

Foxy Lady

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

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Al stared at the board, trying to concentrate, trying not to sweat.

"This one's for the grand prize, folks!" the MC announced, in those infuriatingly jovial tones he did so well. He gestured in the general direction of the display. "Are you ready, Al?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Al replied, trying to sound as if he were having fun, rather than struggling to hold down his lunch.

Watching at home, he thought, you never saw how nervous the contestants were, or how small the studio was, or how that stupid board was knocked together out of plywood and cheap laminate.

"Then you have thirty seconds-- go!"

The central two screens lit up.

People. They were faces, two men.

"Presidents," he said, recognizing Ronald Reagan and John Kennedy. Kennedy disappeared, replaced by Marilyn Monroe. "Movie stars." Reagan vanished, replaced by Madonna. "Blondes."

"Try again," the MC called.

"Sex symbols, actresses..."

Monroe disappeared, and a new face he couldn't identify replaced her, a vaguely familiar male face with long hair and wire-rimmed glasses.

"Singers," he guessed.

Madonna was replaced by Kennedy. If he could figure this one out he'd be all the way around the circle and would win, but he couldn't figure out who the guy in the glasses was. A singer? Connected with Kennedy?

"Ten seconds," the MC said.

He'd seen the face, he knew he had. The hairstyle gave him a clue.

"The sixties," he guessed.

"Try again."

He tried to think. What was Kennedy noted for? "Uh... assassination victims?"

A bell rang and the studio audience burst into cheers.

"Congratulations, Al Roebuck!" the MC announced, coming forward to clap him on the back. "You've won the grand prize! Bill, tell Al what he's won!"

John Lennon, Al realized, that's who it was. He turned, a bit dazed.

"From the New Gene Corporation," the announcer said, as the pale blue curtains parted, "She's friendly, intelligent, and beautiful, and she's all yours! She's their top-of-the-line model, carefully cloned and hand-raised from a kit, every gene selected and tailored to make her the perfect household companion and servant. She's the New Gene Corporation's Mark Five Vixen, Salome!"

Al stared.

"Yes, made from the germ plasm of the common fox, the Mark Five Vixen is fluent in both English and Spanish, and trained to perform a wide variety of common household chores, from mopping floors to massaging backs. With a life expectancy of seventy-five years, she should last you a lifetime. She has a retail value of six hundred and fifty thousand dollars, but, Al Roebuck, she's all yours, for playing Missing Links!"

"Wow," Al said, still staring.

She was beautiful.

She was standing on a melon-colored rotating pedestal, one knee forward, one hand on her hip and the other hanging by her thigh; her pointed muzzle was raised proudly, her tail swishing gently behind her, the only part of her not held motionless. She wore only a simple red tunic that covered her from shoulder to mid-thigh, accentuating, rather than hiding, the swelling curves of bust and hip, and a black leather collar around her neck. Fine orange fur covered her legs, arms, and upper face; her hands, feet, and muzzle were white, toes and fingertips black. A white ruff and black forelock resembled a human woman's head hair.

Al hadn't expected anything like this. He'd figured they'd give away a car, or some furniture, or something, but not a gene-tailored companion!

"Isn't she something?" the MC asked, his arm around Al's shoulders. "And she's all yours!"

"Wow," Al said again, "She's beautiful."

The MC gave a phony chuckle, then turned to the studio audience and said, "Bill, what about our other players?"

"Richard, all contestants on Missing Links receive the home version of our game, and today we also have the pocket edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, compatible with any standard reader..."

Al wasn't listening; he was still staring at the fox-woman on the pedestal.

Then the red lights on the camera went out, and a gofer came to lead Al away. Still dazed, he signed half a dozen assorted releases and tax forms, and twenty minutes later found himself standing at the studio door, lost and confused.

A stagehand walked up, holding a leash; the other end of the leash was clipped to the fox-woman's collar. He held out a clipboard.

"Sign here," he said.

"What is it?" Al asked, accepted the clipboard and a pen.

"Acknowledging receipt of your prize," the stagehand explained. "If you don't want it, sign on Line 3, and we'll pay you a percentage of its cash trade-in value, instead. It'll be mailed out in about ten days."

