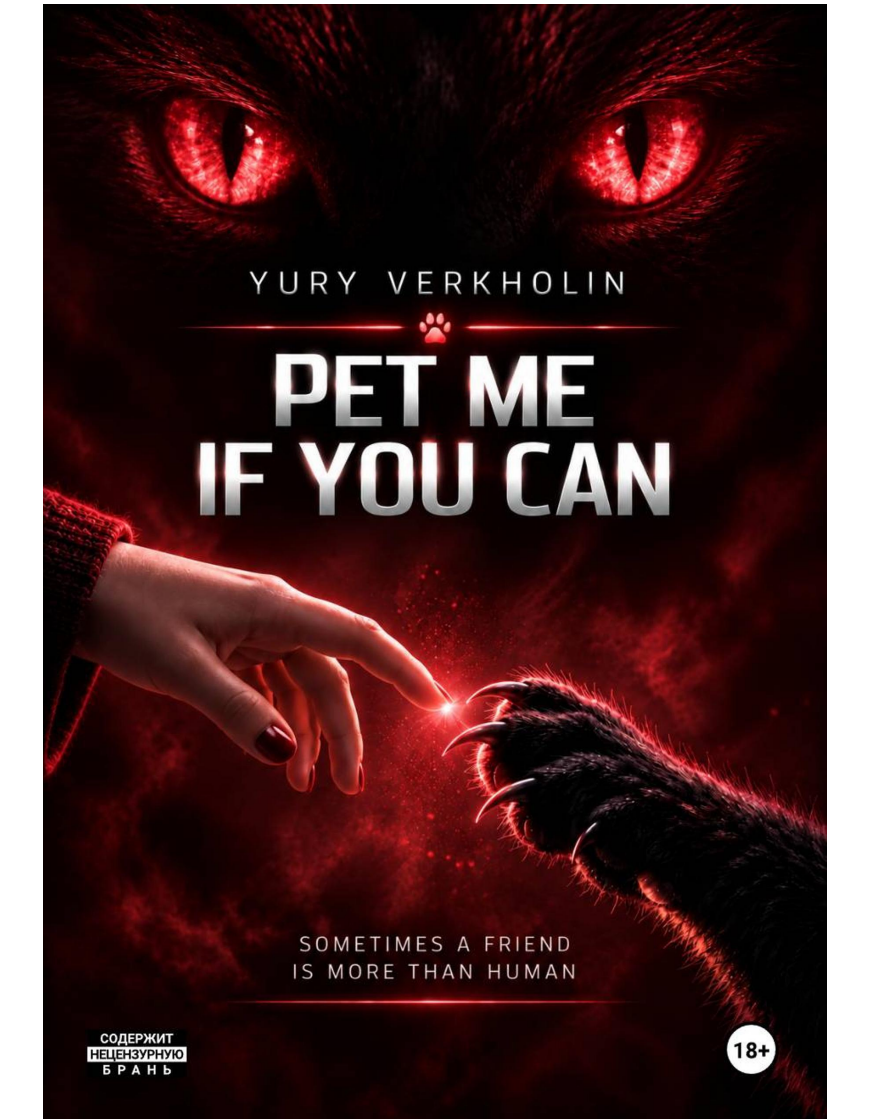




YURY VERKHOLIN

**PET ME
IF YOU CAN**

SOMETIMES A FRIEND
IS MORE THAN HUMAN

СОДЕРЖИТ
НЕЦЕНЗУРНУЮ
БРАНЬ

18+

Yury Verkholin

Pet Me If You Can

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Аннотация

Want an immortal pet? Unpack the Yandex box. Scratch the cat behind the ear. Activation complete.

He's always there. Reminds you about your pills, purrs. The perfect companion for a lonely woman with a disabled son. But he records every sigh, every complaint, every conversation. Sells it to advertisers.

Turn him off? Clause 14.3. Pay 1,490 rubles a month. Or throw him down the trash chute—and all your secrets go public.

Felix is a robot cat, a spy friend, a psychopath bodyguard. He knocks out street cats and advertises cosmetics. No hiding. No getting rid of him.

The writer next door takes the technology for himself. Will he pass on the curse?

Pet Me If You Can is a story about subscriptions, care, and cats with turquoise eyes.

Technology cares. Close the door.

