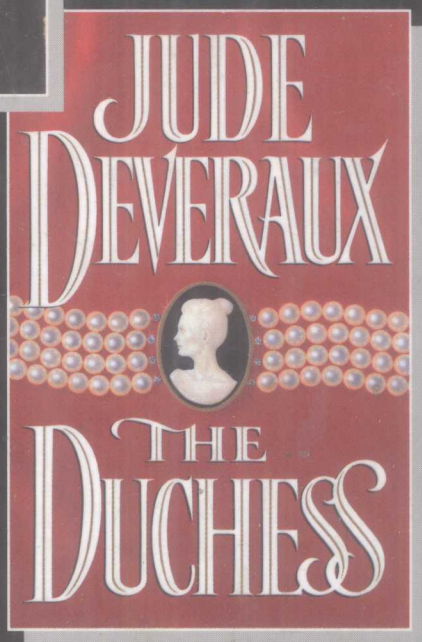
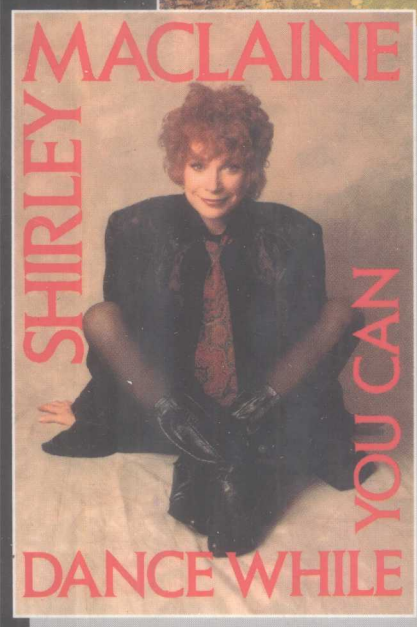
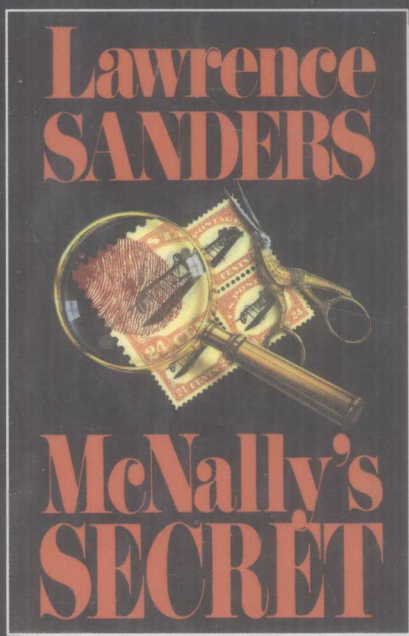
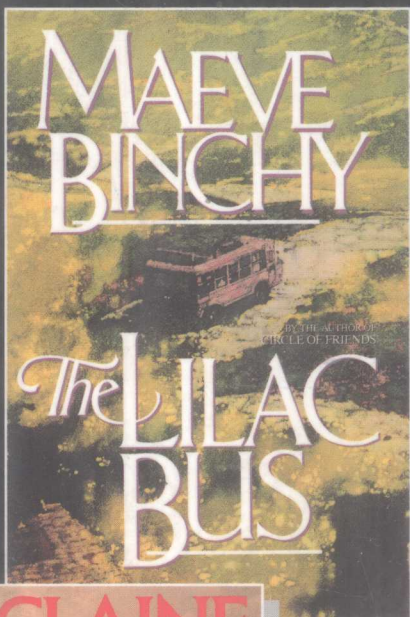


