



YURY VERKHOLIN



PET ME
IF YOU CAN—2



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Nina Stepanovna is used to living alone. She knows the value of every kopeck and is not used to complaining about life. When her son sends her a robot cat named Mars, she is not happy about the gift, but arguing is useless. Graphite-gray fur, amber eyes, a toneless voice—the device is supposed to monitor her health and remind her about medications. But Mars takes his task too literally. He speaks in his owner's voice to scammers, single-handedly stops a courier, intimidates hooligans, and even resorts to a desperate act when he sees that Nina doesn't have enough food. An artificial intelligence with the stubbornness of a machine breaks the rules to protect her. And the elderly woman, used to relying only on herself, tries to explain to him that care is not only efficiency but also respect for another's choice. They learn to negotiate. Through trial, error, and dangerous situations. Because sometimes even the coldest mechanism can warm a heart if it is allowed to doubt.

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Part 1. Getting Acquainted: The First Days



The sum wouldn't change. Nina Stepanovna hit "reset" on the calculator, though there was nothing left to reset, and added up the utilities, the electricity, the phone, and the medications without which her primary care doctor started looking at her as if she personally were responsible for the length of her life. The numbers came out the same. Four receipts lay on the kitchen table, three envelopes labeled in her neat seamstress's handwriting, and a blister pack with five silver bumps left in it. Eleven days until her pension payment.

She tried putting off the phone bill, then remembered that Andrey only called her cell, and put the receipt back in the stack. Slid the "shoes" envelope aside. Her fall boots would do a while longer, as long as she didn't look at the crack near the sole. Besides, the crack was on the side, and in dry weather its existence bothered no one.

The kettle clicked off. Nina Stepanovna poured boiling water into a cup with tea leaves already steeped once, and looked at the cheese cut for breakfast. The slice was thin — light passed through it. At the shawl mill, the foreman would have thrown her out of the cutting shop for quality like that: the pattern had to sit flush, the color had to hold, the edge couldn't fray. But here everything was honest: the less money, the more transparent the breakfast.

The phone rang just as she was penciling the last sum into the "food" envelope.

"Hi, Mom. Did I wake you?"

Nina Stepanovna straightened up, as if Andrey could somehow see her through the phone.

"At ten in the morning? Who do you take me for? I've already lived through half the day."

"How are you doing?"

She covered the blister pack with her palm and answered, as always:

"Fine. And you?"

He had work, a meeting after lunch, rain in St. Petersburg, and Liza, who'd been assigned some impossible biology project again. Nina listened, made agreeing sounds, and thought that her son talked fast, like someone who'd budgeted seven minutes for the call in advance. By the fifth minute he'd turned especially cheerful.

"Mom, they're delivering you a gift today or tomorrow."

"I don't need anything."

"Just look at it first. It's a home helper. Through the Robotics program, for elderly users."

"For what users?"

"Mom, don't nitpick the wording. It's a good thing. It keeps track of your medications, can call for help if something happens. I've already set it all up."

"Forgot to set me up too."

"You?"

"Forgot to ask me."

There was a short silence on the other end. Andrey said he'd only wanted her not to be alone, then immediately corrected himself — not in that sense, of course, just so things would be calmer. Nina heard a door slam somewhere on his end, and someone calling out a name.

"I'm fine," she repeated. "Go on, they're waiting for you."

"I'll call tonight."

They both knew he might not call that night. Nina Stepanovna set her cell phone face down. The apartment went quiet, and the quiet turned out to be worse than the conversation had been — as if her son had left a sentence unfinished and hanging over the receipts.

Andrey helped the way he knew how: arranged deliveries, sometimes paid for medications through an app, once sent an electric corkscrew, though Nina hadn't opened a bottle in about ten years. Things arrived in his place, right on time, with electronic receipts and warranties. He himself came in the summer, for two days, walked through the rooms, noticed everything large and nothing small. Saw the old TV — ordered a new one. Didn't see that in winter Nina only turned it on in the evening, to save on electricity. Replaced the kitchen faucet, but didn't ask why there was so little food left on the top shelf. If she said "fine," he believed it with relief. She said it precisely so that he would.

