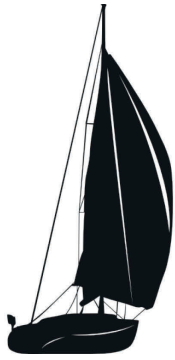
INTO THE MARROW



NOVELS BY G.W. ALLISON

AS GARY W. ALLISON

There is a Season

The Final Round

LEROY CUTTER SERIES

The Sinful

G.W. ALLISON

INTO THE MARROW



DETROIT

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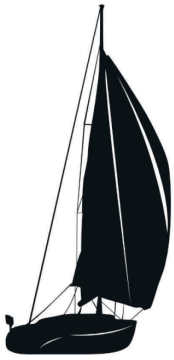
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Dedicated to Dr. Roman Elkhorn.

— Prologue —



He knew the anguish of the marrow
The ague of the skeleton;
No contact possible to flesh
Allayed the fever of the bone.

—T.S. Elliot
Whispers of Immortality

September 6th, 1622

Most ships avoided where the *Nuestra Señora de Atocha* now fought to stay afloat. In the Florida Keys, a Spanish sailor's fear was more than tumultuous waters with shallow reefs breaking up a fast, deep current. The tiny islands of the Keys were also dangerous. Whether by the elements or the natives who inhabited the islands, a shipwrecked sailor was destined to die. They called the westernmost key *Isla de Huesos*, the Island of Bones.

All of this ran through Jobah's mind as he clung to the main yard of the *Atocha*, the foreboding Spanish galleon charged with bringing home a fortune to relieve Spain's expanding debt. The ship was one of many, a convoy returning to her homeland, anointed savior of a holy nation. But they'd left Havana weeks later than planned, at the beginning of hurricane season, when the Devil's waters came calling.

Torn canvas sails whipped Jobah, the sting of each strike masked by rain beating like pebbles against exposed skin. Waves crashed against the mighty vessel, drenching her waist, tossing her about like driftwood. Jobah twisted and turned with the rolling ship, his bare feet slipping on the deck, his heart in his throat.

In addition to the vast wealth stolen from the hills of a faraway land, the *Atocha* carried some of the most important people of the Spanish Empire. None of them dared to leave the false sanctuary of the inside of the belly of the ship. Jobah's owner, a silvermaster who oversaw the king's plunder, had volunteered Jobah to assist above the weather deck, along with another African slave named Sabe. Sabe belonged to a jeweler from Havana, a man who prayed below deck for his god's mercy with the other noblemen.

The two slaves had hesitated, even considered refusing to obey their masters, but felt the sharp whip of a rod on their backs. They'd been told if they did not do as they were commanded, they would be tossed over. Trembling with fear, they'd submitted. When Jobah and Sabe had emerged from below deck, a wave separated the two slaves. Sabe had managed to make his way to the two seamen and two apprentices tasked with keeping the mighty galleon afloat. They'd all tied themselves to the mizzenmast while Jobah hugged the yard and cried out to Allah.

The *Atocha* was much bigger than the sailing ship that had brought Jobah far from his home in Africa. He'd been sold like an animal by African slavers in search of favor from white Spaniards who brought goods and weapons to trade, the very weapons used to make war with rival tribes and villages and people like Jobah. Three months he'd sailed across the sea, farther from home than he had ever been. Cramped and chained, the voyage would be the last of a life well-lived for Jobah. For two years, he'd worked in Spain's South American mines alongside Indian men, women, and children. Slaves as well, but different from Jobah. As far as he could tell, the only value of an Indian slave was their work. But for Jobah, at least he carried a price. He was a commodity. Property. The Indians were expendable because they were readily available and easy to conquer. They were overworked, starved, and died by the hundreds around Jobah. There were no Indian slaves aboard the *Atocha*. Their fate remained in the mountain mines of the new land Spain chose to rape, all for a king none of them knew.

Sabe and the other men gripped the mizzen, their desperate screams drowned out by wind, rain, and the sea. Jobah fought alone for security, for safety. He briefly let go of the main yard to hurry to the mizzenmast, but as the *Atocha* rose upon the crest of a wave, he quickly seized the yard again. He held it so tightly he thought his bones would crack from the pressure.

