

SCAMBAIT

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CEDARBROOK
BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

SPAM

It should be the easiest thing to delete this email, to flush it away with the already-reads, the coupon codes, the lesser spam.

But this isn't spam, no matter what the folder says.

Eric, this is your father.

My father. I haven't spoken to him in years. No one has. It's rare to get a call from the dead—an email, rarer still.

CHAPTER 2

DOLORES

close, reopen my spam folder. The email's there. Still. Right at the top.

I select it before dragging my cursor over the trash can icon.

Nope. No. Not now. Think on it.

There's a play to be made, because here's the thing: even if they never did find my father's body, this has to be a scammer, some twisted lowlife out for revenge.

And if there's one thing I hate, it's a scammer.

If there are *two* things I hate, it's a scammer who thinks they can best me with a despicable, personalized phishing attempt like this.

While I plan my next move, I open another email and continue my work—not the job I'm paid for, mind you, but rather my true vocation.

Here is my driver's license (scan attached) and my social. Please confirm your banking details. I will wire the transfer fee immediately upon receipt, at which time I expect the prompt release of the inheritance I am owed.

The driver's license image I've forwarded is a warped, illegible scan, and the social security number I've provided is from a random number generator. The transfer fee is not a sum I intend to pay, nor do I expect the promised inheritance to ever hit an account I own.

Who do I look like, my grandma?

"Eric?"

I glance up from my screen, minimize my inbox with a keyboard shortcut. "Dolores." My tone is flat. I make no eye contact. I'm busy, can't you see? There are more pressing matters at hand, Dolores.

"Did you get that email I sent you?" she asks.

"Haven't logged in yet."

"Oh, sorry. Just get in?"

"Yeah." This, I can say at any time of day to anyone I please; thanks to carefully crafted paths to and from my desk—the Zig, the Zag, and the Long Loop—no one sees me come in, and they do not see me leave. I wear a blazer—above and beyond the office's required business casual—to ward off the pettier requests, and as the company's lone Special Advisor to Latin America, my schedule is flexible. I'm beholden to no one save for myself and the bare—and I mean bare—minimum amount of work required to not get shitcanned, so it's hard to say, day-to-day, when I might be available; it's better if you send an email.

I tell my coworkers this, especially since Grandma Amundsen's death, and on average, they listen.

Dolores, as she has made abundantly clear, does not consider herself part of *on average*.

"All right," Dolores says, "but when you have a second—"

"Yup."

Dolores steps away from the entrance to my cube, and I expand my inbox.

She returns a second later. "Hey, sorry again, but we also

never talked about that message from—" I exit my inbox. "Was that your email?"

Dolores, please. No. Stop. These aren't the emails you're looking for.

"Can you pull mine up real quick?" she insists. "It doesn't even have to be the email from this morning, but I sent you that one last Thursday—"

"About the Ampersand account? I replied to that." I didn't, no, but I did respond to the woman claiming to be former British Prime Minister Theresa May, as well as the Qatari petroleum exec to whom I've slowly revealed that the millions he plans to send me will be invested in an Ameowsment Park for cats.

To answer your question—yes, despite the wild improbability of anyone founding an Ameowsment Park, the phony oil magnate is still responding. Soon, I'll have his bank account information, which I'll phone into the bank to get the account shut down.

These people, I tell you. It's like they *want* to scambaited.

"I don't think I got that reply from you," Dolores says.

"Can you check again?"

"Is it in your sent folder?"

"Dolores, I'm sorry, but you caught me at a bad time." I pluck my blazer from the back of my chair, slide my arms through the sleeves. "I was late getting in, and I've got a meeting at—oh, would you look at the time?—I'm late for that now, too."

"We should really—"

"We'll *should really* later." I brush past her, stride for HR. "I'll check in with you after this meeting."

She says something, but I've already got my phone to my ear as if calling someone to apologize for my tardiness—not that I've dialed anyone.

I have no number to call, but I do have to do something about this dead, emailing father of mine.

