

# LISA & THE CASTING COUCH

*By Susan Hulbert*



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

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A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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## LISA AND THE CASTING COUCH

By Susan Hulbert

“But I've always been in a band,” Janet protested. “Ever since I got my first guitar, you remember the half size one, I've been in some sort of music. When I first got on stage, it felt like I was in heaven.”

“And you've always had a real feel for the music,” Wendy replied, soothing her friend's frustration.

Janet thought back to those early days. Here was music at her touch, and it was wonderful. With the small children living around her, she organized her first group with herself on the guitar and vocals. The others were organized where she wanted them: drums, bass, backing vocals. With Janet around, they had no choice but to be organized.

“I remember you organizing me into that first kids group,” Wendy said gently, after Janet had been silent for too long.

“The groups got better as we got older, didn't they,” she said. “It was most fun when everyone was as interested in the music as I was. When we started playing in the youth clubs, then for the school dances, I thought we were really taking off.”

“We got better, that's for sure,” Wendy encouraged her now that she was talking again. “Remember the contests and the free concerts in the park?”

“We stayed together a long time, for school kids,” Janet mused.

“We really did have a good time,” Wendy laughed. “You were always in charge, though. You never let us off if you thought we weren't practicing hard enough or taking things seriously.”

“Sure I did,” Janet replied. “But the boys just wanted someone to look good out front. It was fine as long as I was their rock chick, doing what they wanted, but it was never what I wanted.”

“Why didn't you try another all girl group?” Wendy asked.

“I did, but it wasn't a success,” Janet said. “I tried, but they weren't serious. I had to struggle to get them to practice, but there were all kinds of complaints, you know, college work falling behind, dates missed. We improved, but nothing special.”

“Don't worry,” Wendy said, always the optimist of the group. “We've got that offer to make some demos.”

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It was when they were making the demonstration recordings that Janet began to see the answer to her problems. The producer's assistant was Fred, who almost ran

the studio single-handedly. He set up the microphones, arranged the track orders, did some of the mixing, and played keyboards and steel guitar like no one she had ever heard before. With this talent he could have gone anywhere, and joined lots of groups.

She soon discovered he was a great songwriter, too. In short, he was all that she needed to take the Casting Couch, her group, into the big time. They talked a lot over the three days that the recording took. The session was not to show off the Casting Couch but to demonstrate the songs which different writers had submitted to an agency.

The finished recordings would be sent around to established acts, to see if they would record them for release to the public. Each writer had ideas as to how the finished product should sound, and so the group had to be very flexible in their performances. It was Fred who saw to it that their performances matched the writers' concepts, and fitted the style of the singer to whom the song was intended.

"It's been a wonderful experience working with you," she told Fred one evening, as the last tracks were laid down. "You play so beautifully. The way you improvised around my voice on the ballads made it sound really special."

"It's easy," Fred confessed. "I just play what I hear in my head."

"I'd love for you to join the Casting Couch as a regular member," Janet offered. "We're going to be big one day, and you could have a share."

"Sure I could," he agreed. "There's just a couple of problems."

"Such as?"

"Well, number one is that I'm terrified of being on stage. I just seize up, play bum notes everywhere," he said. "I don't know what it is. I've always gone to pieces in front of an audience, even in music school, where I was expected to win all kinds of prizes. I was just too frightened. I was an embarrassment to everyone, I never won a thing."

"So you can get over stage fright now." Janet wasn't going to take a negative answer.

Fred laughed. "Even if I could, there's a fundamental problem with your offer."

"I give up, what is it?"

"You're an all girl group, remember?" he said.

"Sure, and I always intended it to stay that way, but..."

"No buts about it," Fred smiled. "It's what you always wanted. Don't change it now, the others would never forgive you."

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The sessions over, the group packed up and prepared to move on. Janet went to seek out Fred; she did not know why, but she felt unable to leave him behind. She knew his was the sound the group lacked, and that with him their songwriting would take off. For the moment they would have to do without him. They had bookings to play for the next couple of weeks, and then they would be back. Fred stood in the yard as they closed the doors of their van with all the equipment inside, and remained

standing there, waving, as they drove away. That night after the show, Janet exchanged confidences with the rest of the group.

“That was a great session today,” she said, as they listened again to the rough cuts of the recordings they had made. “I wish we could get someone like Fred to join us. It would make us much more flexible, and let us do those songs all the time.”

They racked their brains to think of anyone with similar talents. A couple of names came up, but they were quickly dismissed for being too aggressive, too fat, too domineering, or just too unpredictable as performers. They were agreed that the Casting Couch was an all girl band. If they changed that, they felt, the rot would set in, and eventually men would take over. That was not going to happen.

