

"You're willing to *DIE* for this shit?" They reach us. "You guys are dumb motherfuckers," he says. "I don't even know what to say. You guys are *fucking stupid*." He stares at Phoenix. But then his voice softens. "If you guys are going to stand here and die for it I guess we're going to have to walk home. We should shoot your ass, but I guess we've got to go home."

And they do. They disperse. They go home.

"You *won!*" I tell Phoenix.

I can practically hear his heart pounding.

"They had the weapons, the numbers, but they backed down to the image of Phoenix Jones," he says.

"I'm going to bed," I say.

"We'll stand here for ten minutes and solidify the corner," he replies. "You don't want to stand with us?"

"No," I say. "I definitely don't."

I jump into the taxi. And when I arrive back at the hotel my legs buckle and I almost fall onto the floor.

5:00 a.m. Phoenix telephones. He's shrieking with laughter, babbling, hyperventilating, letting out all the adrenaline.

"That was *ridiculously intense!*" he's yelling. "In a few hours I've got to be a *day-care worker!*"

It is the next afternoon. There's a comic convention in town. I spot Knight Owl and one of Phoenix's friends, Skyman.

"Ooh, look, the Rocketeer!" says Skyman. "You *never* see Rocketeer costumes! That is *priceless!* I gotta get me a photo of that! Ooh! Lady Riddler! Nice!"

Skyman approaches a Batman.

"Is that a real bulletproof outfit?" he asks him.

"No," Batman replies, a little apologetically.

"This place," I tell Knight Owl, "is full of costumed people who would never confront drug dealers in the middle of the night. You and Phoenix and Skyman exist in some shadow world between fantasy and reality."

"Yeah, man," Knight Owl replies. "What we do is *hyperreality!*"

And then there are cheers and gasps and applause. Phoenix Jones has arrived. He is a superstar here. He sees me and we hug—two