The foamy green sea roiled above Jobah. He stared into the darkness; lightning flashed. Jobah's eyes grew wide with horror when he saw a great fish, teeth the size of a pointed end on a spear. The beast's grey fin sliced through the tempestuous water, patiently waiting for Jobah to wash overboard. The black eye of the fish fixated on Jobah, pierced his soul, unwavering in its gaze. Jobah snapped his eyes shut as he was sure he had seen the Angel of Death.

The *Atocha* fell hard into a trough. The sea washed over Jobah, yet his grip held firm.

Lightning, once again, streaked across the sky. The thunder was so loud, Jobah's ears felt as if they'd closed, shunning the world and its agony. He cowered against the railing of the ship and looked beyond the rising waves. Other ships in the convoy were battered, broken, and listing. They rose and fell with the water, their mainmasts lost, rudders shattered. Jobah watched as a wave on her starboard side capsized the *Consolación,* the convoy's flagship. She quickly sank and vanished into the dark water. Impending doom engulfed Jobah more with each passing moment. The Angel of Death grew nearer.

The *Atocha* ascended another mountain of water as Jobah quickly clawed at the deck to move to the men fastened to the mizzen. Sabe reached out to him and Jobah took his hand. As the *Atocha's* bow pitched high with the sea, Jobah lost his footing, but Sabe held on securely and dragged Jobah to safety. The men, now equal in the eye of the storm, held tightly to each other as the malevolent wave lifted the *Atocha*, teetering the ship above the chaos of the sea. She crashed with appalling force upon an exposed reef as the men screamed in terrifying agony.

The impact snapped the ship's mainmast. Wood splintered and the deck buckled. The reef ripped open the lower bow, and the sea poured in through the opened hull. As the rising water flooded the gun deck, the *Atocha* began to sink quickly into the deep waters of the Florida Keys. Poor men, wealthy men, holy men, slaves and free men alike, all desperate, forced open the forecastle hatch and emerged into the violent waters. They grasped for safety on to anything and anyone, only to have the maelstrom wash them away into the murky deep. No one heard their screams for forgiveness. As the *Atocha* descended into the sea, Jobah and the five men tied to the mizzenmast prayed for survival, hoped for mercy, and expected death.

The galleon, a once proud vessel, surrendered to the weight of its burden. Twenty-four bronze cannons, four large anchors, copper, gold, and thirty-five tons of silver dragged the great ship down to its watery grave. Jobah and the men fought to stay above water, untying their lashes, but still holding tightly onto the mizzen. The final glimpse of the *Atocha* was the red and gold-painted

image of *Our Lady of Atocha*, set high upon the poop deck. Sabe, caught in the wash of the sinking ship, lost his grip. His scream was quickly silenced as the sea swallowed him. The water gurgled around Jobah and the remaining men, threatening to pull them away. Waves hit them with such force, they knew they wouldn't last. Jobah heard the Angel of Death call out his name. He shut his eyes and prayed Allah would make it a quick death.

For hours, Jobah held fast to the mizzen as the storm passed overhead. The seamen and their apprentices kept a holy vigil in the hope of some miracle from their god. Jobah thought of home, his wife, his children, his father, and his mother. He thought of his friends, the calm waters of the Sunu Dekh, the lazy river that flowed along the banks of his village. He thought of fishing and swimming in that same river, but he swore if he made it out of the waters of the Florida Keys, he would never wet another toe as long as he lived.

As the storm moved northwest, beyond the horizon, the afternoon sun emerged. Blazing fiercely in the sky, the sun and day carried on. Disoriented and sun-scorched, blinded by the salty sea, Jobah and the other men clung to the protruding mizzenmast of the *Atocha*. All the rest, two hundred and sixty souls total, including some of Spain's most important subjects, along with the king's treasure, and Sabe, were lost to the depths. Spain's salvation had vanished with the *Atocha*. Only sorrow and despair remained in its wake.

In the distance, a ship approached. The men cheered. Their salvation was near. They thanked the virgin mother of their god. Soon they would be home again. Soon the taste of sweet wine would be on their tongues again. Soon the hopes and ambitions of a second life would fill their hearts and minds. But Jobah remained silent. Over the shouting, the celebration of life, Jobah again heard the Angel of Death call out his name, and he knew his life would be nothing but bones.

Chapter One

For almost two days, the wind was with me, and I made good time sailing the west coast of Florida from Tampa to Key West, the Last Resort. The *Hold Fast* had lived up to her name. She was a used CAL-39 Mark II, a sailboat with a keel-stepped mast and roller-furling mainsail. And when the wind kicked hard, she cruised like she was on glass. The *Hold Fast* may have been old, but she was sturdy and quick.