Al looked over the form. "Where do I sign if I do want her?"

"Line 1," the man replied. He pointed.

Al signed on Line 1. The stagehand took back the clipboard, pulled out two copies of the form (one pink and one yellow), and handed them to Al.

"If you change your mind, you have ten days to call the number here and arrange for pick-up," the stagehand explained, pointing. "They'll deduct a charge for the pick-up-- see Paragraph Four? And your check will go out in about two weeks."

Al nodded, not looking.

The stagehand looked at him, glanced at the Mark Five Vixen, then shrugged and handed Al the leash. "She's all yours," he said.

She was shorter than she'd looked up on the pedestal, Al realized-- scarcely over five feet tall. That made sense, though-- foxes weren't very big animals. He looked down into her huge dark eyes.

"They said you probably wouldn't want to keep me," she said, in a throaty alto.

"They were wrong," he said. He looked down at the leash. "Uh... you sound intelligent. Do you need this thing?"

She cocked her head to one side. "I don't know," she replied. "They always said we had to have them any time we went out in public, but I don't know why, really."

"It's so you won't run away, or get into trouble," Al said.

"Why would I want to run away?" she asked.

Al had no answer for that. "Maybe we'd better leave it, for now, just in case," he said.

Holding the leash loosely, he led her out onto the sidewalk. She flinched slightly at the noise of the traffic, her pointed ears folding back somewhat, her tail wrapping about one leg. "Come on," Al said, leading her toward the corner.

The first two taxis passed them by, but the third pulled up in response to Al's frantic waving, and they

got in. The fox-woman looked over the worn upholstery and faded gum wrappers with fascination as Al gave the name of his hotel.

The driver said nothing on the way, but after seeing the size of his tip he growled, and pulled away with horn blaring and tires squealing.

A few people stared as Al led the fox-woman through the lobby to the elevators. Anthropomorphs were still new and rare, toys of the very rich, and this hotel, while respectable, was hardly a haunt of billionaires.

Giving one away on Missing Links was probably an attempt to broaden their appeal, to sell them to the merely wealthy-- prices were reportedly coming down, after all. A year ago there reportedly hadn't been more than a hundred sold; now the number was said to be over a thousand.

They had the elevator to themselves, and Al asked, "They call you Salome?"

"That's my model name," she said. "There were twenty of us in my creche. I was Number Eight."

"You didn't have a name?" Al asked, shocked.

The fox-woman cocked her head in what Al was beginning to realize was her equivalent of a shrug. "They couldn't tell us apart, half the time," she said. "After all, we were all clone-sisters."

"Can I name you, then?"

"You can do anything you like, I guess-- I'm yours, aren't I?"

"I guess so," Al agreed, "I'm having trouble believing it, that's all. I never won anything more than a Big Mac before."

"Really?"

"Really. I mean, I was on vacation here, and signing up for a game show was just a whim, you know?"

She blinked at him, batting eyelashes longer and lusher than any mere human had ever possessed.

"I'm going to call you Sally, I guess," Al said. "For Salome."

"All right. And should I call you Master? That was what they taught us to do."

He hesitated. All his childhood training, to respect others and treat everyone as equals, came back to him-- but this person, this thing, was not his equal, she was property. Legally, she was a pet, not a person.

"That's right," he said.

He had argued when the airline had insisted he buy Sally a ticket, claiming that she was cargo, and not a passenger.

They had responded by showing him their pet regulations-- pets had to be in approved carriers, and if they didn't fly in the cargo compartment and didn't fit in the overhead luggage compartment, then they needed tickets, just like passengers.

They were willing to accept the collar and leash as a carrier, but if he was going to argue...

He bought her a seat.

At least the hotel hadn't tried to charge for her. They hadn't allowed her in the restaurant-- no pets except guide dogs, the sign was right there-- but they hadn't charged anything extra beyond the higher room service prices.

He was beginning to see that keeping an anthropomorph could be an expensive proposition. She ate just as much as a human, needed a seat on airplanes-- that could add up.

Clothing was no problem, though. He had discovered as soon as they reached his hotel room that she was wearing nothing underneath the tunic, because as soon as he closed the door behind them she reached up, unclipped the leash from her collar, and pulled the tunic off over her head.

