

# **THE BLUE MASK**

Mick Burke

“Sticking a needle in your arm is no way to reach a ripe old age. But hey—drugs, sex and rock and roll. That was the name of the game. We hit the golden age of rock after we got through the boy meets girl - boy gets girl thing and we came up with a walk on the wild side. Life is a party. Love anyone and everyone and have a good time. It was an anthem. Live fast and if you happened to die young at least you’d make a beautiful corpse.

“Everyone I know went through it—some still are. The music talked about it and we all jumped in. You did the drugs your favourite musicians were doing if you wanted to be cool—and who didn’t? And you slept with everyone. Free love may have started in the sixties but it grew up in the seventies and eighties.

“Yeah, well, the golden age has faded and we’re hitting the twilight of that little history lesson. Walking on the wild side doesn’t cut it. Not even with the musicians. Drugs, sex and rock and roll. Somehow that anthem doesn’t work anymore. It’s payback time.”

The interview tape had been done some time ago as part of a concerted effort by several agencies who wanted to carry the message of no drugs and safe sex to teenagers. The face of the person watching the screen was a smooth mask as the interview continued. Short, black curling hair framed the pale skin with its sharp features, thin mouth and eyes so dark they looked black. The comments carried on, muted now, a background to memory.

None of them had ever thought things would end up quite this way. The Blue Mask started out in such a spirit of fun, much like the age that was being described on the tape. Drugs had almost destroyed them but a year and a half of silence had not dulled fan support. When the band regrouped and started touring, people hadn’t forgotten. Despite haphazard gigs and uneven management, interest was fired rather than quelled. The two long years of hard work that followed culminated in an early morning phone call. Hidden tides were turning but it was like a blip on the radar screen, something seen through the wrong end of a telescope.

Then.

It turned into something quite different later.

## CHAPTER 1

Spring 1990

Alix Lane drove quickly through the late night streets on a warm spring evening, as she did after every gig they played at home. It was her safe way of coming down when the blood was still pounding through her veins, pushed by the tremendous rush of adrenaline that accompanied her through shows, even after all these years. She liked the long partying that could do the same thing but now restricted it to closing nights of extended gigs. In the early years that wearing down had led to more insidious ways of keeping up with the gruelling schedule, long runs on alcohol and speed. Cruising in a car was a much easier way to get old and, at twenty-six, she still had a way to go.

A soft rain penetrated the Vancouver night, glinting silver in the street lights and misting its way through the open window to settle gently on her hair. Eventually, she pulled into the West End – her haven – the place where the weirdos, artists, layabouts and outcasts of the mainstream made their homes in an atmosphere both secretive and tolerant. It was an old world mix of three and four story walk-ups and highrises where boarding houses sat alongside single family residences. She slid her car into a space near the Arlington Terrace, a grand, old crumbling matron where both she and Joel lived. Grabbing her leathers, she locked up and treaded the familiar path to the oak front door with the tarnished lion's head knocker on it and passed through it up to her room. Joel wouldn't be home for hours yet. The lovely lady who had been draping herself all over him like a dying swan would see to that.

Once inside she tossed her possessions on the bed, lit a cigarette and poured a glass of Scotch, adding a handful of ice from the fridge. Though both she and Joel could afford to live in more sumptuous surroundings they resisted any pressure to leave the Arlington. She loved this bohemian place. Shut the door and the world went away to be recreated in a kind of twilight. She switched off the overhead light and turned on the neon on the wall – a martini glass with an olive in it that Robin had found for her in one of the many second-hand stores around Commercial.

The elegant, airy quality that the twelve foot ceilings gave the long, large loft disappeared and became intimate, caressing. A small kitchen occupied one corner, with a bathroom tucked off to the side. At the other end her bed and desk lay in shadow; a corner closet on the far wall contained her stage clothes and the black jeans and shirts

she favoured. The central area had been left mostly empty. She dragged an armchair across the polished hardwood to one of two floor-to-ceiling windows that rose unencumbered to the rococo trim and sat quietly, drinking and smoking as she watched the desultory parade of people go by on the street below. When her body had slowed down sufficiently she would crawl into bed to recharge. It had been a long week. The level in the bottle dwindled and the ashtray was overflowing when she finally stumbled to bed.