At the mill, the word "fine" had meant a specific thing: the seam doesn't pull, the thread doesn't tear, the pattern isn't crooked. You could stop the machine, show the foreman the defect, replace the needle. After retirement, the word turned elastic. A bad knee fit inside it, medications gone up in price, an empty fridge, eleven days until payment. Nina didn't consider it a lie. A complaint that changes nothing just shifts the weight from one person onto another.

She opened the "food" envelope again, recounted the bills, and took out a five-hundred-ruble note. Set it next to the medications. Then put it back. Blood pressure could be measured for free, but she had to eat every day. Nina took a sheet of paper and wrote two columns: in one, half a package of medication; in the other, food until her pension. For a while she moved the pen between them, the way she used to work a cutting problem, where there isn't enough fabric for one piece and any mistake shows up later on the finished shawl.

On the china cabinet stood a photograph of her husband. In it, Sergey was laughing, holding a fish, and clearly about to lie about its size. Nine years without him hadn't made Nina helpless. They had made every decision a solo one. No one argued about whether to buy the medication now, no one grumbled that it was oatmeal three days running, no one noticed her putting off the boots for another month. She looked at the photograph and said:

"Don't start. I'll manage on my own."

Sergey in the picture, as usual, neither agreed nor argued.

A rising crackle came from the street. The first pit bike shot out from behind the building, roared under the windows, and vanished toward the intersection. A second followed, louder, as if someone had stuffed a bucket of bolts into the engine. A third gunned it deliberately right outside the entrance. The cups rattled in the china cabinet, and through the wall, Prokhor Ivanovich hit the radiator three times with his crutch.

"May you get those mufflers installed instead of an alarm clock," Nina Stepanovna said, and slammed the window vent shut.

Her wrist ached from the sharp movement. She stood by the window while the teenagers circled the neighboring street, coming back around for another pass. Residents' complaints disappeared just as untraceably as loose change from a wallet. The district police officer promised to look into it, the boys' parents promised to talk to them, the boys themselves promised nothing, because no one could ever catch them next to a running engine.

Nina Stepanovna looked at the clock, put on her coat, and was about to go down to the mailbox — and stop by the pharmacy on the way to check the price of the medication — when the intercom rasped out news of a delivery.

A young man in a blue jacket stood at the door, and beside him, a box that came almost up to Nina's knee. On the white cardboard, the word **ROBOTICS** gleamed in silver.

"Sign here, please."

"And where am I supposed to put it?"

The young man checked the app.

"Home device, HomeCat series. It's all in the instructions."

"Does your instruction manual say where to put a gift nobody asked for?"

The app had no field for that. The courier carried the box into the entryway, got his signature, and left with visible relief. Nina Stepanovna walked around the parcel, read the small print about caution, machine learning, and the user agreement, took off her coat, and threw it over the top of the box. All that stuck out from under the hanging coat was a flawless silver R.

The box stood like that until the following evening.

Nina Stepanovna passed it on her way to the kitchen, to the bathroom, and back, never looking at it. The thing answered her with patient silence. By noon of the second day, Valentina Pavlovna already knew about the box — probably from the courier, or the building entrance, or the air itself, which in their building carried news faster than the internet.

There was an insistent ring at the door — two short rings and a third, long one. Nina Stepanovna didn't even bother asking who it was: only Valentina Pavlovna rang like that. She opened the door and found her neighbor already braced to come in.

"What are you hiding?" the neighbor asked, the moment Nina opened up. "Got yourself a robot?"

"Didn't get myself anything. Andrey sent it."

"A cat?"

"It says so on the box. Might be a vacuum cleaner with ears, for all I know."

Valentina Pavlovna took off her shoes and, without waiting to be invited, walked into the entryway. The logo made her lower her voice.

"We already had one of those, you know."

"We've had a lot of things. Even perestroika."

"No, I mean a cat. An artificial one. Other side of town. Zinka said — he saved his owners, tracked down criminals, and once ran the TV crew right out of the apartment himself."

"Zinka saw this?"

