

Scrittore poured himself a cup of coffee and booted up his computer, as he did every morning. Before getting down to work, he checked his e-mail—again, as he did every morning. This morning however, was *not* like every other morning. *This* morning, an unexpected message lurked in his inbox.

“Mr. Apostolik:

I write you because I put a malware on the web page with porn which you have visited. My virus grabbed all your personal info and turned on your camera which captured the process of your onanism. Just after that the soft saved your contact list. I will delete the compromising video and info if you pay me 999 USD in bitcoin.

This is address for payment: 1K2jNTLdbHEwaALQWKMeGoKLWD67Cb6q8B.

I give you 30 hours after you open my message for making the transaction. As soon as you read the message I’ll see it right away. It is not necessary to tell me that you have sent money to me. This address is connected to you, my system will delete everything automatically after transfer confirmation. If you need 48 h just reply on this letter with +.

You can visit the police station but nobody can help you. If you try to deceive me, I’ll see it right away! I dont live in your country. So they can not track my location even for 9 months. Goodbye.

Dont forget about the shame and to ignore, Your life can be ruined.”

A cascade of conflicting thoughts appeared and disappeared, rushing in rapid sequence through Scrittore’s brain.

First was “how could this happen to me?” It surprised that his pulse had quickened and his face flushed with hot blood.

Then he realized the sender had addressed him by his *given* name... not the *nom de plume* by which the world knew him. “How the hell did he get *that*?”

Then, “This can’t be real... look at the horrible grammar. It certainly doesn’t look like it was written by anyone who uses English as his first language.”

Then, “How does that make any difference?”

Then, “Wait... I haven’t even *done* any of the things he alleges.”

Then, “Does it even matter if I am not guilty? This bastard might have edited some anonymous compromising video... and only *claim* it was me. By the time I proved my innocence, the damage would already have been done.”

Then, “He might have my name by accident... but releasing his so-called evidence, even if meant for someone else, would still be disastrous.”

Then, “If I pay him, is there any guarantee the extortion wouldn’t go on forever? Is there any reason I should trust him? Just because he *says* he will destroy his so-called ‘incriminating evidence,’ will he?”

Then, “Do I even have enough money to pay him off, even *once*?”

Then, “What other options do I have?”

Then, “What if I disappeared? Would anyone care about these absurd claims if I wasn’t around to be face them?”

Then, “If I wasn’t around, would *that* make any difference?”

Then, “If I was gone, and the incriminating ‘evidence’ became public, my book sales might even *increase*. People are so nosy about what they perceive as flaws in famous people. Their banality is disgusting.”

Then, “Who am I kidding? I’m not the least bit famous.”

Then, “Yes but, if I disappear, and these salacious claims are leveled at me, I could *become* famous. Maybe this asshole, hiding in some depressing third world country, has actually done me a favor!”

Like most people, Scrittore had—for years—fantasized about running away from a life that was too demanding, too damned complicated. But it had been no more than a casual fantasy. He was beginning to think that ceasing to exist (or *seeming* to cease to exist) might be the wisest career move a writer could make.