BOOK Digest



BESTSELLERS

N O N E V O L U M E



BOOK *Digest*

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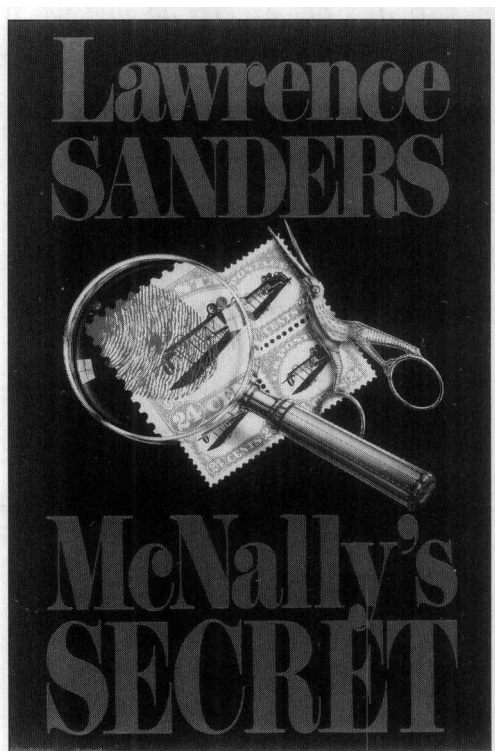
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McNALLY'S SECRET

Lawrence Sanders



*Jacket design by Ann Spinelli
Jacket illustration © Don Brautigam*

Palm Beach investigator Archy McNally has a special way with women, or at least he thinks so. It's not exactly his line when a block of famous, rare "Inverted Jenny" stamps is stolen and a murder follows. But the owner, Lady Cynthia Horowitz, is an aging beauty, and McNally's special talents unexpectedly uncover the truth about the stamps, their owner—and a lonely woman named Jennifer Towley.

*There is a price for solving this mystery:
a secret that McNally must keep, forever.*

1

I poured a few drops of an '87 Mondavi Chardonnay into her navel and leaned down to slurp it out.

Jennifer's eyes closed and she purred. "Do you like that?" she breathed.

"Of course," I said. "'87 was an excellent year."

Her eyes popped open. "Stinker," she said. "Can't you ever be serious?"

"No," I said, "I cannot."

That, at least, was the truth. In my going-on 37 years I had lived through dire warnings of nuclear catastrophe, global warming, ozone depletion, universal extinction via cholesterol, and the invasion of killer bees. After a while I realized I was bored with all these screeched predictions of Armageddon. It hadn't happened yet, had it? The old world tottered along, and I was content to totter along with it. I am an amiable, sunnily tempered chap (and something of an ass, my father would undoubtedly add), and I see no need to concern myself with disasters that may never happen.

I could have explained all this to Jennifer, but didn't. She might think I was serious about it, and I wasn't. I mean I wasn't even serious about not being serious, if you follow me.

So I took up where I had left off, and the next hour was a larky interlude of laughs and high-intensity moans. This was the first time we had bedded and, though I cannot speak for the lady, I know I was delighted; it was one of those rare sexual romps when realization exceeds expectation.

Part of my joy was due to pleased surprise. Jennifer Towley had impressed me as being a rather reserved, elegant, somewhat austere lady who dressed smartly but usually in black—and this is South Florida, where *everyone* favors pastels.

That was the clothed Jennifer. Stripped to the tawny buff, she metamorphosed into an entirely different woman. Enthusiastic. Co-operative. Acrobatic. I felt a momentary pang of how I was deceiving her. But it was momentary.

Later, a bit after midnight, I regretfully dragged myself from her warm embrace and dressed. She rose and donned an enormous white terry robe that bore the crest of a Monte Carlo hotel.

"Thank you for a super evening," I said politely.

"Wait," she said. "I have a gift for you."

I felt a perfect cad. Here I was deluding the poor girl, and she was about to give me a present. Perhaps a gold lighter or cashmere pull-over—something expensive she could ill afford.

But she brought me a packet of letters tied with a bit of ribbon. I knew immediately what they were: the reason for my duplicity.

"I believe these may be what you want," she said sternly.

I looked at her. "How long have you known?"

"I suspected you from the start," she said. "I don't ordinarily attract the attention of handsome, charming men my own age. Most of them are looking for teenaged centerfolds. And then you claimed to be a tennis pro. Your game is good, but not *that* good. So tonight, while you were in the john, I went through your wallet and discovered you are Archibald McNally, attorney-at-law."

"Not so," I said, shaking my head. "If you examine my business card closely, you'll see it says McNally and Son, Attorney-at-Law, not Attorneys-at-Law. Singular, not plural. My father, Prescott McNally, is the lawyer. I am the Son, in charge of a department called Discreet Inquiries."

"But why *aren't* you an attorney?" she persisted.

