such a spiritual blessing and doing so much for so many.

Acknowledgments

Chauncey's fourth misadventure in edgy mystery owes its continued gratitude to my literary posse who dutifully pored over the manuscript and offered their invaluable and perceptive comments. Again, I was fortunate to have the astute participation of Len Labriola and Dave Weippert, two former professional business colleagues of mine, who live in the delightful Garden State of New Jersey. For a distaff perspective, I was fortunate to have Sharon Watkins, a former neighbor in Texas and mystery maven par excellence, and Dawn Cantrell from the Peach State. Their aggregate contributions are appreciated.

Also by Dan Anderson

Bad Vibrations

Death Cruise

Vietnam Vindication

Chapter 1

“They found his body parts scattered hither and yon: a leg in Pasadena, an arm in Compton, the remains of his torso in Escondido and his head in Sacramento.” The little man sitting on the other side of my desk who’d identified himself as Quincy Quackenbush finished his sentence with a sigh and clasped his hands in apparent reverential remembrance.

“They can always use a good head in Sacramento,” I quipped without thinking, referring of course to the sorry state of affairs in our state’s capitol.

His pained look quickly elicited a personal apology. “I’m sorry, Mr. Quackenbush, the detective business tends to numb your sensitivities after a while. Start at the beginning and explain why you need my help.”

“My Pookie has disappeared,” he said in a tone bordering on religious piety.

I struggled for an appropriate response and finally asked, “Have you tried the lost and found?”

Damn, there I go again with the smart mouth.

“You don’t understand,” he replied impatiently with a touch of attitude. “Pookie is not a purloined pet.” He removed a pink silk handkerchief which cascaded over his jacket pocket and used it to dab imaginary tears from beneath his eyes. “He was quite human . . . my devoted companion and protégé. The police claim he’s been murdered . . . dismembered in a most cruel and heartless fashion.”

I wasn’t aware that dismemberment could be executed in any other fashion, but I successfully restrained my reckless tongue, at least on this occasion. At least I now knew who he was talking about.

“Please accept my condolences on the loss of a loved one, Mr. Quackenbush. Pookie’s death, and the manner in which he died, must be very traumatic for you. How can I help you?”

He squared the corners and folded his hanky, slipped it back inside its cubbyhole, puffed and patted it just so, and looked at me

over the top of his spectacles. “I want you to find his killer. You *are* a detective, aren’t you?”

“That’s what the sign on my door says. Is there some reason you aren’t comfortable with having the police handle this?” Some of my clients were eccentric. Some were just plain weird. You never knew for sure until you reached the end of your first interview.

“They aren’t moving with sufficient alacrity in my opinion. My interactions with them have, sadly, been fruitless. Besides,” he continued with obvious disdain, “they are churlish dolts who, if left to their own devices, would write this off as a suicide.”

“Which police department have you been dealing with?” I asked, trying to establish jurisdictional responsibility.

“The local group of constabulary miscreants in L.A.,” he said, with yet another sigh. “Pookie and I live in Brentwood with our two cats, Heloise and Abelard.”

Brentwood? This guy had some coin. “I’ll be glad to look into this for you, Mr. Quackenbush. Before we proceed further, what’s Pookie’s real name?”

“Fabrice Pelletier.”

“How old was he?”

Quackenbush clearly was not comfortable divulging this sensitive information, but replied after a lengthy pause. “He was my age . . . forty-two.”

“I have to ask a couple of standard questions. Do you know anyone who’d want to kill Fabrice and why? Where was he killed? When was he killed?” I used Pelletier’s call name. I refused to call a grown man ‘Pookie.’

Quackenbush uncrossed his legs and reversed their position. “He disappeared without explanation a month ago. I filed a missing persons report with the police a week later. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to harm Pookie. He was such a gentle, sensitive soul who was incapable of causing umbrage.”

“Why did you wait a week to contact the police?”

Quackenbush looked pained and uncomfortable. “We had a little spat before he disappeared and I wanted to give him some time to think things over.”

“What was the spat about if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I do mind you asking, but if my response is absolutely necessary for your investigation I suppose I must comply.” There was an elongated pause with a dramatic sigh at both ends. “I had discovered Pookie had been in contact with one of his former lovers and confronted him with my suspicion. He denied the charge. He said his friendship with Don Diego de la Fuente was platonic and no cause for alarm.”

“Did you believe him?”