Janet got on the phone to Fred. “Can we do these new songs on our tour?” Janet asked. “I think they're beautiful.”

“Sure,” Fred agreed. “But remember, they're just demos at the moment. I'll try and get someone to take them and release them. I'll get you a contract if I can.”

“Thank you,” Janet said. “These songs make us sound quite good, but without you playing with us, we'd be ordinary. It's better than we've ever sounded before.”

Janet told the other girls Fred was trying to help them. After the sessions and this good news, they all felt good. The recordings had been made easily, and the new songs sounded better than they had imagined. They sat silently listening to a copy tape in their van as they drove to their next date. It was as they drove away that night, that the subject of Fred and the group was discussed again.

“Have you asked him if he'll consider playing with us?” asked Sharon.

They fell silent, all thinking about the problem. Then they all started to speak at once.

“Can we do that?” Sharon asked.

“Do we want to do it?” Wendy added.

The meeting which took place on their rehearsal day was strangely subdued. Janet, sensing that they had all given the matter more than casual thought, decided to take it with deadly seriousness rather than being light hearted. She called for silence and posed some questions to the group.

“Well,” she asked, “do you want Fred to become a member of Casting Couch?”

“Yes,” the reply came from the others. It was simple and unanimous.

“Right,” said Janet. “That's agreed. But we're girls, remember. Do you really want him to be the first non female member of the group?”

“No,” came the answer, again simple and clear.

“Well, if that's your answer, are you prepared to do whatever it takes to change him?” Janet spoke slowly, looking at each of her friends. “Are you ready to do whatever is necessary, to change him into a girl, at least in appearance, to bring him into the group?”

“Why don't we just ask him to join us?” asked Wendy. “Maybe it's what he's always wanted but wouldn't ask.”

“I've had that conversation with him already,” Janet confessed. “I don't think he's going to agree. We're just going to have to present him with a decision already made. Make him think it's his choice.”

They laughed at this, breaking the tension, but it was agreed that they would start to spend all their spare time with Fred, and gradually to take whatever opportunity they could to implement their plan. They would meet again in a week to discuss their progress.

A week passed, but no one had any clear idea of where they were going. They all agreed that they wanted to continue, but none of the girls had a plan. Janet was beginning to get something, and started to work it out, talking as she separated the steps in her head.

“There's a house for sale in the country, about an hour's drive away,” Janet told the girls. “It's quite secluded, and we can rent it until it's sold. There's plenty of space for us all to live there. No one will be able to see what we're doing. But who's going to know anyway? There's already a studio there, and it's almost as good as the one we've been using. Shall we go see it?”

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The girls got Fred out to the house by telling him they wanted to cut another demo. It was when they were planning the sessions that Janet spilled, or rather deliberately poured, a big jug of red wine over Fred. This was a signal.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” she said, reaching for a cloth to wipe his shirt.

“That's no good,” Sharon chipped in. “We'll have to wash it quickly or it'll stain.”

“But it's on my trousers as well,” moaned Fred.

“Stop staring at it and get those clothes off quickly, I'll get them in the washer,” Wendy commanded. She bundled them all up together and got them out of sight quickly.

After a few awkward minutes sitting at the table in his underwear, Fred finally spoke.

“Do you think my clothes will be ready yet?”

“Not yet,” Wendy said. “Those jeans will take a long time to dry... Why don't you stay over? There's a bed in one of the rooms we're not using.”

“I think that would be a good idea,” Janet pressed him. “After all, you've drunk a bit too much to drive all the way back tonight.”

“I don't want to stay,” he began to protest.

“Nonsense,” Janet replied. “It wasn't an invitation, it was an order. Come on, I'll show you up.”

Fred followed hesitantly. He knew he wasn't good with girls, outside of music, and wondered just where this was leading. Janet showed him into a room which was all pink and flowery. It was the most feminine room in the house, intimidating for any male. That was why they chose it for him.

"We've got this night dress for you... it's the best we could do," Janet said, handing him a soft, peach-colored, silk night dress.

"I think I'd rather sleep without anything," he said.

"Nonsense," Janet almost shouted. "I need that robe, and we can't have you wandering about naked in the middle of the night. What if you need the bathroom, you'd have to wear something then."

"All right," Fred capitulated. "I'll wear it, I still think it's far too pretty for me to borrow. Turn your back, and I'll pass you the robe."