"Because I was expelled from Yale Law. During a concert by the New York Philharmonic I streaked across the stage, naked except for a Richard M. Nixon mask."

She laughed. "If you had asked for the letters I would have been happy to hand them over. The man is obviously demented. But I had no idea what your game was, and I was curious."

I sighed. "Our client, Clarence T. Frobisher, is a nice old gentleman, but not buttoned-up too tightly, as you've noticed. How did you meet him?"

"At a charity benefit. He seemed harmless enough. When I found out he was loaded, I thought of him as a potential customer for my antiques. We had a few dinners together—nothing more—and then I began to get these incredible letters. He loved me passionately,

wanted to marry me, would give me as much money as I wanted if only I would let him nibble my beautiful pink toes."

I nodded. "Mr. Frobisher has a thing for toes. This is not the first time he has written to women much younger than he offering to buy, or rent, their toes. In three other cases we have bought back his letters to prevent his being sued or exposed to publicity that would make him the giggle of Palm Beach. It is a pleasant shock to have one of his toe targets return his letters voluntarily. I thank you."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "If I hadn't given you the letters, or sold them to you, would you have stolen them?"

"Probably," I said. "Now there is one final matter to discuss."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"When may I see you again?" I asked.

Once more that cool, level gaze was aimed at me.

"I'll think about it," she said.

As I drove home in my red Mazda Miata, I whistled the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth. Or perhaps it was "Tiptoe Thru the Tulips." I wasn't sure and didn't much care.

I will not say I was smitten; my devotion to triviality as a way of life had taught me to shun strong feelings. But still, I was intrigued by Ms. Jennifer Towley. I wanted to see her again. Dine with her again. And, I confess, the thought occurred to me that Clarence T. Frobisher may have had a perfectly understandable fantasy. Forgive me.

We lived on A1A, right across the road from the Atlantic Ocean. Our manse was a three-story faux Tudor with mullioned windows and a mansard roof. We had five bedrooms, and our five acres included a two-story, three-car garage. Our houseman and cook-housekeeper, a married couple of Scandinavian origin, occupied an apartment on the upper floor. There was a small greenhouse where my mother cultivated six million varieties of begonias—or so it seemed. The entire place—the weathered buildings and ample grounds—bespoke old family and old wealth. It was all a stage set, of course, but only I knew that.

I parked the Miata between my father's black Lexus LS-400 and my mother's old wood-bodied Ford station wagon. There were no lights burning in the servants' quarters and none on the upper floors of the main house. But the portico lamp was on, and I caught slivers of light coming from between the drawn drapes of my father's first-floor study.

I went directly there. The heavy oaken door was ajar, and when I peeked in, I saw him comfortably ensconced in his favorite leather club chair, a port decanter and glass at his elbow. He was reading from a leather-bound volume, and I'd have bet it was Dickens.

He looked up when I entered. "Good evening, Archy."

"Evening, father," I said, and tossed the tied packet onto his desk. "The Frobisher letters," I explained.

"Excellent," he said. "How much did they cost?"

"The lady handed them over voluntarily. No charge."

"She is a lady," he said. "Will she accept a small gift in gratitude?"

"I suspect she will," I said. "She's a tennis nut, but her racquet looks like an old banjo. I think a new Spalding graphite would be appreciated."

He nodded. "Take care of it. You look bushed. A port?"

"Thank you, sir," I said gratefully, and poured myself a generous tot in a glass that matched his.

"Better sit down," he advised. "I have a new assignment for you, and it'll take some telling."

As I lounged in an armchair and crossed my legs, he cast a baleful look at my lavender socks but made no comment. He'd never persuade me to emulate him by wearing knee-high socks of black wool and a vested suit of gray tropical worsted.

He sat a few moments in silence, and I knew he was considering what to say and how to say it. My father *always* thinks long and carefully before speaking.

"Lady Cynthia Horowitz came to the office this evening," he said. "She wouldn't come upstairs—because of the air conditioning, you know—so I had to go downstairs and sit in that antique Rolls of hers. Roomy enough, but stifling. She made her chauffeur take a stroll while we conferred. She was quite upset. She alleges that an important part of her estate has vanished."

"Oh? Lost, strayed, or stolen?"