“Not in the least. Don Diego is a notorious mountebank who should have been reduced to capon status years ago.”

His reference to a castrated chicken prompted all sorts of visuals but I moved on. This case had the potential for a walk on the wild side. “What happened next?”

“Two weeks after I reported Pookie missing, I received a call from the LAPD. They had found some human remains and had reason to believe they were Pookie’s based upon a unique tattoo on one of the arms. They asked me to come down and identify the body.”

“Was it, in fact, Fabrice?” I prodded.

“I’m not sure. Admittedly, the tattoo looked like one Pookie had etched on his right arm, but being exposed to the elements and animals had caused some physical deterioration which made positive identification impossible, at least in my mind.”

“Do you know why all his body parts were found in the L.A. area except his head?”

“I haven’t a clue,” Quackenbush said, suddenly looking weary.

“Other than the tattoo, has any other forensic proof been uncovered to definitely establish the body parts as belonging to Fabrice? For example, did they find a hand to allow them to lift fingerprints or teeth to help identify dental records?”

“Not that I’ve been told. The Keystone Cops are basing their identification solely upon the tattoo—Pookie had it inked from a design he created himself. I regret being summoned to assist in the inquiry. For all eternity, my last memory of Pookie may turn out to be his body parts in a bag, like pieces of *poulet* sold at the market.”

Quackenbush dabbed his dry eyes again for reasons not apparent to me.

“Did Fabrice have any family?”

Quackenbush held his hand over his heart. “I’m all the family he had. He was orphaned at an early age and raised in a foster home. I might add that he was sexually abused during his childhood. I’m sure it inflicted severe emotional damage.”

“Other than the spat, are you aware of any other reason Fabrice may have disappeared?”

“He told me only that he needed to get away for a few days. The police have hit a dead end and, without additional information, I doubt if the investigation will move beyond its current standstill. I was summoned to the police station—what a horrid place, a narrow suffocating chamber of dogmatism.”

I hesitated, wanting to choose my words carefully. “This isn’t a pleasant thing to say but the person or persons who killed Fabrice didn’t just want him dead, they wanted to make a statement. Dismemberment is usually caused by a perp who is so consumed with rage that he can satiate his feelings of hostility only by totally denigrating the victim. It’s possible this could be the work of a wacko serial killer. I’ll check around to see if any other similar murders have occurred. If not, the killer may very well be a past or current acquaintance of Fabrice who harbored some deep-seated grudge. I don’t want to alarm you, but that individual may be an acquaintance of yours as well.”

Quackenbush turned pale, gripped the arms of his chair in obvious alarm, and rose halfway to his feet. “Oh my word. Do . . . do . . . you mean I could be in jeopardy as well?”

I tried to soothe the agitated soul and said calmly, “I’m just raising the possibility that it may be someone in your mutual social network. It’s not likely you’re in danger personally or you’d also be scattered around the L.A. basin like the contents of a mortuary after a tornado.”

Not again! I simply have to work harder on my bedside manner.

Quackenbush removed one of his white gloves and examined his nails in a palm down theatrical fashion. “I find your similes most

disturbing, Mr. McFadden. However, I will overlook them as an unfortunate manifestation of your occupational insensitivity.”

“That would be appreciated,” I said with false gratitude. “What did Fabrice do for a living?”

“He’d been employed by Pandemic Insurance Company up until three months ago when they abruptly terminated his employment. For the past month, I’ve taken him on in my business as a floor salesman.”

“Did Pandemic tell Fabrice why he was sacked?”

“They claimed the amount of work had declined to the point where they could no longer maintain existing staff levels. Pookie was acutely distraught at this development.”

“What did he do at Pandemic Life?”

Quincy adjusted a large blond curl of hair that drooped down over his forehead. “He worked in their systems department. Why do you ask?”

“I’m just trying to get as comprehensive a picture of the man as possible. What were his hobbies? Who were his friends?”

“His only hobby was lapidary. He made the most exquisite jewelry.” Extending his hand toward me with pride, he continued, “This ring was a gift for my last birthday. Pookie found this emerald in an abandoned mine in Arizona. He cut and polished the gem and made the setting himself.”

“Nice stone,” I conceded after I’d leaned forward to take a closer look in a feigned gesture of interest. “How about Fabrice’s friends and associates?”