He slipped it over his head and felt the silk float effortlessly down over his shoulders. The thin straps were weightless on his shoulders as the hem fell down below his knees. It was a delicious feeling, he thought as the silk brushed his body. It was not worth another protest, even if it was a girl's night dress; it was just for one night after all. He looked down, once more taking in the fall of the material, the contrast of the silk and the lace trims which seemed to make it fussy and delicate.

"Good night," Janet said, turning to close the door. "Don't get lost in feminine dreams."

He did not hear the door being locked behind him, and fell into bed to sleep.

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Next morning the girls were awake early. Janet was naturally appointed as their spokesman.

"What do I say when he asks for his clothes back?" she asked in vain. "We've decided he's going to get them back today, but when?"

"You should have let me put them on the remains of the barbecue last night," Alison said. "That way you wouldn't be having this conversation now."

"But we don't want to scare him off altogether," Wendy said thoughtfully. "We want to entice him into our lair, not try to clap him in irons."

While they were all in this together now, it was falling to Janet to be in charge. If that was the way the others wanted it to be, she would do it. "Look, we're not ready to try and keep him female just yet. We need time to work on him so that he accepts it naturally when the time comes."

'Look out, here's a new meaning of the word 'natural' for us all to note," Alison said sarcastically.

They heard stirrings from Fred's room about ten. Janet gathered her courage, poured a mug of black coffee, and started up the stairs. The others watched her go, saying nothing, listening as they heard her unlock and open the door to his room. She was back a few moments later.

“He'll be down in a few moments,” she announced. “I'm going to sit here at the kitchen table to talk to him when he comes down.”

“I guess I'd better check on those tapes,” Sharon said.

“I'll come with you,” Alison chipped in.

When there were noises on the stairs, the last of them, Wendy, picked up her bag and fled for the garden, leaving Janet alone to greet him. Fred walked hesitantly into the kitchen, dressed only in the night dress, with fluffy mules on his feet. He grinned sheepishly at her.

“I guess my clothes must be about dry,” he said hopefully. “Janet, I'm not a performer, I'm not able to go up on stage. I told you that, and anyway you said the Casting Couch was going to stay a girl group. How would you explain me?”

“We wouldn't— well, that is, we wouldn't have to. You'd have stage clothes just like ours.”

“Oh, I see, and I'd have a bag over my head to keep my identity secret too, would I?” Fred asked.

“No, you'd have make up and a wig, and I guarantee that you wouldn't even recognize yourself. It wouldn't be you on stage, you could pretend to be anybody else, someone who likes being on stage. I bet you could play wonderfully if you weren't so self-conscious,” said Janet. “Have you never wanted to try for yourself, if not for anyone else?”

“And what would I do for money, I rely on the studio for that. I've got some things I have to attend to as well, you know. Car payments, rent...”

“Well, you could live here for free, and still fit the studio in between. Please give it a thought, give it more than a thought, give it a try, please. We'll make sure no one recognizes you, and if it's too bad, then it's Casting Couch who get the criticism, not you. Please.” Janet pleaded.

It wasn't what she had intended to say, but she decided to be honest with Fred. He would play better if he were willing, she thought, so why not tell the truth? Fred turned as if to think about it. Janet took his hand and shook it vigorously, and then gave him back the bundle of clothes which had been washed and dried in their machine. She waited until he had gone upstairs, then called for the other girls and explained briefly what they had agreed on.

“What do we do now?” Sharon asked. “We've got some dates we can't afford to miss. There's the High School, the Country Fair, and the big fund raiser in the park. We need the exposure, but what about our newest member?”

“We'll have to let him off these dates,” Janet said. “We're nearly ready to make our move on him, we'll just have to hope that nothing goes wrong in the meantime.”

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The dates went fine and received good reviews. They traveled back happily to go in search of their quarry. The van turned into the studio complex, and the girls spotted



Fred's car in the lot. Still not knowing what sort of greeting she would get, Janet wandered through the editing suites looking for him. She eventually found him hard at work, recording with a new group sent by one of the major record labels. They were a young group, highly fashionable, but totally incompetent.

Fred saw her and waved her over. "Look, can you do me a favor?" he asked. "This lot can't play anything. Do you think the Casting Couch would come in and do a couple of sessions for me? I can dub their vocals over and at least I've earned something out of this mess."

"I'm sure I can persuade them," Janet said. "Just don't let them or their record company know, or we'll be in trouble."

"They should do," Fred sighed. "I'm exhausted, that was one of the worst groups I've ever had to work with. No wonder their big name producer sent them to me."

