

Special Investigative Reporter

By

Malcolm R. Campbell



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Author's Note

Originally published as *Jock Stewart and the Missing Sea of Fire*, this satirical novel is loosely inspired by yarns spun by veteran journalism reporters and professors when I was in grade school. The university's school of journalism was my home away from home.

In a quick definition from the days of letterpress, pied type is what you get when you're setting type by hand and drop your composing stick on the floor and scatter the letters into a real mess.

Chapter One – The Little Black Dress

JOCK STEWART WOKE up this morning with an industrial strength hangover. An empty Scotch bottle lay on the floor next to an empty little black dress that wasn't his. Last night, a fair amount of Monique Starnes wore it at the newspaper's office party. Her cleavage, more out than in, was deep enough to kidnap a man's dreams. Now, there would be hell to pay.

At first glance, he appeared to be alone in the bed. Maybe he stole the dress. Maybe he maxed out a credit card at an all-night Vera Wang shop, then came home and slung it on the floor in an ill-conceived pretense of having a life. "The second glance"—as *Star-Gazer* editor Marcus Cash always told him—"is always the beginning of trouble."

Just past the far side of the bed, Monique lay face up on the floor in a 40-year-old birthday suit so worn out no Goodwill Store would take it. She looked like a corpse. Things went too far and he hadn't bothered to conceal the murder weapon.

If more than one crime had been committed here, she was an accessory beginning with an illegal use of a little black dress—though many women contend that dresses don't seduce people, people seduce people. When it got late enough last night for everyone to pair up with nobody cared whom—or was it "who"?—she dared him to dance with her. In spite of the chronic animosity between them she danced close enough to display her breasts in an arousing light.

The world resolved into a curious mix of limbo and dream after she said, "I like a man with a cocked weapon in his trousers."

Now, the best approach to his future might be to draw a chalk outline around her before calling the police to report the accident. Chief Kruller would be pissed, not because he had any love for the newspaper's gossip columnist but because coming by the house to clean up the mess would force him to give up his space at the counter of the Main Street Krispy Kreme.

Though he wasn't being interrogated yet, Jock had to admit that Monique was a voluptuous, saucy, black-haired she-devil if there ever was one. It was her mouth and her typewriter that bothered him. No ass kicking, hard-boiled reporter he knew (including himself) could tolerate gossip columnists. They dragged the whole damn paper down to their level. While exciting in bed, that level was bad for the newspaper business.

She did have nice breasts—for a probable corpse.

Even so, newspapering didn't need columns called *Hands Under Society's Dress* with comments like: "Democracy demands that we celebrate the election process at one ball after another. Just think, in some countries, the winners aren't allowed to have any balls."

Her luscious brown eyes popped open like they were controlled by a zombified spirit who hadn't "crossed over" properly.

He jumped back in fear or what looked like fear. "Jock!"

"Monique, what have we done?"

She sat up, partially covering herself with the sheer window curtain one of his former girlfriends with a name like Bambi or Barbie hung up in the bedroom either as a civilizing influence or to allow his neighbors the dubious entertainment of watching them (Jock and whoever) having sex during blue moons.

"We did what any self-respecting man and woman do when they find themselves drunk in

bed,” she said. “Did I scream much?”

“Did I hurt you?”

“You gave me what I wanted.”

“I thought you were dead.”

“Want to take another shot at it?”

She put her hands where they didn’t belong—as an incentive. “Doesn’t either one of us need to take a leak or something?” he asked.

“Let’s do it together and be kinky.”

She stood up and stretched while running her hands through her hair in a way that made her look both wanton and innocent, an oh-God-Jock-you-caught-me-in-a-private-moment kind of way. He had seen such moments before in photography books.

“You go first,” he said.

When she flounced toward the bathroom everything shook. While she was there he got dressed. He heard the shower running, so he went out to the kitchen and made coffee and set out two cups. The mid-morning light was too bright. None of the cars out on Maple Street had mufflers. The birds were chirping like they were having hot sex in the locust tree. Air molecules careened into each other as though some asshole just lit a barrel full of cherry bombs.

“If we’d known each other then, you could have had my cherry,” Monique announced. She was wearing one of his old work shirts and Irish Spring soap.

“Back where?” he asked. He appreciated the view when she leaned over to fish her cigarettes out of her purse.

“Back anywhere,” she said, smiling when she saw where he was looking. “Where were you in those days?”

“I don’t know anymore.”

“Light me?”

He took a match out of the tin on the gas stove top and struck it on the zipper of his jeans while she leaned so close he almost dropped the match down the front of her (actually, his) shirt.

“You need to get dressed,” he said.

“Let me enjoy the moment. Act like you want me here.”

He poured the coffee, adding cream to his and sugar to hers. He knew how she liked it because they had gotten drunk before and ended up at kitchen tables before on bright Sunday mornings. If he’d known her “back then,” things still would have ended up like this. Her eyes were on him as they always were on mornings after, but she would pull away if he unbuttoned the shirt and he would pull away if she grabbed his belt buckle.

“I found a Lucinda voice mail on my cell this morning,” said Monique. “I feel so lucky.”

“Some juicy tidbit for Monday’s under the dress column?”

“Jock, don’t.”

She drew out the words and he felt rather sorry for teasing her while they were sharing their faux-vulnerable morning-after coffee.

“What’s she want?”

“She wants her horse back. Sea of Fire is missing?”

“Do you have him?”

She gave him an odd look. Then she looked down the front of the shirt.

“Nope, no naughty horsey down here.”

“Have they called the police?”

“She didn’t say. I don’t know why she called me. It’s not the kind of story I do.”

“I’ll look into it,” said Jock.

Monique sipped her coffee, frowning and thinking. Whatever she wanted, he was going to say ‘no.’ She unbuttoned the shirt and raised her hands.

“Start me out with a good frisking. Then we can go back to bed with no more questions asked. May we?”

She stood close enough for him to touch.

If he did, where would it end? How easily he could visualize the lead to her next column: “My sweets, you might well ask what Maple Street reporter found himself under my little black dress last night.”

No, she did that last time and Monique had a firm rule. She never recycled old material. “No,” he said. “I have more worries than questions.”

“What, do you think you can’t get it up again?” She pressed both hands firmly against the front of his trousers.

“No, that’s not it. So what is it?”

“I forgot to use any protection last night,” he said.

She laughed and momentarily he saw the Monique he wanted her to be 24/7. Her laugh almost made him forget where things ended up when he trusted her and so he put his hand on her ass in a possessive way and she responded more the way a lover than an overnighter responds.

“I started out with a purse full of condoms last night,” she gasped. “We had enough protection for a long, slow weekend.”

“No,” he said, “that’s not what I meant.”

She heard the change in his voice, backed away and pulled the front of the shirt together.

“Protection from me, that’s what you’re saying.”

He was surprised the whole neighborhood didn’t hear it. “You got that right.”

She grabbed the coffee cup and slung its sugary contents in his face. “You asshole. Go. Just go back to your precious job or wherever else you go when you’re like this. I know how to let myself out.”

Jock pulled a dishtowel off the rack and went out to the car. The keys were still in the ignition from last night. He sat for a while and watched the house. It looked dead. He considered drawing a chalk outline around it and calling somebody.