CHAPTER 3

AN UNFULFILLABLE PROMISE

In a mostly empty cube in HR—downsizing, so it goes—I re-read, intend to respond to the email from my father. Or, well, my “father,” this pretender who’s more than likely—who *has* to be—some scammer I spurned who can’t let it go.

Eric, this is your father. At least I think I’m your father. You’re in the Madison area, we share a last name, and you’re the same age as my son would be now. And the nose—your mother’s nose. I’d recognize it anywhere.

I’m sorry if this feels like an intrusion. I’ve been meaning to reach out for years, but the guilt finally got to me. I found you on social media, by the way. I have no profiles of my own, not under any name you’d recognize, so I didn’t message you there. You list where you work on Facebook, and after that, I went to the company’s site, and, well, you get the picture. Special Advisor to Latin America? Impressive.

I know I have no right to do this to you. I’ll understand if

you ignore me, but I hope you don't. Please, Eric, I want to do better. I want to make up for lost time. It haunts me that I couldn't be there when your mother passed—or when my own mother passed—but I had to go. I had to. One day, you'll understand.

Can we talk? Not by email. By phone or, if you're okay with it, in person? My number's below, if you want to reach out.

I give it another read. Another. *Another*, another, and good God, man, the contents aren't going to change. Write something or don't. Deep breath. Close your eyes. Type the first thing that comes to mind.

So, here we go, clacking away at the keyboard connected to the laptop and monitors of whichever HR generalist sat in this chair before their dismissal.

First of all, how dare you.

I remove my hands from the keyboard, because what the fuck? Is my mind so a-fuck that the best I can do is essentially cypypasta? And, come on, am I responding as if this guy's for real?

Try again. Clear your head. This guy isn't actually your dad, remember. Your dad is dead. Super dead. Like, only hair-and-bones-left-in-a-casket dead—not that his body ever made it to a casket—so that this is the image I've landed on means I'm in no state to handle this right now. All right. A break. I'll take a break, will press reset with a quick jaunt down the scambait hole.

Scambait hole. Gross.

I brush aside the thought of a scambait hole—again, gross—and open five new tabs in my browser. In every one, a unique account. In every one, a gold mine.

*We were unable to process payment for your domain
To the moon! BIG money and much fortune waits for you
INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITY*

Bad. *So bad.* And yet people fall for them, including people like, yup, Grandma Amundsen, who might as well have had a punch card with Cyber Scams Pvt. Ltd.—not a real company—where she got a refund on her tenth scam because you name it, she fell for it.

And, in doing so, she cost me a considerable inheritance. I cannot emphasize this enough: *considerable.*

Not that the loss of the inheritance is about me so much as it is about her, because here's the thing—Grandma A had to spend her final year in a home of pitiable quality, had to remain in Wisconsin instead of retiring to Arizona, where she long intended to spend her golden years roasting in the sun instead of shivering in the cold. None of which is to mention what her getting scammed meant for Boulder—her aging, gassy Saint Bernard—who became my ward instead of farting his way through Grandma's waning hours in an old folks' home that allowed pets. Don't get me wrong: I love that dog, but the *smell* of him. Truly haunting.

Okay. Enough. I need to channel this angst, so—*knuckles crack*—let's get down to business, specifically the business of wasting as much of these assholes' time as possible. The more they spend focusing on me, after all, the less they'll have to scam anyone else, and ain't that the beauty of it all?

So—terribly sorry, I reply to the first of the emails I have open. How can I ensure payment goes through to this clearly impostor SquareSpace address? To our friend with this fantabulous cryptocurrency scheme: you'll multiply my investment tenfold in five days?! How's ten grand sound? And wow, that was fast, a reply from the schmo I requested banking details from. Let's just compare the routing number to the one on the bank's website before we drop the bank

name and address into Google Maps and, sure enough, it all checks out! We've probably got a real account here, fancy that, so let's pull out the ol' cell and make a call.

While my phone connects with the bank, I catch a glimpse of that email from my dad—er, *not* my dad.

Don't let it get to you, Eric. You're not allowed to let it get to you, not now. There's one more fresh email to respond to here, after all, and—

"Southwestern Credit Union. This is Carl speaking."