Seizing her advantage, Janet prepared carefully what she was going to say. "Why don't you just pack a bag and come and stay with us for a few days. The Casting Couch have been attempting to record some of your new songs, but we need you to help us fill them out. You can arrange and engineer them like nobody else. After all, they're your songs."

"We promise not to work you too hard," Wendy said, suddenly appearing in the doorway. "Think of it as a musical holiday, you do as much or as little as you want."

"Right, I will. I'm exhausted with all this, I'm going to take a break anyway, I might as well come with you. I've been wanting to finish those songs, and to record them properly. We were writing really well," replied Fred.

"I agree," Janet said. "Whatever else happens, there's some good music as a result."

"I'm sure we're on our way," Wendy said excitedly. "I can see it now, our name in lights outside some stadium or other."

"I'll just settle for the fortune bit," Alison added. "You know, if you had to choose - between fame and fortune, that is - well, I reckon you could spend fame pretty quickly, but fortune sounds like it could last."

Choosing her moment, Janet reminded Fred about the half extracted promise he had made before.

"You agreed to try out with the band," she said. "Well, we're doing so well with your songs, I think the audition will be a formality. But why don't we do it tonight. We've everything ready right now, come with me."

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"Now then," said Janet, "take a good look in the mirror, because you're going to disappear." Fred just looked at her and grinned, as if in disbelief.

Janet set to work. He was seated in a chair in front of a big mirror with lights all around it when the transformation began. Luckily he had only a thin and light set of whiskers, quite fair in color. Unlike a lot of musicians, he was fastidious, and shaved

closely and carefully each day, and sometimes in the evening as well. As she stroked his face with a moisturizer, Janet was grateful that his face was so smooth.

Carefully wiping off the excess, she took up a sponge which she dampened in a bowl of water. Squeezing out the excess, she began to apply a creamy foundation to Fred's face, smoothing it carefully into an even finish. Working carefully and quickly, she shaded this with a second, darker foundation, and applied a blusher to his cheekbones, thinning and shaping his face with a subtle use of shadowing. This done, she brushed translucent powder across the whole of his face, to fix the foundation. She paused, looking from the mirror to his face.

Fred spoke for the first time in minutes. "I never realized what a change you could make with just a little effort," he said. "I wouldn't have believed my face could look so different already."

"I've hardly started yet," laughed Janet, relieved that the tension she had been feeling was broken. "I'm going to give you the full works, get you ready to go on the stage with the Casting Couch. Then we're going to have a short rehearsal to see how you feel."

Fred nodded, turning his head from side to side to look in the mirror at the effect she had created. Janet, sensing that she had gotten him intrigued, prepared slowly for the next step. She was happy to let him watch, and allowed him to get used to the feel of the make up on his face as it built up. She wanted him to get used to the scent of the cosmetics, and to like the touch of the makeup artist as she worked upon him. The more comfortable it was, she reasoned, the more pleasurable he would find the experience.

Fred's hair was long and thick, very long for a man. Even being kind, its color could best be described as light mouse, but it had the sort of heavy texture which many women would envy. Janet looked at it carefully as she worked out her next step. She thought at first that she could leave it and arrange it in a more feminine style, but then she realized that was not enough if she wanted his identity to disappear. There would be a time to do something with his own hair later. Taking an elastic cap, she combed his hair back, out of the way, and pulled the cap over his head, capturing all the stray hair and concealing it so that it lay like a skull cap, stark and pale on his head.

"I think the skull image has been done before," Fred said. "I didn't think it was attractive even then. I hope you're not planning on using it. This is supposed to be an all girl band, remember."

"Just shut up and wait," Janet said in mock seriousness. "I can't concentrate and talk at the same time."

Janet took a palette of eye shadows and began to shape his eye lids, carefully building up the colors, darkening the shades nearer to the eye. She worked highlights up to his eyebrows, mentally making a note to do something about them next time: they were far too thick. She continually looked back and forth, from his face to its reflection in the mirror, as she worked, willing the reflection to impress Fred as she built up the effect.

She shaded a little under the eyes, and then, using a fine brush, drew a thin black line around both of his eyes, carefully adding to their emphasis. Working silently, leaving Fred to his own thoughts, she turned to the table behind her to look for the false eye lashes they had bought for him. She found them after some moments shuffling through the bags.

“I thought we'd go for the full works straight away.” Janet showed Fred the lashes in their boxes. He looked at them with interest, as if he had never seen them close up before.

“Will I still be able to see out from behind those things?” he asked. “I know I get stage fright, but making me hide behind those might not be the best cure.”