He had been rather startled by that.

She had been puzzled by his surprise.

"But I've got fur," she had said. "Why would I need clothes? I know I'm supposed to wear them out in public, since I look so much like a woman and we don't want to embarrass anyone, but why should I in private?"

He had had no answer; he simply stared. The short white fur on her belly, and the fluffy white on her breastbone that stood out a good three inches, had fascinated him. The fur was longer again between her

legs, providing a discreet cover-- she really didn't need clothes.

Except, perhaps, to cover her nipples, which were exposed and hairless.

She had tidied up the hotel room while he lay on the bed, resting and watching her. Since the maid had been in that morning, there hadn't been much tidying to be done, but she had done her best, hanging up her tunic, straightening the shirts in Al's suitcase, and so on.

She really was shaped almost exactly like a woman, Al had seen. Except for the fur, and the long bushy tail, and her head, she could have been human.

They'd done an amazing job, starting with a fox and producing her!

When she was satisfied with the room's condition she had come and sat beside him.

"What should I do now, Master?" she had asked.

He had reached up and done what he had not had the nerve to do up until then, and had stroked the fur on her arm. It was soft and sleek.

She had taken this as a cue, and had responded by stroking him back, and then unbuttoning his shirt.

He'd made a vague attempt at expressing his doubts and reservations about the propriety of this, since they were different species. He had said something about voiding the warranty, about physical compatibility, but she had swept that aside.

"Oh, they knew it would happen," she had said as she crouched over him, tail waving. "It was one of the things they designed us for, right from the start, and they trained us for it, too. They can't advertise it, of course, but I think everybody knows."

Her fingers were amazing, and he was delighted by how little her tail got in the way. The fur added a whole new element.

Even so, she made love like a woman, rather than a fox, which was just as well. Al did not care for any nipping, and was pleased to have her on top and facing him.

Of course, those pointed little teeth and the shape of her mouth did limit things somewhat, and he would want to keep her claws filed down, but all in all, it was quite an experience.

He remembered that on the flight home, and decided that she was definitely worth the extra airfare.

She settled in quickly. His apartment achieved and maintained a degree of cleanliness he hadn't believed possible; she answered the phone when he was out, and took messages flawlessly.

He was rather surprised, as he had been so often by her, when he realized she could read and write.

"It's useful," she said, "So they taught us."

The woman he had been dating, one Mandy Charpentier, dumped him because of Sally-- she didn't make a big scene, but she did call him a pervert.

"Hey, I didn't go out and buy her, I won her, on TV!" he protested.

"And you kept her, didn't you?" Mandy shot back. "Are you trying to tell me you couldn't have traded her in, or sold her somewhere?"

Al was basically a truthful person; he let Mandy go.

He worried about it, briefly-- was he a pervert? The new term that was being used by the inevitable campaigners against the immoral use of anthropomorphs was "furvert." Was he a furvert?

He eventually decided it really didn't matter whether he was or not. He dated other women, took some of them to bed-- and when they weren't there, Sally was.

His friends met Sally, marveled at her. A few were offended; a few were intrigued. For reasons he couldn't explain, he never let anyone else touch her-- except once, after a particularly wild date, when he brought the woman home and the three of them wound up in bed together. The human woman had seemed almost obsessed with Sally's fur; Sally, for her part, had been fascinated by the woman's smooth hairlessness.

That particular woman wanted nothing to do with Al after that night.

His food bills more or less doubled, which left him with less disposable income than he was used to, but he got by. He went to fewer shows, bought cheaper clothes.

He taught Sally his favorite recipes; she already knew how to cook, but her repertoire was sadly limited at first.

His electric bills went up; Sally preferred sleeping a few hours each day, and staying up most of the night reading or watching TV. He could have ordered her not to, but that seemed needlessly cruel, and the bills weren't unmanageable.

A small price to pay for having a household companion.

For having, he admitted, a slave.

There were ads on TV for anthropomorphs-- more and more of them, it seemed. There were a few dozen varieties of cat-person, there were seal-people and dog-people and pig-people. There were vixen-ladies up to Mark Six now, and fox-men to Mark Four. Bear-men, lion-men, swan-women.