The phone rang early the next morning. Alix groaned as she rolled over and reached for it. “Yeah?”

“Nice mood, babe. You got a hangover?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” she answered, smiling. “How you doing, Brad?”

“I’m groovin’.”

“And honouring me with a long distance call at some ungodly hour of the morning. What’s up?”

“Ever heard of a guy goes by the by the name Geoffrey Davis?”

“Yeah, he owns Dome Records. Their office has been in touch with us.”

“I know him personal. Some of my bands have signed contracts. He was in Toronto yesterday and I ran into him.”

“And?”

“He’s hot for the Mask, babe. He heard the album you did back in ancient times and he’s talking rerelease and more. He is very, very into doing something for you.”

“I know but we’ve been busy for the last while touring. So why’d he tell you this?”

He laughed. “Don’t blow up on me; I told him I was negotiating to manage you. Actually, I told him it was in the bag.”

“What, from Toronto,” she sneered in sarcastic disbelief. “Come on, Brad. We’re managing ourselves – everyone around here knows that.”

“Yeah, and making a balls-up of it. I’m flying out tonight, Alix. Can you find me a place to crash for a few days?”

“Sure but what the hell is this all about?”

“The Blue Mask got anything on for a day or four?”

“No but we’re off at the end of the week, touring south.”

“Get them together at your place tomorrow morning and I’ll do my pitch.”

“Can I see you before then?”

“Plane gets in kinda late. I’ll come to the Arlington so you can take me to my crash pad. Let me catch up on some zzz’s and I promise we’ll gab later. We on?”

“Sure. See you later.”

The line went dead.

Alix got up to brush the fur off her tongue and swallow some aspirin, her mind churning. Brad was often given to spur of the moment actions but even those were backed up by well thought-out planning. She’d met him years ago in Toronto through a mutual friend when he was a struggling manager trying to put together a stable of bands and he was a renegade even then. Long dark hair framed a squarish face with no hint of weakness and regular workouts kept his muscular body in shape. He always reminded her of a ‘he-man’ out of some old time Western and he had the attitude: male chauvinist straight through and proud of it.

She had fought tooth and nail to win his respect and be treated like an equal in those early days and out of it had come a friendship that meant a great deal to them both. Under the hip talk and cool exterior lay a razor-sharp intelligence and a manipulative cunning that had raised him in the ranks of management to hotshot status before he hit thirty. He’d gotten his stable. The bands trusted him implicitly and all did very well out of it.

She grinned. Joel was going to love him.

Despite the early hour, she took a chance and, armed with two cold beers, walked across the hall to bang loudly on his door. “Hey, asshole, you alone?”

“Yeah,” came the answering groan, “so leave me in peace.”

“No chance.” She already had the key ready and inserted it into the lock.

The singer and front-person for the band, Alix got a lot of unwanted attention, as did Joel Stark, their high profile lead guitarist. Though not the only two surviving members of the original Blue Mask – their bassist Leo Sutcliffe was still with them – they were its voice and, as the group ascended, both found new focus on themselves. The Arlington had a good security system but fans soon infiltrated and gone were the days when the two could merely waltz into one another’s rooms. Keys were exchanged and doors kept dead-bolted from groupies, well-wishers and hangers-on. This arrangement gave the pair enough freedom to write whenever the whim hit them, which was often, and at any time, which was all hours. So far it had worked well.

The large loft was dim and smelled of stale smoke and sweat. Joel was doing up the fly of a pair of tight black jeans and smiled when she handed him a beer. “You know me so well,” he said, leaning over to kiss her and tug on the short black hair.

“Especially at the end of a gig. How long did the party go on?”

“Public or private?”

“Both.”

“Most of the night. I went home with the delectable lady, did what she wanted, then split, as usual.”

She turned away with a look of disgust. “Yuk.”

Joel lit a cigarette and popped the cap on the beer, his features contorting as the first sharp taste went smoothly down his throat. “I don’t know if it feels good or hurts.” He put the bottle on the counter in the corner where a kitchen unit sat against the wall. “Let me clean up before I listen. Something awesome must be going on to get you up this early.”

He disappeared into the bathroom and Alix opened the long black curtains that shaded the windows. Spring sunshine spilled into the room, highlighting the dust motes dancing in the air.