"She believes it was stolen. It was kept in a wall safe in her bedroom. It is no longer there."

"What exactly is it?"

"A block of four U.S. postage stamps."

"And this was an important part of her estate?"

"A similar block of four was recently auctioned at Christie's in New York for one million dollars."

I hastily took a gulp of wine. "Then I gather they're not the type of stamps one sticks on a letter to the IRS."

"Hardly. They are part of a sheet of one hundred twenty-four-cent airmail stamps issued in 1918. The stamps are red with a blue biplane framed in the center. Due to a printing error, the plane was reproduced upside down. Since the biplane pictured was popularly known

as the Jenny, the misprinted stamp is famous in philatelic circles as the Inverted Jenny. Why are you laughing?"

"The lady I dined with tonight," I said, "her name is Jennifer Towley. I suppose some people might address her as Jenny."

He raised one eyebrow—a trick I've never been able to master. "And was she inverted?" he asked. Then, apparently fearing he had posed an imprudent question, he hurriedly continued: "In any event, Lady Horowitz doesn't wish to take the problem to the police."

I stared at him. "She thinks someone in her household might have snaffled the stamps?"

"I didn't ask her. That's your job."

"Were they insured?"

"For a half-million. She has not yet filed a claim, hoping the stamps may be recovered. Since she desires no publicity whatsoever, this is obviously a task for the Discreet Inquiries Department. I suggest you begin by interviewing Lady Horowitz."

"I'm not looking forward to that meeting," I said, and finished my port. "You know what people call her, don't you? Lady Horrorwitz."

My father gave me a wintry smile. "Few of us are what we seem. If we were, what a dull world this would be."

He went back to his Dickens, and I climbed the stairs to my third-floor suite: bedroom, sitting room, dressing room, bathroom. Smallish but snug. I showered, pulled on a pongee robe, and lighted a cigarette, only my third of the past 24 hours, for which I felt suitably virtuous.

I'm a rather scatterbrained bloke, and shortly after I joined my father's law firm and was given responsibility for Discreet Inquiries, I thought it wise to start a journal. That way I wouldn't forget items that, seemingly unimportant, might later prove significant. I tried to make daily entries, but on that particular night I merely sat staring at my diary and thinking of my father's comment: "Few of us are what we seem." That was certainly true of Prescott McNally.

My father's father, Frederick McNally, was not, as many believed, a member of the British landed gentry. Instead, my grandfather had been a gapping-trousered, bulb-nosed burlesque comic, billed on the Minsky circuit as Ready Freddy McNally. He never achieved stardom, but his skill with dialects and his raunchy trademark laugh, "Ah-oo-gah," had earned him the reputation of being the funniest second banana in burley-cue.

In addition to his dexterity with pratfalls, Ready Freddy turned out to be a remarkably astute investor in real estate. During the Florida

land boom of the 1920's, he purchased beachfront property (wonderfully inexpensive in those days) and lots bordering the canal that later became the Intracoastal Waterway. By the time he retired from the world of greasepaint, he was rich enough to purchase a home in Miami and send his son, my father, off to Yale University to become a gentleman and eventually an attorney-at-law.

Shortly after Ready Freddy made his final exit, my paternal grandmother, a former showgirl, also passed from the stage. Whereupon my father sold the Miami home and moved his family to Palm Beach. He had been admitted to the Florida bar and knew exactly how he wanted to live.

The world my father envisioned—and this was years before Ralph Lauren created a fashion empire from the same dream—was one of manor homes, croquet, polo, neatly trimmed gardens, a wine cellar, lots of chintz, worn leather and brass, silver-framed photographs of family members, and cucumber sandwiches at tea.

That was the life he painstakingly created for himself and his family in Palm Beach. He was Lord of the Manor, and that made me not merely a son but a scion. (Lords of the Manor had heirs or scions.) And if I recognized my father's spurious life-style at an early age, that didn't prevent me from taking full advantage of the perks it offered.

I turned to making suitable entries in my daily journal. I made notes regarding the recovery of the Clarence T. Frobisher letters. Then I jotted down what little I had learned from my father regarding the claimed theft of the Inverted Jenny stamps from the wall safe in the bedroom of Lady Cynthia Horowitz. I scrawled a reminder to phone Horowitz and set up an early appointment.