I'd bought the boat on eBay for a song from some joker in New Orleans who was in the middle of a divorce. He couldn't bear the thought of his soon-to-be ex getting the boat. She was ugly—the boat, not the wife—and needed some tender loving care. But the timing was right, so I'd moved in and made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Anyway, I highly doubted his wife would've gotten the boat or anything of much value in the divorce. I'd heard the marshals seized everything he owned the day I sailed away from the Big Easy and headed for the Florida Keys. I had impeccable timing and sometimes, all the luck in the world.

So, how did a former Detroit cop get so lucky? Early retirement and a little side hustle. I had laid down the cash with the help of an insurance check for a boating accident I had with my last vessel at the Detroit Yacht Club a few months back. And by accident, I mean two assholes had decided to set my houseboat on fire with me in it. I'd made it out with just some bumps and scratches, but the boat was toast. One of the firebugs went down with the ship. The other one met an unhappy ending after I hunted him down a week later. He didn't have an easy exit.

But I had still lost my boat. And I loved that boat. I loved it for many reasons, but mainly because it was where I'd lived. I might have deserved a lot of bad juju in my life, but that boat never did anything to anyone. Just a string of bad luck, I guess. And that was what you got when you had all the luck in the world. You got the bad with the good. All of it.

Losing my boat all started with a simple missing girl case that turned out not to be so simple. Following my mutually agreed-upon early retirement from the Detroit Police Department for reasons I'd rather not get into, I got my private investigator's license. Part of my lifelong pursuit of living my later days in a perpetual state of leisure. I figured insurance scams and wayward spouses were a way to make fast cash without breaking my back. Much simpler than being a peace officer on the streets of Detroit. Although being a peace officer in the Motor City was like being a fat kid on a diet in a candy store. No matter how hard I'd tried to be a man of peace, the streets always had different plans. I was surprised I'd made fifteen years.

Happy to leave DPD for greener pastures, I'd opted for a lump-sum buyout instead of half of a problematic city pension. Take the money and run. Better to take my chances all at once than hope and pray the pension system continued to function in a struggling city. Unfortunately, as John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

I didn't want to eat up my nest egg quickly and needed a steady flow of income. But making any real money was far and few between. The missing girl case had come at a time when I was thinking about putting up body parts I could live without for sale. The case was good money, and I was broke, so as the saying goes, money talks and bullshit walks. With nothing better to do, I'd taken the case without much thought. Piece of cake.

The missing girl had been a decent payday, of which my partner and lawyer, Stan Martin, took the lion's share. He's the man in the office that keeps my affairs in order and my debts at bay. As for me, I'd gotten the bad memories of a crazy broad jabbing a knife into my chest. Perks of the man on the street. Just had the stitches removed last week. Feeling pretty good, too. Though I'm sure there was some permanent damage inside somewhere.

And I'd found the girl. But it was Detroit, not Hollywood, so there was no happy ending. Let me put it this way. I wasn't sailing to Key West because of a sudden outpouring of love from my many admirers in the Motor City. Happy endings are fairy tales and fairy tales are for dimwits and dreamers. I'm neither.

Let's just say I had to get out of the city, get as far away from everyone and everything I knew. Somewhere out there was my little slice of paradise, my happiness. And you know where you find happiness? Reunions. And that was part of the reason why I was now sailing to Key West. An old Navy buddy, Dan Yarnall, sent me a postcard a few weeks before my houseboat went down in a fiery blaze to the bottom of the Detroit River. He'd written on it, tongue firmly pressed in cheek, "Wish you were here." It was a phrase we used going back to our days in Afghanistan. It meant he needed assistance. With what, I didn't know, but that didn't matter.

I took Dan's postcard as a sign from the universe and bugged out as soon as the insurance company cut me a check. Sometimes, the stars and planets, or whatever silly superstition you've attached yourself to, align and you just have to damn the torpedoes.

Fifteen years had passed between Dan and me. Far too long and far too wide for pals to go without laying eyes on each other. Most of it had been my fault, but Dan wasn't the kind of man to hold a grudge. With him sending an SOS, there had been no question of what my next move was. So, with a new used boat and a little money in my pocket, I'd officially retired from all things laborious and surrendered myself to a life on the water. Why the hell not? Everyone needs a vacation.