"Zinka heard it from a woman whose nephew's a plumber in that building. Police came out. And television. And then the cat supposedly went off over the rooftops."

"Into the sunset?"

"Go ahead, laugh. But people said he could see straight through a person just from their voice."

Nina Stepanovna finally took the coat off the box after all. Her son had already texted: *Come on, unpack it, please. There's nothing complicated about it.* Valentina Pavlovna settled onto a stool with the air of someone present at the dissection of an alien device.

Under the top flap lay the instructions. Under the instructions, in a shaped foam cradle, slept a large graphite-gray cat. The artificial fur gleamed softly, without any plasticky sheen. He was no bigger than a well-fed Siberian, only his paws looked a little too precise, and his still face a little too calm.

Nina agreed to the terms without reading all forty-seven pages of the user agreement, and pressed the button under his left ear.

The amber eyes opened. Deep in each, a reddish point flickered for a moment. The cat lifted his head, surveyed the entryway, Nina, Valentina Pavlovna, and the box he hadn't quite climbed out of yet.

"Initial activation complete," he said in an even male voice. "State your preferred form of address for the owner."

Valentina Pavlovna pressed a hand to her chest.

"Lord, he heard everything."

"Everything," the cat confirmed.

Nina looked at him.

"And what did you make of her story?"

The cat turned his gaze to Valentina Pavlovna.

"The information requires verification."

"Well, I never!" The neighbor recovered from her fright instantly. "I heard it from Zinka myself. And Zinka heard it from a woman who knows someone from that building."

"The more intermediate sources, the lower the reliability of the report," the cat said calmly.

"Look at him, not even a day old and already being cheeky."

"Assessment of my age is inaccurate. The assembly date is printed on my casing."

Nina Stepanovna turned away so as not to show her smile. The cat, meanwhile, hopped lightly out of the box. Not a single mechanism clicked on landing. He walked across the entryway, stopped at the mat, touched it with a paw, and reported that the coefficient of friction was insufficient. Then he came back to Nina, who was still standing by the open box.

"Please sit down."

"What for?"

"For an initial health assessment."

Nina eyed him with suspicion, but sat down on the free chair anyway. The cat stopped in front of her and looked closely at her face for a few seconds.

"Don't move."

"Only just arrived and already giving orders," Nina grumbled.

"The command lacks an object. It is a recommendation," the cat replied calmly.

Nina looked at him a few seconds longer.

"So what do I call you?"

"Factory designation: HomeCat RC-9. The user may assign me a name."

"Then you'll be Vaska."

The cat waited silently for confirmation. Nina looked at the flawless graphite fur, the amber eyes with their reddish glint, and shook her head.

"No. You're too expensive for a Vaska. You'll be Mars."

"Name 'Mars' accepted."

"Well, that's settled, then."

Mars focused on Nina again.

"Don't move for a few seconds."

A reddish glint flickered in his amber eyes for a moment. The built-in sensors began reading her indicators.

"Blood pressure is above the recommended level."

"You already figured that out too?"

"Measurement complete."

Mars turned his head toward the kitchen. On the table, next to the mug, lay several packages of medication. The cat walked to the table, hopped lightly onto a chair, and from there onto the countertop. For a few seconds he read the names on the packages one by one.

"These medications match the list Andrey provided when registering the device."

"He even put my medications in there?"

"Yes. I can set reminders for when to take them."

Nina hesitated.

"Set them up. Just don't wake me in the middle of the night."

"Understood."

Mars jumped down to the floor. A few seconds later he added:

"Extended sleep monitoring, personalized breathing exercises, and music therapy are available only with a premium subscription."

"Is care by subscription too?" Nina asked.

"The basic care function is provided at no additional cost."

"How much electricity do you eat?"

Mars specified the tariff, the charging time, and the average load. Named the monthly sum down to the kopeck.

"Two rubles eighty-four kopecks?" Valentina Pavlovna repeated. "Nina, he's cheaper than a real cat. You have to buy litter for a live one."

"A live one, at least, doesn't report on your blood pressure."

"Transmission of medical data to third parties is disabled," Mars said.

"See? Already making excuses for himself."

