



*Well there is a house in New Orleans
They call The Rising Sun
And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy
And God I know I'm one*

—The Animals

CHAPTER 1

Ray Shane turned around and found a gun stuck in his face. The muzzle was a black hole the size of an ashtray. As he stared into it, he wondered where the hell it had come from.

For the last fifteen minutes he'd been working the front door of the place everyone called the House of the Rising Sun. Filling in for Walter, the regular doorman, who'd asked Ray to cover for him while he took a piss.

Ray had spent the time sucking on cigarettes. He'd already killed two of them since Walter left, watching people on the street. Halloween night in the French Quarter brought out all the freaks. Just past three o'clock in the morning, most of the tourists had reached their limit and called it a night. Mainly just college kids—too dumb to know when to quit—and hardcore drunks left.

He'd held the door open as a couple strolled into the House. The guy was in his late-50's with a trophy blonde half his age hanging on his arm. The girl had at least ten grand in jewelry dangling from her ears, neck, and wrists, but no wedding band. Just taking the mistress out for a good time.

Sick of the doorman routine, Ray slipped the two-way radio from his back pocket and called Walter. The pimply-faced kid, barely old enough to shave, didn't answer. He was probably hanging out by the stage gawking at the strippers, having a good time at Ray's expense. One more cigarette. That's how much more time Ray had decided to give Walter. Standing on the sidewalk, he lit another Camel, breathed in a lungful of smoke, then closed his eyes and rubbed a hand over his face. He was so tired he was having trouble staying awake, but in less than three hours he could go home and crash.

Standing at the door, he saw a guy pass by dressed like a hotdog, his partner—Ray couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman—covered head to toe in a foam rubber bun. Walter's time was up. Ray took one last drag then flicked the butt out into the street. He turned toward the door.

That's when he found the gun stuck in his face. The end of the barrel maybe two inches from his nose. Somewhere on the other side of the gun, a voice whispered, "Don't move, motherfucker."

Ray still had the two-way radio in his hand. He couldn't see the face behind the gun because his eyes refused to move from that big black hole. It was too big for a nine-millimeter, had to be either forty or forty-five caliber. The gun was a stainless steel semi-auto, looked like a Smith & Wesson. It wasn't the first time he'd had a gun stuck in his face, but it wasn't something you got used to with practice.

"Drop the walkie-talkie," the voice said.

Ray forced his eyes to move past the big pistol, to the white hand holding the gun. A spider web tattoo covered the back of the hand, stretching across the web to the base of the thumb.

The thumb cocked the hammer. "Drop it."

The radio slipped from Ray's hand and crashed onto the sidewalk. Something moved to his left. Out of the corner of his eye he saw someone step up to the heavy wooden front door and pull it open.

The voice behind the gun said, "Inside."

There was no face behind the gun, just a rubber mask shaped like a skull with a pair of bloodshot eyes poking out from behind two holes.

Lips and bad teeth pressed against the opening in the skull's mouth.

As the muzzle poked Ray in the forehead, the lips said, "Now."

Carefully, Ray turned toward the door, hands up next to his shoulders, his fingers spread, wanting these guys to understand that he wasn't a threat. The guy next to the door wore a gorilla mask framed with thick black fur. He carried a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. An old double barrel, cut off at the fore-end, the wooden stock chopped down to form a half-assed pistol grip that was covered with duct tape. Why the hell did they always wrap the stock with tape?

Two more assholes stood beside the skull, both wearing plastic masks, the kind with a rubber band that went around the back of the head to keep them in place. Bill Clinton and a vampire. Each of them carried a pistol in one hand and a canvas gym bag in the other. Ray stepped through the door first, the skull with the bad teeth right behind him, keeping the muzzle of his Smith jammed against the back of Ray's head. The other three trailed in. The door swung closed behind them and cut off the light from the street lamps outside.

The first floor housed the bar and strip club, the stage directly opposite the door so that people passing on the street could get a quick peek at what they were missing. From the speakers, Johnny Lang's voice sang, "Lie To Me", while a naked girl danced across the stage, hips bumping to the beat. Maybe forty people in the room, almost all men, everyone focused on the stage.

A hand on Ray's shoulder forced him to turn, then pushed him toward the stairway opening in the right hand wall. At the foot of the stairs, three feet from the end of the bar, was where Ray normally worked. He spent most of his time there, his butt on a stool, smoking cigarettes, drinking the club's cheap gin, and keeping the riff-raff from going upstairs. But the stool was empty, as it had been for the last fifteen minutes, ever since Walter went to take a leak.