“Just wait, you'll soon be wearing them so easily, it will seem like you're naked without them. You have to keep very still whilst I do these,” she explained, lifting them from their packing. “I have to glue the edges, then I leave them a few moments for the glue to hold. It's easier to put a little glue around your eye, so that there's something for it to hold on to.”

“That hurts,” he complained.

“If you'll shut up and keep still, it wouldn't hurt at all,” Janet snapped back.

Taking the bottom lashes from the box, she applied a thin strip of glue to the base. She put them on the counter in front of Fred, and repeated the process with the top lashes. When this was completed, she took some tweezers, picked up the first of the bottom lashes and began to fit it under his right eye. This done, she repeated the process with the left eye. Fred watched as much as he could in the mirror but could not see much until she was finished. With the bottom lashes fitted, he looked wrong. But the difference was there.

“I'm disappearing,” Fred mused aloud. “When I look in the mirror, there's someone I don't recognize looking back at me.”

“That's the general idea,” Janet said softly.

She was working hard to make sure that he did disappear. Whatever the result, and this was her first attempt on his face, she was intent upon making anything that was familiar to him as different as possible. Pausing only to allow Fred to take in the changes so far, she took the top lashes, and fitted first the right one and then the left. She knew these would produce a striking effect, for they were thick lashes, quite long, and very dark. They were in complete contrast to his own rather thin and fair lashes.

She paused after the lashes were fitted, standing back to look in the mirror, to allow Fred time to absorb the changes once again. She realized that he had been silent for a long time. So had she; she had been concentrating hard as she worked.

“See what's happened? I told you that you could be someone else, quite easily. Just wait until we've finished.”

She took her time as she drew, knowing that she was stopping him from speaking. As she worked, she was figuring out how she could keep up the momentum of feminizing him through the next few hours. She had promised herself that he would be al-

lowed no going back once she got him to be female. Well, she was doing that now. The next problem was going to be keeping him there.

“Now, you can choose,” she said, “which color will go best with your make up.”

She showed him two lipsticks, and held each against his lip, carefully playing out the effect she was having. She knew which she was going to use all along, whichever he decided upon. Fortunately he indicated the right one.

Taking a thin brush, she began to work it back and forth across the tip, and then to apply it to his lips. Fred felt the gentle brushing first, then began to sense a new, unfamiliar taste as the lipstick was built up into an even coating.

Obediently, he closed his lips on a piece of tissue and saw, as Janet withdrew it, he had left an impression across the fold. Janet had not finished the lips yet, she applied a coat of something smooth and when he looked into the mirror, Fred could see an additional sheen across his newly painted lips. It was an effect for which he was not prepared, and he sat back silently, taking in all the changes in just a short space of time. He tried to think of something to say, but found his excitement making him stutter nervously. All his attention was given over to taking in the image that had transformed, replaced, his familiar features.

“I’d better go and get you something to wear,” she said, and turned to look round.

She left the room, leaving him sitting in front of the mirror, fully made up, dressed in only a robe with a hairless cap on the top of his head. Exciting as the makeup was, the image which he took in now was far from perfect; he knew there were more stages to complete. He sat silently, looking again and again at the reflection before him, not-



ing and remembering, then trying to understand the strong feelings of excitement and newness which were running through his brain.

Janet returned carrying a bundle of pale fibers. He could not make out what it was, but then he watched her shaking it out. When she held it open in front of him, he realized it was a wig.

"Hey, that's really something! I don't know if I dare let you wear this," she said. "It's full and blonde, a California blonde, fully styled." "he read from the label which had fallen on the floor, "With fashionable waves from crown to tip."

He shuddered with excitement, willing it to be fitted, but Janet did no more than hold it close to him, as if satisfying herself with the color. Then she placed it carefully out of the way. She went to the door again and called downstairs. "You guys better come up and watch this bit, or you'll never believe me," she shouted.

He heard them coming up, then Wendy, Alison, and Sharon were all in the room with him. They looked and giggled. They all chatted at once, Fred as well; they were all as excited as he was. There was no embarrassment, just pleasure at what had been achieved so far. As if by some organized signal, bags began to appear and clothes were laid out on the chairs at the rear of the room. He was almost excluded as the girls argued with each other, selecting his clothes for his first hour in a new, completely female identity.

Fred was told to stand, and the girls gathered around him. He lifted one foot, then the other, held out his arms and stepped aside as they urged him all together to do different things. He felt unfamiliar things as new clothes were fastened to him, nylon stockings unrolled over his feet and up his legs. Then he was standing once more in front of the mirror, wearing a brassiere, suspender belt, stockings and panties, all in black, contrasting with his pale skin.