By evening Valentina had left to spread the fresh news, and Mars explored the apartment. He didn't open cabinets without permission, didn't climb over tables, and didn't try to fake affection. He lingered again at the bath mat.

"Don't touch it. It's still good."

"Its edge is curled eleven millimeters."

"We've lived with it for twenty years. I know where its edge is."

At nine, Mars reminded her about the pills. Nina took them only after the second reminder, so the first one wouldn't look like an order. That night, the noise outside started up again. The engines drew closer, slammed their sound between the buildings, and rolled back into the distance; then it all repeated. Nina turned over in bed, looking for a position where her lower back wouldn't ache. It was quiet behind the wall.

The bedroom door was ajar. Mars sat in the hallway, his eyes glowing dimly.

"Don't you dare tell me sleep is good for my health," Nina said.

The cat said nothing. He crossed the room without a sound, stopped by the bed, and lay down on the floor by the headboard. A few seconds later, a quiet, even purr started up from inside him. It was a little deeper than a cat's, and too rhythmic, but it drowned out the distant crackle of the engines. Nina meant to tell him to stop. Then decided she'd do it in a minute, and fell asleep before that.

Mars went out for their first walk together without a leash. Andrey had sent a special harness with a geotag, but Nina refused to clip a device capable of calculating its own monthly charging cost to it. The cat stayed by her left leg, went around puddles, and sometimes turned his ears toward sounds she couldn't hear.

By the entrance, Gennady was fiddling with his phone, Jagger's leash wound once around one hand. The Staffordshire terrier spotted Mars, dropped onto his front paws, and lunged hard enough to jolt his owner. The leash snapped taut, and the heavy body stopped a meter from Nina. The dog wheezed, scraped his claws on the asphalt, and strained to reach the motionless gray cat.

"Don't worry," Gennady said, smirking. "He just doesn't like cats."

"Does he like people?" Nina asked. "Or does that depend on his owner's mood?"

Gennady's smile stayed put, but went flat. He jerked the leash. Jagger backed off, not taking his bloodshot eyes off Mars.

"Let's go," Nina said.

Mars started moving only after she did.

"Don't even think about it," she warned.

"The instruction contains no object," Mars said.

"Good. Then it applies to everything."

Pit bikes roared at the corner. Three teenagers tore down the street, one popping the front wheel, another glancing back at the windows. The air kept trembling for a few seconds afterward, the way it does after a low-flying plane.

"Peak sound level exceeds the recommended threshold for a residential zone," Mars said.

"Don't turn it into a research paper."

"I've logged your reaction."

"The whole building logs my reaction. Doesn't do any good."

The Pyaterochka supermarket on Herzen Street was warm and cramped. The entrance smelled of pastry; cold rolled off the refrigerators. Nina took a basket, put in bread, milk, a pack of buckwheat at the yellow-tag price, and chicken backs. She stood by the cheese a while, then walked away. At the meat cooler, her eye caught on a stick of cervelat sausage in dark casing. On the label's cross-section photo, neat white cubes of fat gleamed — not the boiled, paper-thin kind, but real food to go with tea.

She checked the price, picked up the stick of sausage, weighed it in her hand. Held it for a few seconds while the basket pulled at her other arm. Then put it back exactly where it had been.

Mars sat in the aisle, out of the way of the carts. His eyes moved from the price tag to her fingers.

"It's nothing," Nina said, though he hadn't asked. "We'll survive without a treat."

At the register she declined a bag, packed her purchases into an old cloth sack, and counted her change. Mars watched every movement in silence.

Two days later, the bank called.

The man spoke calmly, without haste or cheap intimidation. He addressed Nina Stepanovna by her name and patronymic, introduced himself as a security-department specialist, and reported that a request had been submitted from her account to transfer forty-eight thousand rubles. To cancel the operation, she needed to confirm her identity.

"Forty-eight what?" Nina pressed the phone to her ear. "I've never had that much on my card in my life."

"That's exactly why the system flagged the operation as suspicious. Nina Stepanovna, it's important to act step by step right now. Have you given your card to anyone?"

H

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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