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'Sinister' e-mails target recipient for assassination

Phony killers bilk people with offer to spare lives for money

By John Scheibe
Posted March 16, 2008 at midnight

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Ruth Martin opened an e-mail on Feb. 28 unlike any other she'd ever received.

"Do you want to LIVE OR DIE?" the writer asked. "Get back to me now if you are ready to pay some fees to spare your life."

A bolt of fear ran through the Hagerstown, Md., woman as she read the e-mail more closely.

"I am very sorry for you is a pity that this is how your life is going to end as soon as you don't comply," it read.

The e-mail was laced with broken English.

"As I am writing to you now, my men are monitoring you and they are telling me everything about you."

Martin, who runs a home Internet business, soon realized the e-mail was a hoax.

Although she said she has received numerous scam e-mails over the years, this one was especially insidious.

Rather than sit back and do nothing, Martin decided to write about the e-mail on her blog. See: <http://www.maplewoodva.wordpress.com>.

"I wanted to help anyone out there who may have received a similar e-mail," she said.

Many have.

Detective Eric Buschow, a spokesman for the Ventura County Sheriff's Department in Thousand Oaks, said his department has received reports from local residents who have received a "hit-man" e-mail.

"Anyone getting an e-mail like this should delete it," Buschow said.

Since the beginning of the year, the Internet Crime Complaint Center has received nearly 200 complaints nationwide from people claiming they were being targeted online for assassination.

"This is a particular sinister e-mail to send someone," said Craig Butterworth, a spokesman for the Richmond, Va.-based center.

Butterworth's organization was established as a partnership with the FBI to collect complaints of Internet-related crimes and alert law enforcement agencies of them.

In the hit-man e-mails, victims are typically told someone they know, a friend, acquaintance or business partner, has paid a hit man to kill them. They are told their life will be spared in return for a large ransom.

To make the e-mails more credible, scammers will often include personal information. Some people may fall for the scam because of that, Butterworth said.

But details about someone's personal life, such as their profession or home address, are not that hard to get in this age of abundant information.

"It can easily be obtained from the Internet," Butterworth said.

Laura Eimiller, a spokeswoman for the FBI in Los Angeles, said the hit-man e-mail is an example of scam artists' continuous attempts to extort money from people.

"Our advice is not to respond if you get one of these e-mails," she said. Those getting such an e-mail can also alert law enforcement, "including the FBI," Eimiller said.

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As long as the internet remains an anonymous (read lawless) tool, this will continue to happen.