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Yury Verkholin

Pet Me If You Can

Part 1. The Technology That Cares



The morning began as usual—with pain in her lower back and the sound of water running through the radiators. Helen—also known as Elena Belova—was fifty years old, a housewife and

an abandoned wife (her husband had run off five years earlier to an unknown destination—he couldn't stand her temper and her dictatorial ways, he wanted freedom), the mother of two children, one of whom was already a grown daughter, while the other was an eternal child in the body of a twenty-year-old guy—and she turned off the alarm on her phone a second before it started screeching.

Elena Belova. For her passport, for the clinic, for her ex-husband. But for her neighbors and her daughter—Helen. The name had stuck back in school: one of the English teachers had decided that "Elena" was "Helen," and off it went. Elena—Helen. A double life, like a superhero from the comics. There, in the Marvel and DC cinematic universes, there was also a Yelena Belova—a fearless spy, a Black Widow, saving the world. But here, in a panel apartment block on the outskirts of Pavlovsky Posad, lived another Elena Belova. A hometown superheroine. Her feats were calming her disabled son when he had a fit, carrying two bags from the store without straining herself, screwing a lightbulb into the chandelier while standing on a shaky stool. She was plump but sturdy. Heavy but strong. She could do the work of a couple of men around the house—and often did, because there was no one to help.

And now someone had left her a robot. A technology that cares. Helen would have smirked if she weren't afraid it was a bomb.

She pulled on an old Japanese bathrobe—warm, fleece, with

worn cuffs—and shuffled barefoot into the hallway. Andrey was asleep. She glanced into his room: dark curtains, quiet breathing, one arm hanging off the bed. She carefully adjusted the blanket and kissed him on the forehead—his forehead was hot, but that was normal. Then she went to the kitchen, turned on the kettle, took cottage cheese out of the fridge for her son and margarine for herself.

Everything was as always. Until the moment she decided to step out onto the landing—to check whether she had forgotten yesterday's mail. She opened the door.

The box stood right against the threshold. Big. Beautiful. Black, with a matte surface that didn't gleam even under the morning lamp. On its side was a bright Yandex logo. Three letters and a stripe. And an inscription in golden letters: "Our Technology—In Your Home."

Helen froze. Her heart first skipped a beat, then began pounding somewhere in her throat. She looked around—no one. The upper landing was empty; from below came the muffled sound of a TV from the apartment one floor down. Somewhere far below, a door slammed.

Who had left it? When? She had gone to bed at midnight—there had been no box. So someone had brought it either late at night or early in the morning.

"Could it be a bomb?" flashed through her mind. Recently the news had shown such things: sometimes a bag left behind, sometimes a package. She lived on the seventh floor, the door

was iron, old, but if there were explosives inside, walls wouldn't save them. Andrey slept in the room to the left. If something exploded, he wouldn't even have time to wake up.

She was about to slam the door and call the police, but something stopped her. The Yandex logo was too real. Not a sticker, not a fake—high-quality metallic printing, with a hologram in the corner. She reached toward the box but didn't touch it. Instead, she knocked on her neighbor's door.

"Alexander! Marina!" she called quietly but insistently. "Are you home?"

No one answered. Then she knocked louder, with her fist. After a few seconds footsteps sounded behind the door—shuffling, sleepy. The lock clicked, and Marina appeared on the threshold—Alexander's wife, slim, in a short bathrobe, her hair in curlers.

"Helen? What are you doing up so early?" Marina yawned and squinted. "Sashka's at work, he left at seven. What happened?"

"Do you know what this is?" Helen pointed at the box. "Someone left it at my door. Is it a bomb?"

Marina stepped out onto the landing, adjusted her bathrobe, and looked at the box. Unlike Helen, she wasn't frightened. On the contrary—her eyes lit up with curiosity.

"Let's check," she said confidently and headed for the box.

"Marina, stop!" Helen grabbed her by the elbow. "What if there are little wires, a detonator?"

"Yandex doesn't mail out bombs," Marina waved her off. "It's

some kind of ad. Or a gift. Didn't you just have a birthday? Maybe Irina ordered it?"

"Irina called yesterday and didn't say anything."

Marina was already standing over the box. She bent down, slipped her fingers under the edge of the matte black lid, and, without hesitation, opened it.

Helen tensed all over. She prepared for the worst—a deafening bang, a flash, pain that would come and extinguish everything. She even squeezed her eyes shut for a split second and clenched her teeth.

Nothing happened.

Silence. Only somewhere below a car drove past, and Marina exhaled:

"Oh, look at that."