The girls looked too, then Alison stepped towards him.

"Here's something we can't forget," she said and pushed two pads into his empty brassiere, filling the cups and making his shape less male than before. Sharon and Wendy held a broad belt around his waist and fastened it at the front. He felt his waist being constricted as they pulled from behind.

"Hey, that hurts," he complained.

"You should have been slimmer," Wendy replied, "then we wouldn't have to do this. You want a decent figure, don't you?"

Janet fastened a couple of gold chains around his neck, then some bracelets and a couple of rings on his fingers. To complete the outfit, she clipped some gold earrings onto his ear lobes. They looked extravagantly large against his hairless head. He felt them pinching uncomfortably, but he sat down as he was ordered without a complaint. Janet carefully placed the wig on his head and pulled it down firmly into place.

Fred found that he wanted to close his eyes as she worked on the wig, and felt the slight prickling sensation of the false eye lashes as he did so. He wanted to see this tumbling blonde hair on his head for the first time when she was finished and he was

complete. He didn't want to watch it being pushed and pulled, lopsided, then slipping away. He just wanted to see the end result.

“Why have you closed your eyes?” asked Janet, thinking that she had hurt him.

He tried a few steps forwards and felt a little more secure, then turned to look again in the mirror, to make sure the reflection had not been lying. It had not, this was real. This was Fred. He raised his hand towards his face and saw the reflection do the same. He was about to step forwards when a voice squealed.

“Sit down, sit down! We've forgotten the finger nails!”

It was Sharon. She placed a cloth under his hand on the wide arm of the chair and began to work. Fred did not watch, but continued to gaze at the incredible reflection coming back from the mirror. He felt her working on his left hand, then the right, but deliberately did not look until she was finished. When Sharon moved away he was really finished. When he next raised his hand, he saw it had changed, too. It was a purely feminine hand, with long dark finger nails, sublimely feminine, totally impractical, and undoubtedly his own.

Fred was allowed no time to settle into his new appearance. The girls surrounded him, talking excitedly, looking at his makeup, and commenting on how they would have done it differently.

“Okay, so you're all experts,” Janet said as they argued. “Let's agree we can each take a turn in making him up, then we'll see how he looks best.”

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The girls took up their positions in the rehearsal room, and the music surrounded them. They knew he was good, but they had never heard him playing so well, so magically. It was as if his new appearance had released something which had been hidden inside him. He was playing with a new confidence and dexterity. He realized what he was doing, and could not understand it either. Suddenly, notes were flying off the keys. It was so new, he could play without thinking. He knew the feminine identity had released something within him as he played. He stopped thinking and just enjoyed the music.

They let him finish, and then at once began to play their favorite of the new songs they had recorded. Together they were all affected, all able to play with more inspiration and feeling. Each knew they were on their way, and the girls were reinforced in their determination to keep their new girl in the group.

The session lasted into the evening, and then into the night. They wrote no new songs, but revised the ones they knew and added old favorites. Their new togetherness was understood, but each was afraid to mention it, afraid to break the spell. Exhilarated and satisfied, they adjourned to the kitchen for drinks and relaxation.

Janet spoke first. “That was amazing. We've already enough to play a full concert on our own, never mind our usual second string, support role. Fred, you've really changed more than your appearance. You've changed everything about our performance. You're coming with us on our next dates, I'm not giving you any choice.”

She had spoken for them all. Fred was overwhelmed by their approval. He knew he had found something within himself which he had not known was there, and that he had found new music. He wanted to be there, but still had lingering doubts about going on stage, and said so.

“No, no Fred anymore,” said Sharon. “I can't see him anywhere.”

“Who do you think this is?” asked Janet. “We have a new member of the Casting Couch with no name. We can't have a member with no name, what would the PR girl do with that when we make it big?”

“Wait,” said Wendy, waving her arms for silence. “Let's ask our new girl. She used to be Fred, but who she is now, she'll have to get a new name to go with her new identity.”

Fred answered uncertainly. “How about... Lisa?”

They talked into the night, losing track of time. No one was thinking about bed, when one yawned, and suddenly, as if it were contagious, they were all yawning, stretching, and aware of their tiredness. Janet stood, said her goodnights to the group, and asked Lisa to come with her, being careful to use her new name all the time. They went upstairs, into Janet's room, where she stripped to her under wear.