The guy with the bad teeth stepped in real close behind Ray and lowered his pistol, pressing the muzzle against the base of Ray's spine. No one looked at them as they crossed the room. The stairs went up half a flight to a landing, then turned around before going up to the second floor.

Ray crept up the steps, feeling the gun in his back. When they got to the mid-floor landing, he said, "You sure you know what you're doing? You know who owns this place?"

"Shut up and walk."

"You're not the first guy's ever pulled a gun on me. I just want you to think about it. You can still walk away."

The pistol jabbed hard, making Ray wince. "I said shut up," the skull said again.

"What's he saying?" one of the others asked.

"Nothing," Bad Teeth said. "Just stick to the plan."

At the top of the stairs Ray felt a jerk on his shoulder that spun him to the right. "This way," the skull said, as he pushed Ray toward the money cage built into the back right-hand corner.

The second floor casino wasn't big, maybe five or six thousand square feet. A bar ran along the right hand wall directly above the one on the first floor. The rest of the room was taken up with gambling tables—craps, roulette, blackjack, and poker. Every table was packed, the players tossing their chips and cash around, trying to keep a hot streak alive or turn a cold one around. There was urgency in the air. In less than an hour the House was closing for the night, and so many of the losers were trying to win their money back that no one had time to look at five guys strolling toward the money cage.

Even the two drunks perched at the end of the bar didn't look up as Ray and the four masked gunmen passed behind them. On the other

side of the bar, the door to the storeroom stood open, the bartender's back visible as he bent over to pick something up.

Ray did some quick mental math. The nightly take from all three floors was usually somewhere around a hundred grand. At this time of night, almost all of it, less what was still out on the tables and at the bars, was in the counting room behind the money cage. Even the money from the whorehouse upstairs was in there, because every couple of hours someone walked the third floor take down to the counting room just to be safe.

If you had the guts—and the guys in the masks had already shown they had guts—this kind of job beat the hell out of knocking off a Seven-Eleven for forty bucks. But nobody had to die. Let them take the money and go. The last thing Ray wanted was a wild-west shootout.

"When we get there," the man whispered in Ray's ear, "tell the girl to open the door."

Ray nodded, and kept thinking, nobody has to die.

The money cage wasn't really a cage, but a chest high wooden counter with wire-mesh up to the ceiling. There were two openings in the wire, each the size of a toaster. It was through them that money passed back and forth to the players. At the end of the counter, separating it from the wall, stood a locked wire-mesh door. The girls working the money cage used it to get in and out.

In the back wall of the cage was a wooden door that led to the counting room. The door had a peephole and a deadbolt, but Ray knew it wasn't locked because the girls at the counter were always in and out carrying money.

The House wasn't fitted with the elaborate security setup found in legal casinos. The owners had their own security arrangements. It was simple, nobody had the balls to fuck with them. Only somebody forgot to tell Mr. Bad Teeth and his friends that you didn't try to take down a mob joint.

Two girls stood inside the cage, both busy cashing in chips for customers. Bad teeth shoved Ray the last couple of feet. Off balance, he stumbled forward and had to grab the counter. The nearest girl looked up at Ray. "Been celebrating?"

He shook his head. "Open up."

She finished cashing in the customer's chips, then turned toward the door. As she reached for it, she hesitated and looked at Ray, curiosity on her face. It was an unusual time for him to be there. He always stayed out of the counting room until after the House closed and all the customers were out. The girl glanced at the men with the masks, then looked back at Ray. "It's Halloween, how come you're not dressed up?"

He didn't answer.

"Party pooper," she said, as she turned the knob.

Bad teeth shoved Ray through the door. He tumbled inside, smashed into the girl and knocked her over. Startled, she screamed. Ray grabbed her to keep her from falling.

Three of the gun-totters rushed into the counting room. The one with the gorilla mask stayed in the cage. He stepped past the second girl and put his back to the wall, keeping his sawed-off pointed at Ray. The girl who'd opened the door pushed herself away from Ray. She stared at him, her face a challenge. "Aren't you going to do something?"

Ray shrugged. "Like what?"

"Stop them."

He nodded toward the gorilla with the sawed-off. "How?"

She looked at Ray for a second, then shook her head in disgust.

Turning to the gorilla, she said, "You guys are dead, you know that?"

The gorilla didn't say anything.

Ray heard shouting from inside the counting room then the sound of someone getting smacked with a pistol. A customer showed up at the cage and stuck a cupful of chips inside the opening. He seemed confused when no one moved to help him, but then he looked at the gorilla with the shotgun and backed away, raising his hands in surrender and leaving his cup of chips on the counter.