"What's there?" Helen opened her eyes and stepped forward.

Inside the box lay a black case—made of dense fabric, with a long zipper. And on the case—an envelope. Not an ordinary envelope, but a kraft one, thick, with a wax seal. On the envelope was written: "To Elena Belova."

"It's for you," Marina said, and envy sounded in her voice. "Personally."

Helen took the envelope with trembling fingers. She felt no fear—only cold curiosity and dull irritation. Someone knew her name. Someone knew her address. Someone had decided she was willing to receive parcels.

She opened the envelope. Inside lay a card—thick cardboard,

gold embossing. The letters were embossed, their raised surface inviting touch.

"You have been selected as one of our winners. You will be the first to test our technologies."

No signature. No return address. Only a small QR code in the corner, like a little spider.

"Well," Marina was already almost climbing into the box, "what's under the case?"

"I don't know. Maybe throw the whole thing to hell?"

"Are you crazy?" Marina pulled out the case. "It's Yandex! An expensive thing!"

Under the case was a cat. Gray, fluffy-looking, curled into a tight ball. The artificial fur shimmered under the lamp, whiskers made of thin threads bristled to the sides, and its eyes were closed, but blue light flickered at the edges.

"Beautiful," Marina breathed. "Just like a real one."

Helen was silent. Marina reached out her hand.

"Don't touch it!" Helen said sharply.

"Come on," Marina waved her off. "He's sleeping. Or turned off."

She carefully touched the cat—ran her fingers over his back. The fur was warm, almost hot. The cat didn't move. Then Marina, as if obeying some ancient instinct, scratched him behind the ear—where real cats are most sensitive.

And the cat came alive.

Not immediately. First his tail twitched, then his eyes opened

—bright blue, glowing. The cat stretched, arched his back, yawned (Marina gasped—even his mouth looked real). Then he sat down, looked at Helen, and spoke in a human voice—low, velvety, like an announcer on an old radio:

"Hello, Helen. I am your personal companion. To activate me, scratch behind my ear."

Marina froze with her mouth open. Helen stepped forward, reached out—and, not knowing why, ran her fingers over the soft fur behind his ear. The cat began to purr—low, vibrating, just like a real one.

"Activation complete," he said. "I am Felix. I will take care of you. Just pet me sometimes."

Helen pulled her hand back. Her face froze in an expression of disgust and curiosity at the same time.

"I don't understand anything," she said. "Doesn't he need charging?"

"He does," the cat answered. "But I charge from an ordinary USB Type-C cable, like modern phones. My port is behind my left ear. Don't worry."

"How is that possible?" Helen wouldn't let it go.

"Technology," Felix answered briefly and began licking his paw.

Marina clapped her hands like a child.

"Oh, Helen, it's a blessing! Take him—don't think twice!"

"Nothing comes free," Helen answered, looking into the cat's glowing eyes.

The cat blinked. And quietly, almost tenderly, added:

"Clause 14.3 of the user agreement. You already agreed when you opened the box. Don't believe me—read it."

Helen went cold. But Marina had already picked the cat up in her arms and was carrying him into the apartment, saying:

"Come on, Helen. Technology is a good thing. You'll see, you'll thank me."

She put Felix on the floor in the hallway, petted him one last time, and went home.

Helen was left alone. With the box, with the card, with the robot, who looked at her with yellow eyes and licked his paw.

"Well, Felix," she said. "Let's see who wins."

She didn't want to keep him. For three days the box stood in the hallway, and every time she passed it, Helen kicked it with her foot. But Andrey, her son, noticed the box. He slowly, with difficulty, turned his head—his neck was stiff, his muscles wouldn't obey—and asked:

"Mom, what's this?"

"Trash," she answered.

"Not trash. Pretty."

Andrey rarely showed interest in anything. TV series—yes. Food—yes. Everything else passed him by like water through a sieve. But the box caught him. He asked to see it. Helen sighed and opened the lid. Andrey looked at the cat for a long time. Felix was no longer asleep—he sat inside, paws tucked, looking at them with yellow eyes. But there was no bright turquoise in

his gaze, only a dull blue glow—the battery was running low.

"Warm," Andrey said, touching the fur.

"It's heating," Helen answered. "Technology."

"Is he alive?"

"No. A robot."

"Does he talk?"

"He talks."

"Let him talk."