Then, staring at my diary, I made a final note:

"Jennifer Towley!!!"

2

I OVERSLEPT and by the time I trooped downstairs my father had already left for the office and my mother was pottering about in the potting shed, which seemed logical. I learned all this from Jamie Olson, our houseman, who was seated in the kitchen smoking a pipe and working on a mug of black coffee to which he may or may not have added a dram of aquavit. He was a wrinkled codger and he and his wife, Ursi, had been with us as long as I could remember.

"Eggs?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Rye toast and coffee. I'm dieting."

He set to work in that slow, deliberate way of his. Both the Olsons were good chefs—good, not great—but neither would ever qualify for a fast-food joint.

"Jamie," I said, "do you know Kenneth Bodin? He drives for Lady Horowitz."

"I know him."

"What kind of a guy is he?"

"Big."

I sighed. Getting information from Olson isn't difficult, but it takes time.

"A few years ago there was talk that he was more than just her chauffeur. You hear anything about that?"

"Uh-huh," Jamie said. He brought my breakfast and poured himself more coffee.

His taciturnity didn't fool me; he enjoyed gossip as much as I did. Palm Beach is a gossip's paradise. It is, in fact, the Gossip Capital of the World.

"Is this Kenneth Bodin married?" I pressed on, slathering my toast with mango jelly.

"Nope."

"Girlfriend?"

"Mebbe."

"Anyone I might know?"

He slowly removed his cold pipe from his dentures and regarded me gravely. "She gives massages," he said.

"No kidding?" I said. "Well, at this moment I'm not acquainted with any masseuses. She work in West Palm Beach?"

"Did," Olson said. "Till the cops closed her down."

"And what is she doing now?"

"This and that," he said.

"Ask around, will you, and see if you can find out her name and address."

He nodded.

I finished my breakfast and went into my father's study to use his directory and phone. The old man puts covers on his telephone directories. Other people do that, of course, but most use clear plastic. My father bound his directories in genuine leather.

I looked up the number of Lady Cynthia Horowitz and dialed. Got the housekeeper, identified myself, and asked to speak to the mistress. Instead, as I knew would happen, I was shunted to Consuela Garcia. She was Lady Cynthia's social secretary and general factotum.

I knew Consuela, who had come over from Havana during the Mariel boatlift. A few years previously she and I had a mad, passionate romance that lasted all of three weeks. Then she discovered that when it comes to wedding bells I am tone-deaf, and she gave me the broom. Fair enough. But we were still friends, I thought, although now when we met at parties and dances, we shook hands instead of sharing a smooch.

"Archy," she said, "how nice to hear from you. What can I do for you?"

"An audience with Lady C. Half-hour at the most."

"What's it about?"

"Charity subscription," I said, not knowing if Horowitz had told her of the disappearance of the Inverted Jennies.

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "Everyone's been hitting on her lately to help save something or other."

"Give it a try," I urged.

She came back on the phone a few moments later. "If you can come over immediately," she said, sounding surprised, "Lady Cynthia will see you."

"Thank you, Connie," I said humbly. I can do humble.

The Miata is not a car whose door you open to enter. As with the old MG, you vault into the driver's seat as if mounting a charger. So I vaulted and headed northward on A1A.

As I drove I mentally reviewed what I knew about the woman I was about to interview.

Her full name was Lady Cynthia Kirschner Gomez Stanescu Smythe DuPey Horowitz. Around her swimming pool, in addition to Old Glory, she flew the six flags of her ex-husbands' native lands. The divorce settlements had left her a very wealthy woman indeed. She had won her title from her last husband, Leopold Horowitz, who had been knighted for a lifetime of research on the mating habits of flying beetles. Unfortunately, a year after being honored, he had fallen to his death from a very tall tree in the Amazon while trying to net a pair of the elusive critters in *flagrante delicto*.

Long before I met Lady Cynthia I had heard people speak of her as a "great beauty." But when I was finally introduced, it was difficult to conceal my shock. It would be ungentlemanly to call a woman ugly. I shall say only that I found her excessively plain. She had a long nose with a droopy tip and a narrow chin that jutted upward.

