

# Sample - Crime Novel

Calvin Strong sat down in his custom designed Italian leather armchair, looking out onto the view from his penthouse apartment in the luxury Eastern Yards high-rise condominium, watching the ferries and sailboats float by on the East River. It was an idyllic, peaceful view, one of the primary reasons Calvin decided to purchase the penthouse apartment. That and the twenty-foot high ceilings that his wife claimed would be the perfect space for her priceless Picassos and Rothkos.

But today, Calvin Strong was not at peace.

*"How may I direct your call today?"* a pleasant robotic voice asked over the phone. Calvin held the speaker of his cellphone up to his mouth.

"I. Have. A. Problem"

He detested these new artificial intelligence bots that companies were using nowadays. For starters, not a single one could live up to the name "intelligent" — they didn't understand, didn't hear, or were programmed to misunderstand anything you said. Gone were the days of an actual *human being* on the other end of the line, one you could get a result out of if you demanded it. Someone whose job it was to help a customer, pay attention to their needs, maybe compliment them on their choice.

*"I'm sorry, I cannot understand your question. Please speak clearly into the microphone"*

"I. AM. HAVING. A. PROBLEM!" Calvin screamed into his handset. His face was going red, his watery grey eyes were starting to tear up and what little hair remained on his head was standing on end. No human being would dare speak to Calvin like this. He wanted to talk to a person. In fact, he wanted to talk to *the* person.

Calvin Strong didn't think he needed a security system. The security at Eastern Yards was run by a private firm who had won some industry award for their discretion and secure practices. But he had met Matt Penske at an art auction with his wife, and Penske convinced him he needed the new Net Guardian system by Cybermart. Penske sold his wife on the added protection for her paintings, which in themselves were worth half of Calvin Strong's fortune. Calvin loved the idea, he always wanted to upgrade his tech systems at home, constantly chasing the high of brand new innovations for home and work. If he had his way, his whole home would be wired up and controlled remotely, but his wife Becky would have none of that.

Penske even came by to oversee the installation, helping Calvin to customize the system to his needs. But that was a few months ago, when the Light's were still being courted by Net Guardian. Nowadays, Matt Penske had stopped taking his personal calls, and Calvin was having an impossible time getting help through the Net Guardian customer support channels. So much for the top-tier service he was paying for.

The businessman was shrinking into the shadows, unable to cope with Calvin's mild constructive criticism. All that tech-genius stuff had gone straight to his head and all of a sud-

den he couldn't handle the perfectly normal issues Calvin had, stuff that would likely plague any user of the system.

For example, the priceless Ming Dynasty porcelain vase that the drone had almost destroyed? He could have hired a cleaner for minimum wage and they'd know to avoid it, why can't this piece of state of the art technology do the same? He had seen the drone turn on a dime, but when it came to precious artwork it barrelled right through.

Calvin had initially been impressed with the company — a billionaire founder who had his priorities straight, knew exactly how to treat a top customer like Calvin. Calvin could sometimes be a diva, his wife often complained about his finicky nature, so maybe Penske and the team at Net Guardian had tired of hearing his pearls of constructive criticism. Calvin couldn't understand why, no use pushing a product that still had bugs in it or was sub par, it would only tarnish the reputation of the company.

First Calvin complained that the installed units didn't match his apartment's decor. Calvin's suggestion that the Net Guardian would be more successful if it came with more customization options was met with nothing but an eye roll.

Then he noticed that sometimes the cameras changed angles after he had re-set them. Now that is just a faulty product! How was Penske planning on selling the Net Guardian when it wouldn't even stay in place? Yet again, Penske dismissed Calvin's concerns stating that it was probably the sway from his high rise penthouse that was causing the cameras to drift.

The cameras stopped drifting, but then rooms that Calvin hadn't programmed to appear on camera started appearing to his security team. His bedroom and his office, both places where Calvin felt didn't need extra monitoring (especially during private time with the missus) kept showing up both on the live feed and in recordings. The cybersecurity team at his hedge fund noticed that when they would check the live feed, the cameras and drone would sometimes zoom in on Calvin's keyboard while he was working on sensitive financial documents — they had specifically asked him to turn it off multiple times.