Chapter Two

The waves pushed hard against the bow and the *Hold Fast* rolled with the Gulf of Mexico. It was Thursday afternoon in early September, hurricane season. The sun was high in the sky and baked anything not wet. The *Hold Fast* had a cockpit Bimini top to keep the sun off me while I stood at the helm. Normally, I prefer piloting a vessel as God made me, a benefit of being alone in the middle of a large body of water.

But today I was heading for land, so I wore a pair of Bermuda shorts and a white Stetson cowboy hat I'd won in a poker game after spending a couple of days in New Orleans. I'd played three good games in the Big Easy and come out ahead. The hat had been a bonus when my opponent couldn't cover all his bets. No skin off my teeth. So, I'd taken his hat, and it fit good, too. Besides, I had always wanted to be a cowboy.

Prior to my trip, I had forgotten how much I loved being out on the water. Technically, I'd lived on the water in Detroit, but yacht-club life on a big river is different than the spray of seawater and a rolling tide. In my short Navy career, I'd only seen the inside of one ship. An aircraft carrier, the USS *Independence*, then out of Yokohama, Japan. The *Independence* sailed the South Pacific eighteen months in two years, three months at a time. I'd been on the ship for one of those three months. I had eventually ended up in the mountains of Afghanistan where boredom and danger took their toll on me. But those three months at sea stayed with me and I looked back on them fondly. There was nothing like pulling into a port after a cruise on miles of liquid real estate. I was getting that old feeling back again as Key West grew closer.

As I lowered the mainsail the *Hold Fast* jerked and bobbed in the waves. Splashes of seawater sprayed me as I hurried along the bow. It wasn't a one-man show, but I was a picky captain. I wasn't going to let just anyone run around my vessel. Never mind I was light on friends who wanted to spend half a year

traveling from port to port in search of new experiences with me. Their loss, my gain.

Once I had the sail tied down, I went back to the cockpit and turned the key to kick the diesel engine on so I could sputter into port with ease. The engine turned and the *Hold Fast* was soon riding the waves again. It wasn't swift, but it was safe and easy, and easy is the name of the game.

The Key West City Marina looked full, but I had reserved a slip for the next two weeks. I figured that was long enough to decide my next move. Yachts, ski boats, fishing boats, and sailboats filled the slips. It was a lot of action, and the marina was tight on space. I maneuvered the *Hold Fast* alongside the main dock and tossed a line to a haggard-looking man with a body like an egg. He had pencil-thin legs with knees that wouldn't bend. He wore baggy cotton shorts pulled up past his navel, and unfortunately, he was shirtless. White hair spread from his stomach up his deflated chest, over the shoulders and down his back. A pineapple hat that had seen better days sat atop his head.

Egg Man helped tie down my vessel and I climbed up to the dock. I stood a foot taller than Egg, but most people looked up at me. Easy to do when you're six-foot-three. Egg Man was no different. He squinted cloudy and bloodshot eyes in the sunshine after he sized me up. He smelled like a damp towel left in a hot car.

"You the harbormaster?" I asked.

He coughed up some phlegm, spat into the water and said, "This here is the city marina. Harbor is on the other side of the cay. Javier runs the show here."

"You're not Javier?"

"Main buildin'." He gave me the once-over again, then said, "You new?"

"First time."

"Fort Myers?"

"Tampa, by way of New Orleans."

"In that thing?"

He made a gesture to the *Hold Fast*, and I noticed he was missing part of his right thumb. Probably a fishing accident or payment for a welched bet. He wasn't impressed with my purchase.

"She gets the job done, pops."

Egg Man grunted, then reminded me where I could find Javier. He wandered over to a speedboat pulling in full of young girls in bikinis and one lucky kid who kept a towel wrapped tight around his waist. The girls giggled at the sight of the Egg Man, but he didn't mind. He had a job to do.

I made my way up the dock and onto dry land. There was a small steel building with a mobile home next to it. The steel building had a Thai restaurant, a place to rent Jet Skis, and bathrooms. I deduced the mobile home was, no doubt, the main office. I knew this because there was a shingle hanging outside the door that told me so. I used to be a detective. I opened the door, and a blast of cold air stood me up straight. The air felt good as it cooled my chest. Someone yelled for me to shut the door.