Joel emerged a few minutes later. Although not conventionally handsome, he was arresting and it assured him of a succession of women and a never empty bed. With the added popularity of the band this had only increased. For his part he was always honest with them and made no promises. Alix remained his partner, close friend and confidant.

Clad in the usual black t-shirt and jeans, he was tall and well-built, wiry rather than muscular. His face was angular, cut sharply and reminded her of a wolf, lean and hungry-looking, full of a mischief that had a dangerous edge. His hair was a blonde sheen, combed sleekly back and, though there was intelligence in the features, there was also cruelty. It was a hard face that softened only when he grinned. Eyes of a deep sea green were bracketed by fine lines reflecting twenty-six hard earned years.

Lighting another cigarette, he picked up his beer and indicated two chairs by the long window. "Sit down and talk to me, girl."

"Remember my friend Brad?"

"The hotshot manager back east?"

"He's on his way out here and he wants to manage us. It seems he's had a chat with Dome's Mr. Davis and they want us badly."

"That shouldn't surprise you. Their office has been calling."

"But this is the man himself. I don't know any more. Brad's doing his clam imitation until he sees all of us tomorrow at my place."

"Dome's big, Alix. Shit, they're international. I thought we wanted to stay low key."

"We haven't been low key for months. We've got so much work we don't know whether we're coming or going. Besides, Brad can have all the headaches."

"We don't want to move too fast. Why spoil the fun?"

“It’s not all fun now and we might as well move a little faster in the direction we’re already headed. We’ve got a lot of material and it would sure beat having to pay for the studio ourselves.”

He reached over to smooth the frown cutting into her pale features. “‘Kay, girl, I’ll get the others there and you take care of the hotshot’s appearance. We’ll listen. If we like it, he’s in.” The lop-sided grin was pronounced. “Now, seeing as we’re up, let’s go Downtown and get beer and breakfast – in that order.”

Alix secured Brad a room at the Crossfield, a boarding establishment down the street and was waiting, key in hand, when he hammered on her door late that night.

Exhausted, he stumbled into her room begging for beer. She opened two and propelled him into an armchair by the long windows.

“Nice pad,” he said, looking about him with undisguised interest.

“Yeah, yeah. Now sit down and answer some questions or I’ll push you through the glass.”

“Let me eye you first, babe. You looking healthy.” He smacked his lips and she hit him. But she did look better. No longer skeletally thin, her body ravaged by alcohol and the lasting effects of kicking speed, she had fleshed out. Her eyes were clear and her face had lost the pinched whiteness that he remembered. He shook his head mockingly, taking in the old black jeans, turtleneck and low-heeled leather boots. “You still wearing the same threads I met you in.”

“I have a whole wardrobe of this stuff. I replace it when needed.”

“You look good, Alix; I’m glad.”

“Wish I could say the same for you.” The blue silk shirt was wrinkled from the flight and his jeans were soiled at the hem, as were the tooled cowboy boots. “You could’ve cleaned up at least.”

He laughed. “Still a charmer.”



“Come on, Brad, now that we have the fashion commentary finished, tell me what the hell’s going on.”

“Hold on, babe, I’ll come clean.” He took a long drink and when he turned to face her all the jocularity had gone out of his face. “Stuff in Toronto is running so smooth I don’t even have to be present and accounted for. I wanna change and I wanna expand and you guys need me more than you know.”

“We’re doing just fine, thanks,” she retorted. “We’re making money and we’ve got people making offers left, right and center.”

“You’re not on top of the ladder yet.”

“We’re headlining our own tours.”

He sighed and shook his head. “But you ain’t in the big league.”

“Get off your high horse.”

“Not on one. I get to hear a lot of stuff on the grapevine and I get around in places that count. In a few months, you guys managed to turn a lot of people around who wrote you off a couple years ago. So why not take the leap?”

“Into what?”

“Don’t be stupid. You need management and I need stars.”

“Stars. You’re joking.”

“You selling yourself too cheap. Man, that Davis cat likes to get around and see who’s going on his label. He takes a real personal interest and I ain’t seen him this excited in a long time. Don’t forget – I been dealing with him years. Dome ain’t EMI but you ain’t the Stones either. It’s a good label and it does fairly big bucks in the US of A as well as Europe. They got a base in Britain that’s earning, which is something in this recession. I know he’s contacted you but if you handle it wrong you could get screwed, get below your worth. You got to trust someone some time, Alix. This is my job; I’m good at it.”

