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Written by Donald E. Westlake

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FOREVER *and a* DEATH

by Donald E. Westlake

A HARD CASE



CRIME NOVEL

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ONE

The helicopter sped eastward under a clear blue sky, low over the Coral Sea. Its flattened footprint scudded beneath it, rolling out the slate-gray waves, then immediately gone, and the waves leaped up again.

Inside, the copter had been custom refitted with light blue industrial carpet over a plywood floor on which stood eight broad swivel chairs in two rows of four, upholstered in a darker blue vinyl. A gray bulkhead up front with a curtain in its doorway separated this main cabin from a small galley, with the pilot's compartment beyond that. On the bulkhead wall, next to the doorway, was imprinted a large symbol of an entwined RC, in dark red, looking vaguely snakelike or like an espaliered tree.

Richard Curtis, owner of the initials and the helicopter and almost everything else he could see, occupied the rear seat on the right. The other three passengers, two men and a woman, all venture capitalists with whom Curtis had had dealings in the past, were his guests, seated where he could look at them, consider them. There was too much noise inside here from engine and wind to make conversation possible, but Curtis didn't need conversation, not now. What these three knew of his business and the reason for this flight was what they needed to know, and what they didn't know was everything that mattered.

They had flown out here from Townsville, on Australia's northeast coast, into the clear morning air, crossing over the southern part of the Great Barrier Reef, past Tregosse Island and Diamond Island and the Lihou Cays, and now Curtis felt

the craft veer slightly to the right, which must mean the pilot had found the *Mallory*.

Yes, tugging gently at its sea anchor in the modest ocean swell, the yacht *Mallory*, named for Curtis's father and with the entwined RC next to the name on both sides of the bow, stood offshore from Kanowit Island, where the final preparations were underway. George Manville, the engineer, would be over there on the island; this experiment was his baby. But he'd return to the *Mallory* when he saw the chopper arrive.

The circular white landing pad was aft, above and just forward of the observation area at the fantail. The helicopter lowered slowly, delicately, toward that constantly shifting white circle, then at last gently touched it and immediately seemed to sag, as though to clutch and hold onto the moving ship.

Even before the rotor blades had stopped turning, two groups of men ran forward, crouched, converging on the copter. The four men in gray work jumpers secured the craft to guy cables fixed in the deck, while the two in white steward uniforms slid open the side door, lowered the metal stairs, and stood by to offer a helping hand.

Curtis debarked first, nodding at the stewards, needing no help. An ocean breeze ruffled his thin gray hair as he crossed the pad, and he patted it down. He looked toward Kanowit and yes, the launch was coming this way, almost invisible against the gray sea except for its white wake.

Glass doors slid automatically open as Curtis entered the lounge, where a third steward waited, smiling a greeting, saying, "Morning, Mr. Curtis. Good flight?"

Curtis never thought about journeys, only destinations. What was a good flight? One where you weren't killed? He ignored the question, saying, "Tell Manville to come see me in my cabin as soon as possible." Turning to his three guests, who had followed

him in here, he said, "The stewards will show you your cabins. You'll have time to freshen up before the show starts."

"A beautiful boat," Bill Hardy said, smiling as he looked around in honest envy. An Australian, he was both the most candid and the shrewdest of the three.

"Thank you," Curtis said, returning Hardy's smile, though not with as much candor. "I like the *Mallory*, it relaxes me." In fact nothing relaxed him.

Then he nodded to them all, and went away to his cabin, forward, just behind the bridge, where he could be alone until Manville arrived. He was consumed with so much anger, so much hatred, that he found it hard to be around other people for very long. The snarl beneath the surface kept wanting to break through.

And of course, everybody knew about it, which only made things worse. Everybody knew they'd driven Richard Curtis out of Hong Kong, those mainland bastards, once they'd taken over. Everybody knew they'd cheated him, and robbed him, and driven him out of his home, his industry, his *life*. Everybody knew Richard Curtis's great humiliation. But what nobody knew was that the game wasn't over.

Binoculars were kept in the drawer of the table by the large picture window in the parlor of his two-room cabin suite. Looking through them, Curtis saw Manville's launch almost here, and far away—brought much closer through the lenses—Kanowit Island, a round low hillock of scrub in the sea, with the rotten bent shapes of the Japanese army's barracks and sheds, nearly sixty years old, standing here and there on the island like the ghost town remnants they were.

Curtis watched the island through the binoculars. Manville's people were still at work over there, just visible, scurrying like ants, completing the preparations.

In how long—two hours?—Kanowit Island would be changed completely from what it now was, wrenched into a new existence. If Manville were right, it would change into something good and useful; if he were wrong, it would become something destroyed and irreparable. But Manville had to be right, Curtis needed him to be right.

In how long—two hours?—step one.