“I think I'd better go to my room,” Fred said, admiring the night dress in the mirror once more. He turned, feeling the soft material cling as he moved, then went back to his own room, to lie down and think through all that was in his mind. In truth, he knew Lisa had taken over for the night, but he had to decide if he wanted Lisa to be there tomorrow.

Janet went down quietly to speak to the other girls. Seriously, though tired, they planned their next moves.

“Lisa will stay Lisa,” Janet announced, “whatever he wants.”

All Fred's clothes had been removed as a precaution, but they did not intend that he should do anything more than notice that in passing. They had a busy schedule worked out for Lisa, and he was not going to have time to think about the past at all. While he was falling asleep, they were making sure everything was in place for Lisa's second day.

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It seemed that they had no sooner gone to bed than it was day again. They awoke to the sound of the keyboard playing from the studio. It was playing things they half recognized, then something familiar, then something completely new, all in the style of the Casting Couch but more immediate and musical than they had heard before. Janet heard it, and hurried to the studio, worried about what change she may have to contend with.

When she arrived there, she found Fred alone, the tape spooling as he played, committing it to electronic memory for later work. At a glance, she guessed that this was still Lisa, not Fred returning, for he was dressed still in the flowing nightdress. He had not changed and was sitting there happily playing. She knew they were making some

progress, but now was the important time: they had to keep him changing from male to female, and not permit any time for him to consider going back.

He was wearing no makeup and had no wig. His own hair was long, almost touching his shoulders, but it was not styled. It had just grown. Janet saw all these things and knew where her plan for the day was to go. She took up her guitar, and began to play along with him. Taking their cue from her, the other girls came into the studio and began to play, improvising where they felt he was breaking new ground, but keeping playing whatever happened. Sometimes they felt inadequate to keep up with him, other times it seemed to fit so well together.

When he slowed and sat silently at the keyboard, Janet went to him. Silently she hugged him, and the others gathered around, again taking their cue from her, and they began to hug him too. They whispered how good the music had been, calling him Lisa, over and over again. There was no mention of Fred. Fred had gone, disappeared; Lisa was with them. They went into the kitchen for coffee, and, sitting around the table, it was as five girls they spoke. Janet noted almost every word, and marveled at just how the other girls were able to fall in with the plan, and just how Lisa was emerging as a personality in her own right.

The break over, Janet decided it was time to take charge again. She had formed her plans last night, and all the others knew what was intended, but from watching in the music room, she knew that things would have to be done differently. There were priorities, she felt, which were more apparent now than they had been last night, and the most important was to change him as much as possible, and as fast as possible today, before Fred had a chance to return.

“Lisa, if you'll dress quickly, you've an appointment at the beauty parlor as soon as you can get there. Alison will help you dress, and then I'll drive you there,” Janet said. “There's no need to feel embarrassed, they've been doing new looks for groups like us for years, and I've explained it's just an experiment for you. You'll enjoy it.”

Before he had time for any questions, Lisa was being taken to the makeup room where Alison and the others fussed around him, making so much noise and conversation that he was allowed no time to voice any doubts. Within a few minutes, his face was made up simply, and his hair was braided back into an intricately woven shape. It looked so neat and complicated, but he had sat there and watched Sharon's hands flicking back and forth as she did it. It was very feminine, and he felt terribly self-conscious. He tried to say this, but deliberately the girls kept changing the subject.

Then he was ready to leave, dressed in a full denim skirt, with tan tights and matching high heeled cowboy boots. He had a paler denim shirt, worn open, with an ivory sun top underneath. As he got into the car, he wondered if he could escape, but knew as soon as Wendy got in the car with Janet and they set off, that he had no chance but to go along with them. He didn't want to escape from Lisa.

They drove through the town and turned into a small private parking lot at the rear of one of the town's most exclusive dress shops. He felt frozen in the car, unable to move.

“Oh, now come on,” urged Janet, laughing with her eyes as she saw through his discomfiture. “We talked it through last night, we've only a couple of weeks before



Casting Couch is on the road again. If we're going to give it our best shot, we've no time to waste."

Reluctantly allowing himself to be propelled forward by the girls, he entered the shop. As they were riding up in the elevator towards the beauty salon, he thought hard. Nothing like this had been discussed, he only thought he had agreed to a try out. How on earth had things changed so fast, and what could he do about it?

But then the feelings of excitement returned. If he were to be female, he would enjoy it. Last night the transformation had been fun. Today he was going to be transformed by professionals, and he wondered how much more they could do. He was excited by the prospect, but, at the same time, his confidence to go through with it was falling as he drew nearer to the shop.