The mystery of the "great beauty" legend was solved when a national tabloid printed a sensationalized article on Lady Cynthia and

her myriad marriages. The article was, as they say, profusely illustrated, and it provided the reason for her allure.

She was blessed with a body so voluptuous that her first published nude photos made every geezer in the world snap his braces. During the 1940's and 1950's she posed for many photographers and artists. Her face was usually turned away, but her figure was as unique, universally recognized, and dearly beloved as a Coca-Cola bottle.

Now, at the age of 70-plus, she apparently retained the body that had electrified the world 50 years ago. She also retained more spleen than anyone had a right to possess. She was notorious for her temper tantrums and a long list of peeves that included cigars, dogs, men who wore pinky rings, air conditioning, and direct sunlight—which made it difficult to understand why she had decided to spend her remaining years in South Florida. But she was treasured by Palm Beach society as a genuine “character.” She held wondrous parties and galas and employed the best French chef in South Florida.

I must also add that Lady Cynthia Horowitz had never treated the McNally Family with anything less than charming civility. My mother, father, and I had dined with her several times, and she couldn't have been a more gracious hostess. You figure it out.

Her home looked like an antebellum southern plantation. The only anachronisms were the high wall of coral blocks topped with razor wire surrounding the estate and a large patio and swimming pool area at the rear of the main house.

It was to poolside that the black housekeeper conducted me. Lady C. was reclining on a chaise lounge in the shade of an umbrella table. She was swaddled in a voluminous white flannel robe, wore white socks to protect feet and ankles, long white gloves to shield wrists and hands, and a wide-brimmed panama straw hat.

There were two phones, cordless and cellular, in view. Horowitz was using the cellular and waved me to a nearby canvas director's chair while she continued her conversation.

“No, no, and no,” she was saying wrathfully. “I don't want to hear another word about it. Listen, sweetie, if I thought it was humanly possible, I'd tell you to go fuck yourself. Am I coming through loud and clear?”

She hung up and glared at me angrily. “Have you met Mercedes Blair?” she demanded.

“I don't believe I've had the pleasure,” I said.

“Believe me, lad,” she said bitterly, “it's no pleasure.”

I made sympathetic noises. Lady Cynthia finished her tirade, leaned

down to pick up a tumbler alongside her chaise. It contained what I guessed to be her first gin and bitters of the day. She took a sip and visibly relaxed. "Want a drink, lad?" she asked pleasantly.

"Not at the moment, thank you."

"You want to ask about my missing stamps. Prescott said you'd be looking into it. Ask away."

"Who knows about the disappearance of the Inverted Jennies?"

"Me, your father, you."

"You haven't told Consuela or anyone on your staff?"

She shook her head.

"In addition to Connie, you've got a butler, housekeeper, two maids, chef, and chauffeur. Right?"

"Wrong. The butler and one of the maids quit two weeks ago. Claimed they couldn't stand the summer in Florida. Idiots!"

"So that leaves a staff of five," I said. "Anyone else staying in the house?"

"My son Harry Smythe and his wife, Doris. Also my son Alan DuPey and his bride, Felice. They've only been married a month. And my daughter, Gina Stanescu. Also Angus Wolfson, an old friend. He's down from Boston for a couple of weeks. He's gay—but so what?"

"A full house," I commented. "Who knew the combination to the wall safe besides you?"

"No one. But that doesn't matter. I never locked it."

I looked at her and sighed. "I'll have that drink now, please," I said, figuring the sun had to be over the yardarm somewhere in the world.

"Of course. What?"

"Vodka and tonic will do me fine."

She used the cordless phone to order up my drink.

"Lady Cynthia," I said, "why didn't you lock your wall safe?"

"I couldn't be bothered," she said. "That stupid combination—I kept forgetting it and had to rummage through my desk to find it. Besides, I trusted people."

I didn't make the obvious reply to that. We waited in silence until the housekeeper, Mrs. Marsden, brought my drink. It had a thick slice of fresh lime—just the way I like it.

After the housekeeper departed, I said, "Isn't it possible you forgot where you put the stamps?"

She shook her head. "They weren't just in an envelope. They were between clear plastic pages in a little book about the size of a diary, bound in red leather. It's not something you'd easily mis-