Al marveled at how human the New Gene Corporation could make all those different species. He wondered why other companies didn't seem to be able to, even though NGC didn't claim to have any patents on their processes. Their nearest competition came from Polyform Biologicals, and PB's Poly-Pets were small and stupid, limited to perhaps a hundred words of vocabulary and a few simple tasks.

Sally seemed as bright as he was-- maybe, he admitted to himself, brighter. He wondered if the genetic engineers might not have overdone it.

"You know, Master," Sally said one night, as he got ready to crawl into bed after a late date, "I know I shouldn't, but sometimes I feel jealous of those women you go out with."

Al turned and looked at her.

"I know, I know," she said, "I'm just an animal, and you're a human, but I do. I won't do anything about it, of course, but I wanted to let you know-- just so, you know, if I get angry or say anything nasty, you'll understand why."

He hadn't answered; he didn't know how. Instead, he had canceled his dinner date for next Saturday, and stayed home with Sally.

He had had her almost a year when it happened.

He came home from work and let himself in; she was not waiting there to greet him. That wasn't particularly unusual; sometimes she was asleep. He hung up his jacket and turned.

She wasn't asleep. She was sitting in the living room, staring at the TV.

Her eyes were fixed on the screen with an intensity he had never seen before.

"What is it?" he asked, crossing to her.

"Shh!" she hissed, without turning.

Puzzled, surprised that she had dared to shush him, he sat down beside her on the rather battered sofa and looked at the TV. A toothpaste commercial was just ending, to be replaced by a news desk.

"Welcome to the second half of Channel 8's Eyewitness News," the anchorman said. "Recapping tonight's top story, FBI agents have arrested most of the management of the New Gene Corporation on a variety of charges, including fraud, slave-trading, and murder. Four NGC executives are reported to have attempted suicide, two of them successfully, while others are still at large. Authorities say that genetic testing has demonstrated that the so-called anthropomorphic pets marketed by NGC are, in fact, human-derived, rather than animal-derived as the company claimed, and that under present law, all such anthropomorphs are human beings, free citizens, entitled to the full protection of the law..."

It was Al's turn to stare in shock at the TV, while Sally slowly turned to stare at him.

When the news switched to something about central Africa, Al looked at Sally.

"I didn't know," he said. "I swear I didn't know!"

"Neither did I," she replied. She hesitated. "So if I'm human-- do all humans feel like this? Confused and unsure all the time, and trying to hide it by working at little things, to distract themselves from the big ones?"

"Probably," Al said. "I do."

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"I can't keep you," Al said. "I mean, I'd be glad if you stayed, but I can't make you, I can't tell you what to do. They said something about a settlement..."

Sally nodded. "We're all going to collect damages-- they're liquidating NGC and parceling it all out. If there's enough, they might pay back some of what the owners paid. You could..."

"There won't be enough. There can't possibly be enough to cover what they must owe all of you!"

Sally blinked.

"Besides, I didn't pay anything, I won you," Al pointed out.

Sally got up from the couch and headed for the door.

"You'll need your tunic," Al called. "And it's chilly; take my tan coat."

"But..." Sally turned. "But I won't be..."

"Don't worry about returning it," Al said, "It's the least I can do."

She put on the tunic, and took the coat.

Al sat alone on the couch until very late that night, not really thinking, but simply missing her.

At the end of the first week his apartment was a mess, worse than ever-- he had become accustomed to leaving things around for her to put away, and it took awhile to break the habit.

By the end of the second week the place was spotless again; he had gotten fed up with his own slovenliness and, as a sort of tribute to her, had thoroughly cleaned the entire apartment.

He was wavering about whether to keep it that way-- specifically, whether to carry his used coffee mug back to the kitchen or just let it sit-- when the doorbell rang.

If he was going to have to get up anyway, he might as well take the mug, he decided. He picked it up as he rose, and carried it with him to the door.

He almost dropped it.

She was wearing a black suede jacket, a pleated black skirt, and a broad-brimmed black hat with an ostrich plume on one side-- the effect was startling.

She cocked her head to one side. "We don't exactly blend in, regardless of how we dress," she said, "So why not have fun?" She held out an arm; his tan coat was draped across it. "I brought your jacket."

