

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"I've already been shot once," says Phoenix.

"I've been shot *three times!*" another member of the gang says, looking weirdly proud. "One motherfucker round here got shot in the nighttime. Innocent bystanders get shot here. Think about the bigger picture. You're putting your lives on the line. If you guys get killed, if you guys are in a casket, your mamas are going to be like, 'For what?'"

"Don't be a hero," another adds. "That superhero shit? This is real life! You're going to get hurt, fucking around." He pauses. "How you feed your family is not how we feed our family. For real. We're not out here just for the fun and just for the show-and-tell. This is *real life*."

I am finding myself ostentatiously nodding at everything the crack dealers are saying, I suppose in the hope that if the shooting starts they'll remember my nods and make the effort to shoot around me.

"I appreciate the info," says Phoenix.

Suddenly a gang member takes a step forward and peers at Phoenix through his mask.

"You're a *brother?*" he says. "You're a *BROTHER* and you're out here looking like *THIS?* You've got to be out of your fucking mind, man."

And then, it all changes. "I feel threatened right now," he says. "You've got ski masks on. I don't know if you're trying to rob me. A guy got shot last Friday in Belltown by somebody with a mask on. Is that you?"

"You don't have to be here," says Phoenix. "You've got choices."

"I've been in the system since I was ten years old!" the man yells. "I haven't got no choices! When your kids get older this is going to be the same shit."

"I disagree," says Phoenix.

"It can't be better!" the man yells. "This is it!" A silence. Then, "When I see ski masks I'm thinking, *Are these guys going to rob me?*" The nine men withdraw up the block to decide what to do next. "Have a good night. Good meeting you," calls Phoenix. They're watching us, murmuring to each other. Their problem is