Quackenbush reached in the pocket of his jacket and, clearly without relish—with fore- and middle finger—wiggled forth a small black book which he handed me. “I anticipated this question. While going through Pookie’s personal effects, I ran across this in a locked box in his drawer.”

I fanned the pages slowly and noted it contained, in rough alphabetical order, names, addresses, and phone numbers. “Do you know any of these people?”

He sniffed audibly. “Some are people with whom he worked. Beneath the names of several entries, you will note PIC which stands

for Pandemic Insurance Company. Others are mutual friends whom I have indicated with a check mark. The rest which I have underlined are men he knew prior to the commencement of our relationship. I thought he had removed these pages, but apparently not.” Quackenbush tried to pretend indifference but it was clear Pookie’s retention of this contact information had caused him emotional distress.

“One of the underlined names is Don Diego de la Fuente. Isn’t he the guy you mentioned earlier . . . the cause of your spat?”

Quackenbush said drily, “Yes, a pretentious poseur and poster boy for ostentatiousness. His only claim to fame is being a laicized priest.”

“A what?”

“One who’s been defrocked,” Quackenbush explained condescendingly.

“I knew a defrocked priest once,” I quipped. “He was appointed to a large cathedral but subsequently excommunicated.”

“What on earth for?” Quackenbush asked on belated cue with an air of indifference.

“He claimed to have seen the silhouette of a grilled cheese sandwich in one of the stained glass windows.”

Quackenbush rolled his eyes and groaned before I continued. “How long were you and Fabrice together?”

“Six glorious months,” he said wistfully.

“How did you meet?”

“We bumped into each other, literally, at an art gallery cocktail party. We were there to see Desmond Lemond’s unveiling of his latest abstractionist works at Rothstein’s Fine Arts. We were both drinking pink ladies which we spilled on each other upon contact. While dabbing our libations off each other, we bonded after discovering how much we had in common. In a word, Pookie became my lover after a whirlwind courtship. Once he committed to a monogamous relationship, he moved in with me.”

“Is it possible he was killed by a previous lover who was jealous over his relationship with you?”

“I suppose anything is possible. You should know, however, that prior to our habitation, Pookie didn’t traffic with rent-boys. He was discriminating in his relationship choices.”

“What about you, Mr. Quackenbush? What do you do?”

“I own the Artemis Interior Design Firm, whose services”—he paused to look around my sparsely furnished office—“you could most certainly use. Who’s responsible for your current décor, Attila the Hun? I can’t ever recall seeing another office which generated less visual excitement than this enclosure and which so urgently begged for artistic intervention. What look were you striving for—early American boxcar?”

I should have been miffed at his environmental critique but I knew he was right. My office contained only a desk, two chairs, a filing cabinet with a busted lock, and a phone with an answering machine. There were three nails on the wall from which pictures had once been suspended but they were casualties of austere times and now gathered dust at the Acme Pawn Shop. I had planned on doing a little something as soon as my depleted budget allowed, but decorative attention hadn’t been possible. “Funny you should ask. I *have* been considering several designs but I’m undecided which one would best reflect my personality and aesthetic tastes.”

Quackenbush looked at me as if I had just emerged from a cave during the Paleolithic period of civilization. “In your defense, I think the current décor, simple and minimalist, accurately captures the essence of your persona. The threadbare nature of your office is complemented by your rumpled seersucker suit which virtually screams ‘Salvation Army thrift store.’”

Ouch! I didn’t like the personal direction this conversation had taken. I didn’t come off well in comparison to Quackenbush’s attire to be sure. To aid me in a stolen property recovery case I had previously worked on, I had taken some courses in men’s fashions and brand names. As a result of this sartorial education, I would wager he was wearing a Brioni suit, Armani tie, and pair of Berluti shoes which cost more than my car. His silk ascot was tucked beneath the collar of what appeared to be a Luigi Borrelli Napoli striped shirt—a week’s salary in my business.

“There’re two reasons for my modest habiliments,” I retorted defensively. “I frequently work undercover in the poorest parts of town and I don’t want to appear conspicuous.”

“What’s the other reason pray tell?”

“By keeping my personal expenditures low, I can pass the savings on to my clients.”

“Speaking of costs, how much *do* you charge, Mr. McFadden?”

“One hundred dollars a day plus expenses—five days in advance.”