“What do you get out of it?”

“My percentage.” He grinned. “And more stars on my dance card.”

“You think you can do that much for us?”

“I got a solid rep and a nose for talent and I know what to do with it. Usually I got bands asking me for help. It’s rare I offer. Ask Bear.”

“Our drummer?”

“Yeah, I know him from way back. When you picked him for Mark’s replacement you made a great choice. He’s one of the best on the circuit.”

“And you think you can push us into this league of yours?”

He winked. “Sign on with me and I’ll take you for a hell of a ride. You won’t know what hit you.”

He left shortly afterwards, pleading the need for sleep. Alix settled in her favourite armchair, gazing out at the dark, empty street. She had already decided she wanted to sign with him. Experience told her that if he was driving it would indeed be one hell of a ride and if things got a little bumpy, well, she’d been on rocky ground before and come through alive.

Little did she know just how wild that ride was going to be.

## CHAPTER 2

All were assembled the following morning. Joining Alix and Joel were Bear McNeil (given name Edgar), a thirty-something transplanted Torontonion mountain of a man with a heart to match his size plus Leo, twenty-seven, a Mick Jagger carbon copy with a frank, open face and dark, serious eyes, and Dixie Adler, at twenty-three the youngest member, a large-boned keyboardist with crimped, dark blonde hair surrounding a vixen's face dominated by merry blue eyes.

Much to Alix's surprise, the meeting went smoothly. Joel recognized a soul mate in Brad and shook hands enthusiastically. Bear hugged him so hard he almost choked and Dixie flirted outrageously before settling down to listen. Leo sat quietly absorbed as Brad outlined in detail what he had told Alix the night before.

"That's about it, hombres. My contract is pretty standard so I'll leave it with you. I'm winging back to transfer ops out here and deal with my management in Toronto. If we got a deal then it's business as usual – my way. I'm good at this and there'll be bread for all of us. Make no mistake."

"We have a lawyer we pass all our signables to," Joel said. "We'll run it by us and then him."

"You got some good habits, Durango. Between him and me and the accountant we're gonna hire to deal with your fortunes, you gonna be sitting on top of the heap."

Leo spoke up after Brad departed. "You sure he's not selling us fairy stories, Alix?"

He was a quiet reflection of the man she'd met years ago. The earlier recklessness had given way to a more guarded approach to life since their previous drummer Mark had died of drug complications. Both Joel and Alix had been heavily using drugs and he had feared they would die too, but Mark's death had shocked them all and given the two the jolt they needed to rethink their lifestyle. During that time he had also lost a few close friends to AIDS. Joel no longer made cracks about Leo's gayness and a new respect had grown between them all with the maturity that their shared experiences had wrought. Yet Alix missed the fun she and Leo used to have, missed his lightheartedness. Relations between them were gentle and sometimes tinged with sadness but he trusted her implicitly.

“He’s fine as far as I know but ask Bear. He was in the business in Toronto a long time before me.”

“Not to worry, little buddy,” Bear said enthusiastically. “If anyone can do it, Brad Easton can. I’m sure as hell glad he’s transferring out here. He’s honest and he gets results. Where his bands are concerned, he’s a shark. Dome hasn’t a chance in hell of getting us cheap. He’ll push for everything but we’ll have to work our asses off once we get it.”

For the next three days the five tossed ideas back and forth amid discussions and rehearsals in a loft they rented Downtown. Joel had gotten the nod for the contract from their lawyer and there was no hesitation as far as the band members themselves were concerned.

For his part, Brad sat in on the sessions, taping, listening carefully and taking notes as the Blue Mask ran through the song list for their tour along the southern coast of British Columbia. Already deep in negotiations, he promised to have a solid offer hammered out with Dome when they returned. Armed with past records of the band’s business, he set off.

The last night before Alix and Joel were to leave the pair arrived home to find two people on their doorstep, clamouring for attention.