Behind a desk was a man I figured to be Javier. Like the shingle outside the mobile home, his shirt had a name tag on it that told me so. Again, I used to be a detective. Javier was typing something into a computer, and he didn't look up at me as I stood near his desk. I was the only other person in the room. There were other rooms with doors shut, probably storerooms, not offices. How many people did a marina need? Someone out on the docks and someone in the office. That's it. No big deal. Big boss in the air-conditioning, while Egg Man humped under the sunny skies of Key West. A short but effective chain of command.

Javier was around thirty, maybe as old as thirty-five. He had dark, sunbaked skin and hair buzzed down to his scalp. He was sinewy from what seemed to be working his whole life and had big hands. Javier looked like he could handle himself if trouble called. He probably had to in this town. Key West is a beautiful island, but beneath its exterior isn't an isle of tranquility in the Caribbean. Back in the day, this place was the Wild West, filled with drug

runners, people smugglers, and weary souls with nowhere else to go. My guess was that not much had changed. Plus, anywhere Dan Yarnall lived had to have a certain level of excitement and seediness for him to call it home.

I cleared my throat to catch Javier's attention. He'd kept me waiting long enough. I was easy but could still be impatient. I had things I wanted to do and the sooner I could get to them, the better life would be.

He finished typing and said, "Leroy Cutter, right? Another five minutes and you would've been a no-show."

"Then I'm right on time."

"Fifteen minutes early is right on time. You're almost a day late." He produced some paperwork and said, "Read and sign. How are you paying?"

"Cash all right?"

"As long as it's not funny."

"Just stained with tears and disappointment."

Javier didn't even crack so much as a smile. He was a hard man all right. I verified my information on the paperwork and paid for two weeks in cash. Javier handed me a receipt that included the slip number, as well as a printout of the marina rules.

"Slip thirty-eight is along the main road here, third dock, down at the end. Good spot." He pointed out a window and I looked. "You can't miss it. There's a placard on a post that holds electrical and water. Water's free. Sewage pump is at the service dock by the ramp. Don't let me catch you dumping in the marina, or I'll beat your ass to Marathon and back, then report you to the authorities."

"Got it."

"Everything else is on that sheet I gave you. Any questions?"

"You wouldn't happen to be the concierge, too?"

Javier gave me dull eyes.

"Then I'm cool," I said.

"Ever been to Key West?"

"First time."

"Well, it's a little late in the season, but there's plenty to do around here. Don't bring any of it back to the marina."

"Like what? So, I know if I'm bringing it back or not."

"If you gotta ask then don't. Key West is a great place to get lost. Hospital is within walking distance. Anything else?"

"Can you tell me where the Oceanside Motel is?"

"You passed it coming in. Just across the bight. You not staying on your boat?"

"No, I am. Old friend of mine lives there."

I thanked Javier for his impeccable hospitality and took my receipt and rules, then stepped back out into the blazing Florida sun. The comings and goings of day cruisers, charters and tourists strolling around looking at the big boats, riding bicycles, and taking pictures of pelicans, crowded the marina. Traffic hissed along the highway and overpass nearby. Peace and quiet were scarce. Maybe everything died down when the sun set. At least, I hoped it did. I needed my beauty rest. I headed back to the *Hold Fast*.

Egg Man was ogling the bikinis and the young man was sans the towel now. The kid was aggravated with Egg but didn't have enough in him to say so. He had attitude but no experience to back it up. The kid stayed smart and kept his mouth shut. He fully knew who he was dealing with on the dock.

I gave the girls a wink and a smile to add fuel to the fire and got the stink eye from the kid. Egg Man gave me some attitude, too. Guess he thought I was moving in on his territory. I liked his optimism.

After I untied the *Hold Fast*, I started the diesel engine, then eased her around and parked her into slip thirty-eight. I was right next to a houseboat that made my last one look like a washtub. An old couple waved to me from behind tinted glass. I waved back.

I took a cold shower—a habit I picked up on my last boat after the water heater broke and I was too lazy to fix it—then changed into a cool pair of white linen Tommy Bahama shorts, a pair of brown leather sandals, and the ugliest Acapulco shirt in my seabag, pink flamingos and sailboats. With the Stetson and Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses, I was ready for an unexpected night with an old Navy buddy. Get ready, Key West, a sailor on a pale boat cometh and hell follows with him.