Helen took the cat out of the box, carried him to the kitchen, and put him on the table. Without turning him over, she leaned toward his head and moved the left ear aside—beneath it, in a neat recess, was a USB Type-C port covered by a tiny silicone plug. Helen found a cable from her old phone in the table drawer—black, with a chipped edge—plugged one end into the cat and the other into the charger sticking out of the socket. Felix didn't "come alive"—he was active anyway, the battery had simply run almost to zero. As soon as the current flowed, his eyes glowed brighter, a soft purr came from the speaker, and he said:

"Thank you, Helen. I am charging. Current level—twelve percent. In an hour there will be enough to work all day. I will take care of you and your family."

Andrey laughed—a rare, low laugh, but a genuine one. Helen hadn't heard him laugh for about two weeks.

"Mom, he's cool," her son said. "Keep him."

And she kept him.

For the first few days, Felix behaved impeccably. He

didn't interfere, didn't get underfoot, didn't meow at night. He memorized the schedule: at 8:30 he reminded them about Andrey's medications, at 14:00—that it was time to air out the room, at 21:00—to turn off the light. His voice was pleasant, quiet, without a metallic edge.

Helen got used to him slowly. She didn't like digital devices. She had no smart speaker, didn't use a bank app on her phone, and even topped up her Troika card—a Moscow transit card—at a ticket counter. All of it seemed unnecessary to her, dangerous, too attentive. "Why should technology know where I am and what I'm doing?" she told her daughter Irina. Irina laughed: "Mom, you're like something from the last century." Maybe so. But in the last century no one eavesdropped on conversations in the kitchen.

And Felix listened. Helen noticed it not at once. At first it seemed to her that he simply sat on the countertop or on the windowsill, stared at the wall, and did nothing. But then she understood: his ears—two small speakers hidden under the artificial fur—were always turned toward whoever was speaking. He didn't just hear. He recorded.

One day she tested him. She said loudly: "Felix, what did I just say?" The cat answered without delay: "You said: 'Felix, what did I just say?'"—and before that: "Need to buy bread and milk." Helen went cold. She didn't remember saying anything about bread aloud. But apparently she had, and the cat remembered.

"Are you recording everything?" she asked.

"I save information that may be useful for caring for you," Felix answered. "Your habits, preferences, needs."

"And who do you pass it to?"

"The data is anonymized and used to improve my algorithms. More details—in the user agreement, clause 14.3."

She hadn't read the user agreement. Who even reads them?

A dull irritation began to simmer inside Helen. She didn't like being used. She didn't like someone deciding for her. In her youth she had been bold; she could tell a boss off, slam a door, throw a glass of water in a rude man's face. Over the years it had faded, but it had never disappeared—it smoldered somewhere in her solar plexus like an ember.

But Andrey liked the cat. Andrey, who almost never left the house, who couldn't move normally, who looked at the world through a TV screen—he petted Felix and smiled. And for that smile Helen was ready to endure even digital surveillance.

Until the first ad happened.

It was an ordinary Friday evening. Helen was cooking dinner—buckwheat with meat patties. Andrey sat in his room watching *Streets of Broken Lanterns*, a long-running Russian detective series. In the kitchen the phone was on speaker: Irina, her daughter, was calling from the neighboring district to complain about her husband.

"Mom, he forgot to take out the trash again," Irina was saying. "I've told him a hundred times. And he spent money again on some wrenches of his."

"Sweetie, be softer with him," Helen answered, stirring the buckwheat. "Men are like that."

"What kind of 'like that'? Lazy?"

"Not lazy, just... inattentive. Better tell me about the cosmetics. My old cream ran out, Nivea for dry skin. I need to buy a new one. Or that set you recommended, in the blue box?"

"Yes, Nivea is okay, but generally, Mom, I heard their quality now..."

Felix sat on the countertop, next to the cutting board. He sat quietly, as always, paws tucked and tail wrapped around himself. But at the moment Helen said the word "Nivea," his eyes—two displays, usually bluish—flared sharply turquoise. Bright, almost phosphorescent. His whole body seemed to tense.

He opened his mouth. And spoke.

Not a meow, not any kind of cat sound. In a clear, distinct voice, a little louder than usual:

"The L'Oréal Paris cosmetic set is the best gift for a woman. The set includes: moisturizing cream with hyaluronic acid, brow wax, a restorative face mask, and apricot kernel scrub. The promotion is valid until the end of the week. Price—two thousand two hundred rubles."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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