David Ashley – Ash to his friends – was sleek and streamlined with a mane of fiery red hair and a face that, though hard like Joel’s, had a sculptured simplicity that he lacked. A promising painter at twenty-three, he had blown several art gallery contracts through repeated drunkenness and abuse to his wealthy, conservative clients. In the intervening years he’d managed to turn himself around, with Joel’s assistance and Robin’s maintenance, and had been making a living designing posters, CD covers and similar artwork. The Blue Mask had been his first assignment and out of it came their logo: five deep blue masks, each a stylized depiction of the members done in a slash of simple lines, over the band’s name on a stark black background. Such a rash of contracts had followed from other bands that he now had little time to paint.

Robin Coxx, a talented dancer/choreographer, had branched into videos with some of the groups Ash designed for. Tall, with long blonde hair, she had a delicate, beautifully proportioned face with high cheekbones, a full mouth and large brown eyes. Ash called her his moon goddess who danced in a dark world and, with Alix and Joel, the four

comprised a strong friendship/support group that went back years. They kept in close contact and, despite busy careers, still tried to meet regularly.

“Let us in,” Ash demanded, producing a bottle of gin. “We brought libations for the meeting.”

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Joel protested. “You know our rules on touring.”

“You’ll be on the road all day so you can sleep it off. Go soak your head; you’re getting old.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Alix said, laughing, “we get the point. Come on Joel, the sooner we let them in, the sooner they’ll go.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

The four assembled in Alix’s room and, after drinks were poured, settled in happily.

“Rumours, rumours, rumours,” Ash said slyly.

Joel opened a beer and tossed the cap at his friend. “You sound like some kind of mystic guru with a brain problem. What’s your point?”

“I think we should schedule these goddamn sessions every week so we know what’s going on in our little family. Me and Robin haven’t seen you for ages.”

“We’ve been working,” Alix said.

“Tough. I propose weekly meetings.”

“Here, here,” Robin agreed.

“All in favour raise your arms.” Ash went behind Alix and Joel and pulled both their hands skyward. “Motion passed.” He laughed and poured himself another gin.

“Kay,” Joel said, shaking his head in mock disgust, “on weeks we’re out of town we’ll arrange a conference call.”

“Seriously,” Ash said, taking his place in the circle that the four always unconsciously assumed when together, “I hear you have a new manager. Give me details.”

“You used to be able to keep a secret in this town.”

“Not when you’re friendly with the boss of the Crossfield and one manager-type friend of Alix’s, recently arrived from Toronto, gets a phone and fax installed because he has just signed a contract with the Blue Mask.”

“That’ll do it. Alix, the floor’s all yours.”

She explained the situation, eyes flashing with excitement, a smile lighting the pale features. Ash sat back thoughtfully when she’d finished. “I’ll have to find out more about this Bradley person.”

“Not for our sake.”

“No, for mine. I called this meeting because I too have news. We both do.”

Robin cleared her throat. “Mine’s typical. Videos.”

“What Little Miss Modest isn’t telling you is she’s been signed by VidWorks to do a series.”

Amid congratulations Robin got hold of him and rubbed her fist in his face. Ash brushed himself off with dignity and banged his bottle on the floor, calling for order. “Does this Bradley person do more than manage bands?”

“Brad,” Alix said pointedly, “is far too cool to be called a Bradley person to his face and if you’re prepared to risk it, I’m warning you he’ll probably rearrange your beautiful mug.”

“So I’ve heard. No chance for me there, I guess.” Ash pouted campily but a snort of disgust from Joel quickly wiped the expression off of his face. “Seriously, I need a manager or agent or someone called Friday.”

“To what, organize your social schedule,” Joel asked with a touch of sharpness. He had little tolerance for references to Ash’s lifestyle. It had long been an understanding between the two that those discussions be conducted along certain well-established lines.

“Remember the first poster I did for you for that gig at The Street?”

“Yeah,” Alix said. “I couldn’t believe the response. People stole them all out of the club. You became a star then.”

"I never would've guessed it would net me so much goddamn attention. I got half the bands on the West Coast banging on my door trying to get stuff done. I figured charging them the moon would slow things down but no luck. I'm supposed to be a fucking painter, working on my art and trying to convince the stuck-up bastards at the Western Canadian Gallery they can trust me enough to give me another showing, but I can't see them for the line-ups at the studio. I had to set me up a smart little office so I could find the time to actually work."