"Hi, Carl," I say, my posture straightening. This is my favorite part of my job—well, *vocation*. Calling in these accounts really feels like something. Something meaningful. "I'm wondering if I can speak to someone in your fraud department."

"Oh, uh—what seems to be the situation?"

I explain to Carl, as he put it, the situation. I get emails, I tell him, attempts to goad people into passing along personal information, not to mention cash. It starts with government IDs, dates of birth, social security numbers, et cetera, before the Big Ask, as I like to call it. While I bring Carl up to speed—I've got it down to a script at this point, really—my attention drifts back to the final email of the newbies to have hit my inbox since I'd last checked.

And this one? Wow, the investment opportunity of a lifetime, and one I can't pass up: Aisha Al-Qaddafi has contacted me of all people! I support my phone between my shoulder and ear, typing a response on my keyboard while Carl puts me on hold to nab everything he needs to file a report.

Thank you so much, Mrs. Muammar Al-Qaddafi, I write, for your willingness to share you and your late husband's fortune; what can I do to make sure all twenty-seven million dollars make it to my American accounts securely?

Before I click SEND on my email to this supposed widow of the disgraced Libyan despot, I consider the attachments, open them. Standard stuff. Documents requesting bank

account and routing numbers, all of it on letterhead for a bank that—yes, a Google search confirms as much—doesn't exist.

I rub my forehead. I cannot wrap my mind around how people—Grandma—get duped by these. Grandma was the first to tell you not to trust strangers on the street, but the second she got unsolicited phone calls from Microsoft and Apple tech support—from the Amazon subscription department, from the IRS and Social Security Administration—it was all *yes, of course, how can we fix this?* and *I'll gladly wire you whatever's needed to make this go away.*

Fix *what*, Grandma? Make *what* go away?

I never should have gotten her that smartphone.

"You still there, Eric?" Carl asks.

"Yup, still here."

"Okay, can you pass along that account information for me? I want to verify—"

"That it's a real account, yeah." I share the account and routing numbers the scammer forwarded to me and, sure enough, Carl confirms they're real. "I also have a name attached to the account, if you'd like that?" I ask, and of course he'd like that. It's no surprise—to me, anyway—that when I share the name of Mabel Higginbotham, Carl relays this is, yes, the name on the account.

Now, if Mabel Higginbotham doesn't sound like the name of someone who'd be out to pick the pockets of the unsuspecting, you might be right. We can look her up online, actually, and see there's a Mabel Higginbotham who lives in a twenty-five mile radius of the bank in question. She's seventy-eight years old and owns a toy poodle named Bruce—thanks, Facebook—and she doesn't look like she's walking around with Rolexes on her wrists.

Why? Because scammers are likely using her account to launder money after having scammed Mabel herself, the poor thing.

Check in on your elders, folks. Hell, check in on everyone,

but especially Mabels of the world. We can't have them winding up like my grandma. Poor. Dead. Well, we can't do anything about that last one, but you know.

The call with Carl winds down, concluding with a self-high-five and a reminder that I'm not here to think about my dad or my Grandma right now. I'm all about the mission, about the promise I made to Granny A: keep from happening to others what happened to her.

I return, then, to the contents of Mrs. Qadaffi's email, pore over its attachments one more ti—

Shit.

Those attachments. The computer in this cubicle. All of my defenses against malevolent links and other ungodliness—this laptop wasn't connected to my Raspberry Pi, the rinky-dink mini-computer I hook up to my desk's keyboard and monitors when wading through the muck.

This workstation in HR isn't safe, not like mine.

A cold sweat descends. I return my attention to the laptop before me, locate the downloads folder, wipe it clean. And then—now what? Tell IT, says a voice inside my head, but no. No. I'm okay. The odds are the files were harmless, were designed to encourage me to pass along sensitive personal information and nothing more. Not every scam email is some super sophisticated attempt to bring down an entire network. That's certainly not what they were out to do when they targeted Grandma Amundsen with similar shenanigans.