More shouting from inside, another smack. This time it sounded like someone fell to the floor. Then the skull's voice yelling, "Hurry up!"

People were starting to take notice. At least a dozen customers and several dealers had stopped what they were doing and stood staring at the cage. The gorilla's head swiveled back and forth, glancing out at the casino, then at Ray, then at the counting room door. Even though Ray couldn't see his face, he knew the guy was scared.

It seemed like an hour, but was probably only about ninety seconds; then Ray heard thudding footsteps and saw all three gunmen rush out of the counting room. The skull carried nothing but his big automatic while the other two carried their pistols and lugged the gym bags, bulging with what Ray knew had to be cash.

Bad teeth nodded toward the cage door and the other three went out, the gorilla with the sawed-off taking the lead. Ray didn't move. He

hoped they didn't need him anymore. Bad teeth dashed that hope by pointing the Smith & Wesson at him, the muzzle about two feet from Ray's face. "Move," he said, then jerked the muzzle toward the open cage door.

As Ray took a step, a hand grabbed his shirt and bent him backwards. Again, the gun against the base of his skull as Bad Teeth shoved him through the door. A lot of murmuring from the crowd. Glancing at the casino floor, Ray saw that all the gambling had stopped. Everyone just stared at the cage.

The other three stood just outside the cage door, their backs against the counter, guns aimed out as they covered the floor. The robber in the skull mask pushed Ray past the gorilla holding the shotgun and kept going, using Ray as a shield. The others fell in behind as they headed for the stairs.

Halfway down, Ray stumbled. A hard pull on the back of his shirt kept him from falling. "Slow down," the skull breathed in his ear. Ray kept thinking, nobody has to die. Just let these motherfuckers get out of here and everything will be okay.

At the bottom of the stairs, the end of the bar was just to Ray's right, the front door about thirty feet ahead and to the left. Ray glanced out across the room. It looked like no one down here had a clue what was going on. All the customers still stared at the stage, where a second girl had joined the first. The two dancers had oiled up and were rubbing their breasts together.

Ray looked at the door. Thirty feet to go and these guys would be out of here. He took a couple of steps forward with the guy in the skull mask shuffling along right behind and hanging on to him, his pistol still pressed against Ray's head.

Behind the bar, the storeroom door flew open and banged against the wall. Ray spun toward it and saw Peter Marcella step through the door carrying a bottle of champagne in one hand and two glasses in the other. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, a white apron hanging from his neck, the strings tied behind his back.

Peter nodded to Ray and took a step toward the lift gate at the end of the bar. "How you doing, Ray?" he said. Then he froze.

Peter stared at the gun behind Ray's head.

Ray spoke calmly. "It's okay, Pete, everything's—"

The bottle of champagne slipped from Pete's fingers and exploded on the floor. Ray tried to turn around but got stiff-armed. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the guy in the gorilla mask step off the stairs, saw the shotgun come up, the twin barrels pointing across the bar. He wanted to tell the guy not to worry. Pete looked like an adult. Twenty-eight years old, but he had the mind of a child. He wasn't a threat.

Ray's mind screamed, Nobody has to die! But when he opened his

mouth the roar of the shotgun cut him off. The blast hit Pete in the face, arching him back like a gymnast doing a backward somersault. He hit the floor and slid a few feet before coming to a stop. He didn't even twitch.

Screams. Some of the customers stood up, some dove to the floor. Ray glanced up at the stage. One of the dancers was bent over, looking at blood pouring out of a hole in her thigh. Something cracked against the top of Ray's head, and he dropped to his knees. Dazed, but still looking at the stage when he saw the dancer with the hole in her leg slide down onto her ass. The other girl knelt beside her and cradled her head like a lover.

Sound was muffled, but Ray heard the one in the skull mask yelling something. He got a shove in the back and fell face down on the floor. Another blast as the guy with the sawed-off let go with his second shot. From the corner of his eye, Ray saw the twin barrels aimed at the ceiling. Glass from the colored track lights hit the floor, and then there was more screaming. At least the big gun was empty.

There was a dull pop just above Ray's head. Heat seared the back of his neck as something smacked into the wooden floor next to his face. He was having trouble focusing his eyes, but was still able to see four pair of feet rush past him on their way out the door.

Although he was glad they were finally gone, all Ray could think about was how much he needed a cigarette. As he remembered the half-full pack of Camels in his shirt pocket, he slid his hand along the floor trying to reach it, but he was just too tired. Something warm dripped into his left eye.