"It makes sense."

"It didn't to me. At least not until a couple days ago. It was paying my rent and keeping me in gin and leather, don't get me wrong, but I didn't look at it as art."

"So what happened," Joel asked.

Robin laughed and gave Ash a conspiratorial wink. He nodded sagely. "My moon goddess has been doing a bit of PR on my behalf and showed some of my stuff to a certain agent-type who went to a certain band and the whole thing brought this phone call from Scott Tyler. Name ring a bell?"

"Hades' lead singer." Hades was Dome Records' premier Canadian band. Their current album had debuted at number five on Billboard. It was a triumph for any Canadian band to enter the U.S. charts at such a high spot and the group was even more popular in Europe. Dome's English company reported that it had taken the number one spot in less than four weeks.

Ash sat back smugly. "Hades goes into the studio next week to work on their new album. Any guesses who just signed the contract to design it?"

With a whoop, Alix and Joel dived on him, hollering and cheering.

"It does look like our family stars are on the rise again," Robin said, now serious and somber as she recalled the last time their fortunes were spiralling upward. "Do you think we can hold onto ourselves this time?"

Joel shook his head sadly. "We're not young and stupid anymore, Robin. Me and Alix haven't done drugs in almost four years and Ash isn't seeing life from the bottom of a bottle. You were the most together out of all of us but even we can give you a run for your money now."

“That all only came about because Mark died. What’s left to stop us this time?” She could still see his body, sprawled across the bed, the cord from a table lamp tied around his arm and the morning light flashing silver on the syringe lying among the loose wire. Dead because they had driven him too far and he thought that trying Alix and Joel’s drug would help him understand. “Only old age, girl.” He reached over and tugged her hair. “Stop worrying, ‘kay? We won’t self-destruct.”

Alix poured Scotch into her glass and moved around the circle, refilling everyone’s glass with their particular poison. When she’d finished, she cleared her throat and raised her glass. “A toast. To Mark.”

All four acknowledged, drank and retreated into private thought. Alix, Joel and Leo had found him first, and then called Ash and Robin. Death – the ultimate kick, the one she and Joel had written about songs about, lauding it and the pursuits that could cause it. When they found Mark, they realized that it was a kick, but a cold and empty one.

“He’d be pleased, you know,” Robin said finally. “He really believed the band could get somewhere. He loved that first album, even though you thought it was too commercial.”

“I listened to it the other day. I hate to admit it, but our producer Jack’s instincts were good. I liked it.”

“Me too,” Joel agreed. “I think we were wrong to attack Apache for selling us out.” Apache, their first manager, had demanded the changes to the record.

“Only Mark thought she did the right thing and we attacked him too.”

“That’s water under the bridge, girl.”

Alix felt the familiar rush of guilt wash over her. Apache had blamed her for Mark’s death and she still felt a responsibility that she admitted to no one but herself. If she hadn’t been so savage he might never have gone near their supplier. He’d done speed for the first time in a drunken haze with some idea that it would help him understand her addiction to it. His death had dragged her out of the pit.

She pushed the ghost away and changed the subject abruptly. “So this office set up is for real? You want to consult Brad?”

“I was only joking about that. But the rest is a go. I’m hiring someone full-time. I have a feeling this Hades thing is ready to explode. I found myself a two-room space I can use as



an office/studio and got a phone, answering machine and fax. I guess I've officially gone into business."

The sheepish look on his face made her laugh. "That's one for the record books: David Ashley goes legit." She clinked her glass against his. "Here's to success. "

He inclined his head grandly. "Now, if you don't mind, me and Robin have plans to send you on tour with a massive hangover. If there's no other business or smart remarks, can we please get down to it?"

## CHAPTER 3

When the Blue Mask returned the following week Brad was pacing impatiently at Alix's door. "Can't it wait till tomorrow," she asked wearily. "I just got in and I need a hot shower and some sleep."

The short black hair hung limply around her small face, emphasizing her pallor. There were dark circles under her eyes and the smell of stale cigarette smoke and Scotch wafted like cheap perfume. "Hungover, babe," he asked casually.

Lighting a cigarette, she nodded. "And before you begin the lecture about my drinking, I don't do it much during gigs. At the end of a long run, when I have the next day off, I go on a binge and make up for lost time. It's under control."