They stood in the entrance to the beauty parlor for a few moments. He felt so self-conscious, he wanted to fall through the floor. He was sure that all the eyes in the place were focused on him, seeing him for what he really was and laughing. He looked down as much as possible, trying to look small and insignificant, not to attract attention from anyone. Then there were voices around him. Janet and Wendy were talking to the woman who had come to meet them. She was smiling at him and nodding as they spoke. He was too confused to take any of it in.

"We've booked the senior stylist for you," he was told as he was introduced.

He gasped as he saw her. She was a beautiful woman, with nothing natural showing. She was a living advertisement for what the salon could do, from the tips of her pale, silvery blonde hair, to her crimson toenails peeping out of gold, open-toed pumps. Normally he would have been excited just to be talking to a woman as different as this, but now he felt a little apprehensive all over again. She tried to put him at ease, but there were butterflies in his stomach as he mumbled some replies to her. In truth, he had no idea what he was saying, or if he was making sense. It didn't seem to matter, everything was happening around him anyway.

"Come and sit in my chair," he was instructed. "I'll just loosen your braid, so that I can see what we have to work with."

The woman took him to a chair in front of a big mirror at the end of the salon. She undid his braid and allowed his hair to fall loose. It was heavy as she combed it, and it fell just over his shoulders. She combed it forwards and backwards, not talking, but looking closely at his hair, then in the mirror watching it fall. He saw how it shone, for he always kept it in good condition, and saw too the dull, mousy color, which was thrown into prominence because of the bright lights all around.

"This is going to be just great," the stylist assured him. "You'll never believe how beautiful you'll be when I've finished."

Her voice was enthusiastic and encouraging. She gave him back some of the confidence that had been seeping away earlier. She took him to an area of the salon where there were sinks, and soon he found himself leaning backwards while his hair was washed. The girl washing it was just as much a beautiful creation as the stylist. He could not hear her talking because of the water, but, looking at her, he guessed that someone must have set a theme and ordered all the girls working there to follow it.

She had the same silvery blonde hair and beautiful nails, and again, nothing natural was showing about her.

He began to relax as she washed and rinsed his hair. The rhythm of her hands, massaging and stroking his head, was soothing; he felt some of his tension slipping away. After all, he told himself, he was here now. Whatever was to be done to him was being done, and it wouldn't be so bad.

When his hair was washed, the stylist returned and combed his wet hair. She looked at it again and turned and tilted his head several times. She pinned up the hair on the crown of his head, leaving the bottom pieces trailing. Then, taking some tiny scissors, began to comb, hold, and cut small sections at a time. She worked her way around his head slowly and methodically, then released some hair from his crown and started again, matching section to section, until she had released it all. As she worked, she sprayed it to prevent it from drying, so that when she was finished, it hung wet and limp around his face, and down onto the gown which covered his clothes.

“That will look absolutely fabulous when I've finished,” she said, smiling at him. “I love the Casting Couch, and I think it's really great that you're joining them. I'd hate to think they were selling out. It's being all girls that makes them so knock out.” It was as if there was a conspiracy which they were sharing.

As his hair was rinsed and toweled, she combed it back and forwards again, as if inspecting it. He was facing away from the mirror, and he could only see the bits of his wet hair as they flicked quickly in and out of his vision. Then she was combing it again and applying more thick liquid. This time she used a brush and four separate bowls, brushing the different liquids along separate sections of hair until she had worked all around his head.

He was covered with plastic again and taken back to a different drier. This time he was not left alone, but joined by another blonde girl in a white coat. While he sat under the drier, she took his hands and cleaned off his finger nails, pushing back the cuticles. When he was clean, he saw that she measured and shaped some acrylic nails. He knew what they were and felt a surge of excitement all over again. They were much longer than the ones she had removed, and he trembled at the thought of having such long nails fitted to his hands.

“Be careful,” he urged. “I have to be able to play, you know.”

“If you could play with those I took off, you'll play better with these. Just think how they'll look, dancing over the keys. They'll be inspirational, nothing less.”

Before she had time to complete these nails, the drier finished its cycle and a buzzer rang. The stylist came back and again his hair was washed and rinsed off, and some more cream, a wax conditioner, was massaged in. With a warm towel wrapped around his head, he was taken again to the drying area, but instead of sitting under one, he sat at a desk where the false nails were glued over his own. They were deep crimson, impossible to hide, and fitted perfectly. He lifted his hand to his face after she had finished, and felt the nails against his lips and teeth. They were real. They were secure, and they were now his nails.