Quackenbush breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s a trifle and certainly reasonable enough,” he pooted as he reached into the other pocket of his jacket and removed a gold and ivory pen and check book in a leather case that looked suspiciously like ostrich. He scribbled the requisite information on a business check and handed it to me. I gave it a quick glance to ensure acceptability by my bank and slipped it into the drawer of my desk.

“I’ll report to you at least weekly and whenever I uncover anything of significance. Sign a copy of this standard PI contract and write your residential address and home phone number in the spaces indicated.”

The dapper dude removed some reading glasses from a case and examined the text at some length. After what seemed to be an interminable period of time, he concluded, “I suppose the terms are acceptable although several provisions invite further inquiry because of their nebulousness. Also, I note a number of syntactical errors and misplaced modifiers.”

Was this guy for real?

“The contract was written by the attorney across the hall who revels in the desecration and obfuscation of the English language,” I explained. “No need for concern. It’s a mere formality. By the way, how did my services come to your attention?”

Quackenbush signed the contract with a regal, animated flourish and stood up. “I got your name from an article in the *L.A. Times* which recounted how you were instrumental in solving the murders of those Vietnam veterans. I was impressed until I arrived in this deplorable neighborhood and saw the building in which your office is

located. I almost did an about-face, but regained my composure because of my desire to either find Pookie or see those responsible for his murder apprehended.”

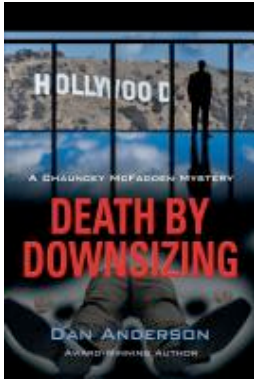
He was referring to my previous case, which had generated some favorable publicity for me if not a steady stream of business. “I expect to be equally successful in your case as well, Mr. Quackenbush. Understand that I can promise nothing but my best efforts. Fabrice deserves no less.”

I was relieved when Quackenbush left and I could remove my jacket and tie. It was approaching noon and the warmest part of the day. It had been the hottest August anyone in Los Angeles could remember. It hadn’t rained since February and any land not covered with concrete and asphalt was as bare and parched as the low desert floor. The only vegetation still possessing any elements of green were succulents, cacti, and masochistic trees and shrubs which thrived in drought conditions. Everything else had turned brown, beaten into submission by the rays of a merciless sun. Further stroking the misery index was an absence of any air movement. L.A. hadn’t had a breeze since its last balanced budget. Even the Santa Ana winds couldn’t muster up enough enthusiasm to blow tumbleweeds across desolate highways. In concert with the other uncooperative elements, the clouds—which normally served to shield the land from excessive heat—had beaten a fast retreat to the high Sierras. The solar bake was relentless and had turned car hoods into frying pans and cars into saunas. Several homicides had been reported as the result of irate drivers fighting for spaces beneath the branches of parking lot trees.

The office of my private detective agency offered little respite from the oppressive heat. I had only a room air conditioner—perched precariously on the sill of my only window, and held in place by wooden slat supports and duct tape. Added to my woes was its intermittent operation. It worked only when I gave it a whack with my shoe.

While I was dying from the heat, Quackenbush had displayed no evidence of physical discomfort. Maybe it was due to his small stature—he was about five-foot-five and one fifteen soaking wet—while I uncomfortably carried my two hundred and fifty pounds on a

five-foot-eight frame. I knew I should get started on the case, but reasoned the only antidote to the heat wave at the moment was to move my chair closer to the air conditioner and take a nap. Sleep was not easily forthcoming, however. Self-doubts began to pop into my head with increasing frequency. While I had some homicide experience under my belt, credit for the successful resolution of my previous cases was at least partially due to the assistance of others and a large measure of good fortune. While I was reluctant to get involved in a case involving a killer who dismembers people, I knew I didn't have a choice since several of my overdue accounts had been turned over to collection agencies. Right before I drifted off to sleep, my psychological commitment caught up with my contractual one and I resolved to spare no effort on Fabrice's behalf.



A client begs Chauncey McFadden, Los Angeles PI, to find his gay lover who has vanished. Although LAPD believes the victim is deceased based upon uncovered body parts, Chauncey agrees to investigate and contacts the paramour's former co-workers at a large insurance company. However, the case explodes in scope and complexity as Chauncey discovers each co-worker has also died under mysterious and violent circumstances. Chauncey must find this vicious assassin before the body count escalates.

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