"I got no prob with that. I know you straightened out."

"Good, then let me get some sleep."

"No go," he said smugly.

She took a long drag, watching him carefully. "Okay, spill it."

"I've been in meetings all week," he said in an offhand way, looking around as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"And?"

"They're offering a three album package that includes reworking your first disc and rereleasing it under their label. There's big bread in the works. No more touring for a while. You gonna be kind of busy in the studio."

She screamed and threw her arms around him, nearly knocking him off his feet. Her hangover and tiredness forgotten, she continued to yell, bringing Joel running from across the hall. The Blue Mask quickly assembled in due time to sign, seal and deliver the contracts.

The band was in the studio a week later.

Prep work consisted of rehearsals in the loft Downtown and early Monday all assembled in Dome's Little Arrow Studio. The session began on a sardonic note. One of Dome's best producers was slotted to work with them. Jack Elgin was also the same man Apache had

used when they recorded their first album. Alix could hear the groan he politely tried to suppress when the band was introduced.

"It's been a long time, Jack," she said, patting him on the shoulder. "No need to bring in litres of milk for your ulcer on this one. We have no pills, no needles, no booze and no attitude. Honest, we'll surprise you."

She walked away, leaving him standing with mouth agape in the middle of the room.

Brad was consulting with the other members of the band in the corner. "I'm sticking around, hombres."

"We don't need a babysitter," Dixie said brightly. "Most of us have been in a studio before and we promise not to bite the technicians."

Alix spoke up. "She's right, Brad. We are house-trained."

"I want an intro to the Ash dude you and Joel been talking about. We can do it after this session."

"Fine," Dixie agreed. "Now that we know your social schedule, can we please get some work done?"

Alix laughed as she saw Brad's spine stiffen. "See, asshole, I'm not the only one who orders you around."

He shook his head. "Some manager. I get no respect and now it's come to this: the babes think they can boss me. I thought you were supposed to eat lotus leaves for breakfast in Van, not razor blades."

"I think you'll be safer in the booth, little buddy," Bear advised.

"You got a point, Durango."

Jack came over to join them, his bald pate shining under the bright lights. His ruddy, pock-marked features had relaxed and the smile he wore was genuine. "I thought we'd go over the procedure and discuss what lines we'll take on this."

Joel reached over to tug gently on the long pony-tail that plunged down his back. "Over the shell-shock?"

“Sure as hell hope so. We’ve got work to do.”

The sound-proofed studio was cavernous, strewn with instruments, cables, headsets and microphones. Jack’s booth was upstairs, behind a glass partition. Speakers were hooked up so that he could communicate with the band through an intercom. Bear’s drum kit and Dixie’s keyboard were in the corner; technicians had already miked them and tested them for balance, as they had the guitars up front. Everyone would be separated by partitions.

They would start with the bed tapes, laying down basic drums and bass tracks. The guitars would be added, then solos, the main vocals, back-ups and any touches that were to finish the song and flesh out each track. Jack would do the mixing to balance instruments, vocals and highlights. It entailed listening to a song countless times, adjusting levels until the mix was exactly right. Jack’s reputation was well-deserved. His skill in a mix-down was what had made his name synonymous with excellence. They were lucky to have him.

Brad joined him in the sound booth and the band got started. It was a long process, without glamour, and the bedrock of any band worth its salt. Enthusiasm gave way to frustration and back as the music, solos and vocals were flubbed, redone and repeated. No one ever got it right in one take. Afterwards, Brad accompanied Joel and Alix to Ash’s studio/office where discussions took place for the new album. He was contracted to design it. Business concluded, their manager departed.

Ash whistled as the door closed and his footsteps faded down the stairs to the street. “I can see why I can’t call him the Bradley person to his face. That is one manly hunk of man.”

“Drop it,” Joel bit out. “Your hormones are showing.”

“What is your problem?”

“I’m tired, I guess. Things went good today; I just hope to hell the hassles don’t bust us.”

“Why would they?”

“After that last fiasco in the studio I decided I would never let a dream get me by the balls again.”

“Things are going to work out,” Alix said.

“Like last time? I don’t know if I’m ready for this trip. We’ve been cruising along fine without a mess of contracts, lawyers and that whole business barrel of shit.”