His wife was also annoyed. She was an avid art collector and had noticed that recently she kept getting outbid by an anonymous bidder at auction. The bidder would swoop in, just as she was interested. It seemed they knew exactly what she would bid on and what her budget was — like they were doing their research over her shoulder. Calvin dismissed her concern at first — it wasn't a mystery that someone would outbid her on a Monet — but when her bids turned to young up-and-coming artists and she was still swept out, he wondered if the Net Guardian was also spying on his wife.

Now his wife, on vacation in Tulum, was receiving notifications that the Net Guardian was recording, even though Calvin was home and hadn't set the drone to record. When she messaged him screenshots of her notifications, Calvin checked the drone's live feed. Nothing appeared, the drone was, presumably, safe in its dock waiting for Calvin to come home from work. He sent his wife a message saying he'd deal with it, and then made sure the notification settings were off for her phone.

Calvin finally had enough. Today, the drone went too far. He came home with the intent to reset his wife's notifications and check on new concerns that the IT division at his hedge fund had brought up. He came home, turned the corner in the hall, and noticed the drone

wasn't in its dock. He knew exactly where it would be. Calvin burst into his office and there it was — hovering around the room as if it were looking for something. Calvin whistled at the drone — if it was going to act like a dumb guard dog, might as well treat it like one — and the flying robot turned on a dime and started chasing Calvin down the hall. Now he knew for sure — the drone didn't have a mind of its own, it was being controlled by someone, someone who had it in for Calvin.

Light ran through the house, straight to the small bathroom down the hall. He opened the window, breathing in what little fresh air he could before he started panicking. His panic turned to rage, and he resolved to get all these issues dealt with once and for all — and he wouldn't get off the phone until he did.

*"I'm sorry sir, it seems we cannot understand your question. Goodbye."* There was a click from the other end of the line. Calvin was fuming, he rolled his eyes and threw the phone at the window. A bird going past seemed to think the thing was after it and swerved away.

Above his shoulder he could hear the drone hovering. What, did the thing expect to get treats now? The tin-can had a mind of its own and frankly, he didn't care that it was only the most exclusive clients that got access to the airborne miniature drones. It clearly had problems, both major and minor. He couldn't seem to get it to stop beeping when he was in his office, and he didn't know why. Not only that, but it seemed to be causing an echo whenever he was on a phone call.

Calvin Strong couldn't decide if the drone was more like a flying robot-vac or a bizarre little guard dog. The two together would be more effective than the drone he was sure of it. No matter how many times he reset the home base, or told his security team to recalibrate the settings the cameras constantly had black-out moments or recorded when he turned them off. His security team got emails throughout the night and Calvin was being woken up at the whiff of smoke — he couldn't even light a cigar without the Net Guardian calling the fire department and automatically turning his television screens on to lung cancer documentaries.

"Listen Penske, if I had wanted an actual guard dog, I would've got something bigger than a chihuahua" He had told the tech-billionaire when he came to recalibrate the system for the third time in the past week.

"Don't worry Gord, this thing doesn't have a mind of its own — it needs someone telling it what to do," Penske had assured him. But Calvin didn't think Penske was telling him the whole truth. Why else did the drone follow him around, and why was he finding recorded video when he had specifically turned the Net Guardian off?

Well, if Penske wasn't going to answer his calls, Calvin knew what to do. He went over to the window and picked up his phone from where he had thrown it.

*@CyberPenz mistake after mistake, and now you won't even stand by your product? The new #NetGuardian ain't what it's cracked up to be. Maybe I can train it to roll over for a treat?*

He knew that a social media post would get Penske's attention. Calvin sat back in his chair and waited for Penske to call. The view was perfect, not a cloud in the sky. Except for that bird that had started hovering right in his eye-line.

Just as Calvin realized that the thing in his eye-line looked a lot more like his puppy-dog drone than any bird he had ever seen, the bullet proof window of his penthouse apartment in the most exclusive building in all of Manhattan cracked and a single high-caliber bullet shot him, right between the eyes.