Besides, telling IT would only lead to questions. The wrong kinds of questions. Say, Eric, why were you on this laptop in the first place? Why were you not doing your actual job? Why would you be opening emails in your spam folder anyway? Don't you remember your IT training modules, Eric?

The list goes on.

For now, the file's deleted, and that will have to be—is—enough.

Not that my cold sweat has evaporated. Not that I'm feeling great about returning to my cubicle with Dolores skulking around the corner for what remains of the day.

So, away we go—I log out of the workstation in HR before hustling for my cube, retrieving my laptop, and taking the Zig to the parking lot. That makes for a short day, even for me, but I've got a dog to pick up at the vet.

I know. Add it to the list.

CHAPTER 4

THIRTEEN

turned thirteen the day the call came in.

“No, Glenn’s not here,” my mother said. “He left an hour ago. I don’t understand. Slow down. Please.”

I stood at the threshold between the kitchen and the living room, my ears perked.

“Oh my God. What? When? Is he—? I’m driving down.”

Mom drove us, the two of us, to my father’s place of employment. A sinkhole, they said, caused by a faulty water main, and everyone stay back because this is an active situation, and they’ll get everyone updates as soon as they can.

Emergency lights strobed, police tape whipped and snapped, and I braced myself against the brisk October wind. The earth trembled, and the hole opened wider, swallowing another car on the surface lot.

Their best guess? My father had been in the underground parking garage when the water surged in. He didn’t have a chance, they said, but it would have happened quickly. I doubted this, but said nothing; another thought consumed me.

Saturday. It was a Saturday. My father never should have

been there; we should have been at the pet store, but we weren't.

And we weren't there because of me. Because I asked too many questions.

This is how I viewed it then, anyway, when grief still whispered *you did this, you did this* every hour of every day.

On those Saturdays *before*, there was little I looked forward to more than that simple question from my dad. "Ready?"

I'd nod, already on my way to the car before we'd scoot down East Washington and dip into the Willy Street neighborhood. Then, the walk across the parking lot, the anticipation swelling. The whoosh of the automatic doors, the step inside, the smell of dog food and fish flakes, the hum of heating lamps and, during the monthly Catapalooza adoption fairs, the kittens tumbling and pawing and mewling away in their enclosures.

To me, those Saturday mornings were everything. It was time with him, with my dad, the man whose work kept him so occupied he had next to none for his wife and only son. Did I mind that he'd spend a few minutes in the back office chatting away with the store's owner, his friend? No, my dad deserved that time with his pal, and besides, he told me he'd find me later, that I was free to roam so long as I didn't pull a fast one and tell an employee I needed them to help me gather everything I'd need for an at-home aquarium, including the fish.

In my defense, I only did that once, the employee should have known better, and my father shouldn't have left me alone in the first place.

Either way, one Saturday when he returned from the back office for our customary lap around the store, curiosity got the best of me.

"Why can't I meet your friend?"

My father told me he wasn't his friend.

"Then why do you talk to him?"

"Because he's an important person," he'd say.

"Like Mom?"

My dad laughed. "Sure, like Mom."

As we passed the back office, I peered through the window. A man of herculean proportions sat in a desk chair, a girl with a bow in her hair holding tight to a stuffed animal of some kind. Even though this friend laughed, the expression he wore was calloused, always.

"Is he a bad person?" I asked.

My father said nothing, and our lap around the store was cut short. My father drove us home, straight home, without a word between us. The warmth between us dissipated, and I wouldn't return to the pet store until years later—after his death and that of my mother—to adopt Boulder to keep good old Grandma Amundsen company.

Those questions I asked of my father might have cost me those precious Saturdays. They might have even cost my father his life.

But even now, twenty years later, I'd still like answers.

WHAT ABOUT THE DOG?!

AND WHAT'S UP WITH ERIC'S DAD
AND THAT PET STORE?

ANSWERS AWAIT AT EITHER OF THE LINKS BELOW.

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PRAISE FOR *SCAMBAIT*

"Laugh out loud funny. My highest
recommendation."

- ROBB GRINDSTAFF, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR
AND WRITING COACH