“This means a lot to us, Joel. We’ve been shooting for another album for a long time and we’re not going to fail. Trust Brad; he won’t let us down.”

“And what if we do? What if we let us down? Maybe we don’t have anything to say that anybody wants to hear anymore. Ever think of that?” He shook his head and abruptly left the office.

“What in the hell was that all about,” Ash asked. “He seemed so excited about finally getting a move on.”

“I’m not sure. He gets like this when things are about to happen for us. Remember that first gig at The Street? He couldn’t believe people were still into the band. He wants it to be a success real bad but he won’t admit that to anyone. The thought of failing freaks him out and he sees it as a kind of weakness. And we both know how Joel feels about weakness.”

Ash gave her a brief hug. “Keep an eye on him and let me know. Once the album’s done and out selling and you guys are touring his silly superstitions should disappear. You watch - he’ll be back breaking hearts and leaving notch marks on lucky ladies’ bed posts.”

“I know.”

“Does it ever bother you, his sleeping around?”

“Not in the way you mean. Not anymore. It did once but now he just worries me ‘cos I don’t think it’s healthy.”

“He’s protecting himself. Joel’s not stupid; he knows the facts. Hell, he saw what happened when Vince got AIDS. And now the heteros are getting infected.”

“I don’t mean that. It just seems like a pretty empty way to live.”

“You’re a good friend, Alix. He’s lucky to have you and he knows it.”

She frowned. “What brought that out?”

"I don't know. Guess I've been doing a lot of thinking about all of us lately. I used to not like you much. I couldn't see what Joel saw in you. Sure, you have talent, but you were a real pain in the ass."

"We've all changed, Ash; we had to. It was grow up time or die. You've come a long way too. We couldn't have had this conversation once. I didn't think much of you at first, either. Now maybe we should have lunch or something."

He laughed. "You got it. But I haven't lost my edge so I'm still going to bad mouth you on Johnny Carson."

"He's not on TV anymore, moron."

"I know but I've used that line for so many years I just can't give it up."

"I've got to go. This conversation is messing up my head."

Ash opened the door, his face serious again. "Thanks for the vote of approval and the design work. Don't think it's not appreciated."

"You've got a lot of talent. Don't do the modest thing; I know you too well. Soon we'll have to come crawling on our knees for your attention, the line-up will be so long."

"Get out," he said good-naturedly.

"Eat ratshit."

He watched her descend to the street door and waved, his thoughts miles away.

Alix hopped in her car and headed for the West End. She knew Joel wouldn't be home; he would go out on the prowl and burn off a little hysteria. She breezed past the Arlington and headed for Stanley Park. This and the sea wall along English Bay were her favourite places to go when she needed time to herself – good or bad. And if a part of her stood back and cocked a mental eyebrow at her nature-loving rambles, she ignored it. It was better than trying to lose her problems in a sea of drugs and alcohol.

She parked and headed on foot to the tree-shaded paths and the green silence that shadowed her steps. She made her way to the concrete pylons of Lion's Gate Bridge, settled down and lit a cigarette, watching the water lapping.

Joel was always happier in a crisis. It made him nervous when things went too well for too long.

He had tried to follow when she started her solitary wandering but found impatience in it. He preferred bright lights and lots of people. He sought the company of other musicians to bounce ideas off but his way of forgetting and winding down had been like hers in their early days. Like her, he had stopped the drugs and curbed in his alcohol intake but, unlike her, he could sit and nurse a drink. The binges they still indulged in together but for Alix, the thought of going into a bar and partying with a drink or two left her wanting more, so she found other ways to deal and water seemed to be it. She loved to sit by the ocean, watching its movement and its moods.

Never one to actively pursue sex for the sake of sex itself, she had little interest in conquering the way Joel did. The death of a man she had loved left her alone and unwilling to replace him and an earlier rape had mostly stifled her interest. Joel was another story altogether. She knew he'd be out searching for someone to take the loneliness away and distance him from whatever problems his mind had conjured up. A few hours would do.

Oh well, as Ash had said, she'd keep an eye on him. She was sure that this was just cold feet, a blip in the now smooth running of their careers. She was glad they had Brad.

Calm and serene, she got up and headed back to life.