"Come in!" he said, gathering his wits, "Come in!"

She did.

She draped his coat on the back of the sofa and looked around, and he thought he saw a trace of disappointment flash across her face.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "I've wanted to know how you've been doing. I've been watching the news reports, of course, but they don't get very specific."

She nodded. "You've kept the place neat, I see," she said.

"I try," he said, suddenly reminded of the coffee mug in his hand. "Listen, can I get you something to drink?" He headed for the kitchen. "There's all the usual stuff."

"A glass of milk would be nice," she said.

He put the mug in the sink and got her milk.

When he returned to the living room she had doffed her hat, which now adorned an end table, and unbuttoned her jacket, revealing the familiar red tunic beneath. She took the milk with the odd half-grin that was the closest her fox-like mouth could come to a smile.

"So what's been happening?" he asked, settling on the couch beside her.

"It's been pretty awful," she said. "They've been talking about plastic surgery and hormone treatments and things, to make us all look more normal, and they don't seem to listen when most of us say we don't want to look normal, we like the way we look. They say it's just the conditioning we got from NGC, but even if that's true, so what? It doesn't make it any less real."

"Hormone treatments?"

"For the fur," she explained. "To make it fall out."

"Oh, that would... what a waste!"

She nodded. "And they want to cut off our tails. But I'm keeping mine-- they can't make us."

"Of course not!"

"They talk about us as if it's our fault, sometimes-- I heard someone say that at least the problem's not permanent, since we're all sterile we'll all die off in a generation. I don't see why we have to be a problem like that."

"You don't," Al began, but she interrupted him.

"And there are the stories the others tell about their old owners-- torture, and beatings, and abuse-- I knew I liked you, and everything, but I didn't realize how lucky I was that you'd won me, instead of my being sold to some rich, sadistic furvert."

"People can be thoughtless," he said feebly.

She shook her head. "They weren't thoughtless," she said. "They did it on purpose."

He didn't argue.

She looked around the room again and asked, "So, have you been seeing someone?"

"No," he said.

"Oh. I thought you might have been lonely, with me... I mean, living alone again."

"I am," he said. "But it's okay."

"I've been living in a hotel," she said, "With three other anthropomorphs. They put us all up there until we could find places of our own. And we're all entitled to welfare, as well as a share of the NGC settlement-- that could be about sixty thousand dollars apiece, they think."

He nodded. "So what are you planning to do?"

"I don't know," she said. She looked around the room again, a little desperately. "I was sort of hoping I could... could maybe work cleaning people's homes."

"You're good at it," he said, "But it's not a very good job."

"I know," she admitted. "I always hated it."

"You did?" That was the first thing she had said that had really surprised him. He sat up straight and stared at her.

"Of course I did!"

"Then why did you do it?"

She stared at him as if he was obviously insane. "Because I had to, of course! It's what a household companion is for!"

"Well, if you'd ever told me you didn't like it, maybe I would have done some of the cleaning myself, but I thought you liked it! I thought it had been programmed into you, or it was something foxes did, or something."

"No! I was trained for it, but I never liked it!"

"Well, did I ask you to keep the place so spotless?"

"No, but I thought you liked it!"

"I did like it, but if you didn't like doing it, it wasn't important."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"You never asked!"

She stared at him.

He stared back, and in a much calmer, quieter voice he added, "There were a lot of things I never told you."

"Like what?"

"That I love you."

An hour later they lay together on the floor, naked; he stroked her furry back, and she brushed her tail along his thigh.

"Only an idiot would want to make your fur fall out," he said. "Or cut off your tail."

She nipped gently at his nose. "I love you, Mas... I mean, Al."

"You can call me anything you like, in private," he said.

"And I can stay?"

"As long as you like."

"That might be a long, long time-- I'm really not sure."

"Whatever."

"I'm glad to be back. Except..."

"Except what?" He stopped stroking.

"Well, there's one thing that'll have to change, or I just can't stay."

"What?"

"Oh, don't look so worried!"

"I am worried! What is it?"

"From now on," she said, laughing, "You wash the pans that don't go in the dishwasher! I hate what the detergent does to my fur!"