

THE SCAM

Written by

Chelsea Kania

INT. CUBICLE - DAY

The hum of phones and voices waft above the cubicle belonging to RAVI (30s) - handsome, palpably kind and calmly absorbing the voice screaming into his headset.

RAVI

I underst--I understand completely
Mrs. Garvey.

(F-bomb from the headset)

I am right here with you, and we
WILL solve this. I promise.

Visible on his desk, his cell phone lights up: SCAM LIKELY.

He absently hits END.

Then clicks away at his desktop computer.

RAVI (CONT'D)

See that little red button? Simply
click it and the program will
restart.

Silence.

RAVI (CONT'D)

Mrs. Garvey?

Ravi's ambiguously gendered and palpably overworked BOSS (50s) sidles up to his cubicle with a stack of papers. She raises an eyebrow at him.

A much more subdued Mrs. Garvey is overheard on his headset.

RAVI (CONT'D)

You are so welcome, Mrs. Garvey.
(her gentle reply)
Don't cry! It's okay! I know
software can be very frustrating.

Boss gives Ravi a wry smile.

RAVI (CONT'D)

You too. Okay goodbye Mrs. Garvey.

He hangs up.

BOSS

Dumbasses. I don't know how you do
it.

She plops the stack of papers on his desk.

BOSS (CONT'D)

But I am going to need you to do it
twenty more times today.

RAVI

(shrugs)

Everyone just wants their struggle
to be heard.

BOSS

You sound more like my shrink than
my IT geek.

RAVI

I'm not going to touch that one.

His cell phone lights up again - another SCAM LIKELY. He hits
END and starts to put on his headset again.

BOSS

Hey--how's your immigration coming?

Ravi's fake smile betrays him.

RAVI

Great. I check in every month.

BOSS

Don't worry, Ravi. They'll approve
you. They have to, or I'll kill
myself.

RAVI

Not touching that either.

BOSS

I swear to god. You leave me in
this hellhole and it's a murder
suicide.

RAVI

Yes, boss.

She winks, leaves.

Ravi's headset blinks and he pokes it to answer.

RAVI (CONT'D)

Hey Julie.

OPERATOR JULIE (V.O.)

Hey, you've got a call from someone
saying they're a customer but it
sounds like your mom... again.

RAVI
Sorry. Put her through.

A click, and then --

RAVI (CONT'D)
Mom, you know I can't accept
international calls at work--

RAVI'S MOM (V.O.)
Have you spoken with Zane?

Her sharp Indian accent hangs in dead air a moment.

RAVI
I sent him money last month.

RAVI'S MOM (V.O.)
That's not the same thing as
speaking. You two are brothers!
It's not his fault he can't get a
job, it's hard out there!

RAVI
You baby him.

RAVI'S MOM (V.O.)
Well he's my baby! And so are you.
How are you - are you eating?

RAVI
Yes, mom. How's dad?

An opaque silence.

RAVI'S MOM (V.O.)
Recovering.
(beat)
So--Zane's girls are doing so well!
Did you hear Sheila was accepted to
MIT?!

RAVI
Yes, I got the first check.
(crickets from Mom)
Sorry, I didn't mean it like that.
I'm just--I'm proud of her. She's
tough, like her mom was.

RAVI'S MOM (V.O.)
And smart! Like her uncle.

Ravi's smile is sad.

RAVI'S MOM (V.O.)
 (in Hindi)
 Oh Ravi. You're our great hope.

Ravi sighs at an old photo pinned to his cubicle:

In front of a lake house, 20 year old Ravi smiles with one arm around his parents, and the other around his brother Zane and Zane's wife - they each hold a little girl.

RAVI
 Mom. How's dad?

RAVI'S MOM (V.O.)
 (sigh)
 They say he needs PT, but Ravi we can do without--

RAVI
 No. I'll take care of it. Text me the bill. I should go. I love you.

RAVI'S MOM (V.O.)
 (in Hindi)
 I love you, son.

He hangs up, sighs at his fresh list of names - and dials.

RAVI
 Hello Mr. Scheels, I'm responding to your help ticket, and I understand you've having some issues with our software--

His cell phone lights up again. But this time it says: UCIS.

RAVI (CONT'D)
 --and I'm so sorry but I will have to call you back immediately!!

He hangs up, and hurries to answer his cell phone.

RAVI (CONT'D)
 Hello?

CALLER (V.O.)
 (slight accent)
 Ravi Chowdhury?

RAVI
 Yes! How are you--

CALLER (V.O.)
I'm calling from United States
Citizen and Immigration Services--

RAVI
Yes, thank you so much--

CALLER
Can you go someplace private?

Beat. Ravi freezes.

CALLER (CONT'D)
Where no one can hear you. There's
a problem with your file.

RAVI
Okay.

CALLER
I'll wait on the line.

Ravi peers above his cubicle, sees his Boss distracted in her office, and sneaks out.

EXT. RAVI'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Ravi blinks into the light. A teeny, tiny bit suspicious.

RAVI
(into cell phone)
Okay, I'm outside. What's the
problem?

CALLER (V.O.)
Look...
(big sigh)
I know you're a smart guy. I can
see here in my system that you went
to MIT, yes?

RAVI
Yes.

CALLER (V.O.)
And you last visited India two
years ago, May 10 through 31?

Beat. Ravi looks concerned.

RAVI
Yes...

CALLER (V.O.)

I see. My system is showing me that you owe the government 500 dollars to correct your immigration file.

Ravi's knees nearly give out.

RAVI

But how? I mean--

CALLER (V.O.)

You made some serious errors in your paperwork when you last entered the country. We've been trying to reach you for a while.

RAVI

But I check in every month. Here, it's in my call log, I'll send it--

CALLER (V.O.)

Well no use doing it right now! I need you to focus so we can resolve this asap. Today's the deadline.

RAVI

Today?

The Caller chuckles.

CALLER (V.O.)

Oh buddy. You're lucky I got ahold of you! I can get you out of this mess, but we need to work quick. Yeah?

RAVI

Yes. Of course.

CALLER (V.O.)

Alright. You sound like resourceful guy, so I'll tell you how we can expedite things. Okay?

RAVI

Okay.

CALLER (V.O.)

Okay. **The most important thing is to stay on the line.** Do not call or text anyone until we're done here. But we WILL solve this, I promise.

CUT TO:

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE - MOMENTS LATER

Ravi enters, sweating - holding his cell to his chest.

He takes a gift card and slides it to the CASHIER.

RAVI
Can you put \$500 on it?

But as the Cashier rings him up, Ravi slides her another one.

RAVI (CONT'D)
And on this one?

CASHIER
Sorry. We have a \$300 dollar limit
for prepaid cards.

Ravi blinks.

CASHIER (CONT'D)
But there's a gas station around
the corner.

EXT. GAS STATION PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Ravi is dripping sweat as he finishes reading the numbers on the back of the cards into his cell phone.

RAVI
--Six-Two-Four-Three.

CALLER (V.O.)
Buddy, you did good. Just give me a
moment to see the transaction
through. I'm going to put you on
hold - don't hang up.

The line clicks.

Ravi exhales. He sees a MISSED CALL from PRISHA.

RAVI
(texts Prisha)
Call you back soon, I'm in the
middle of something.

Suddenly, his cell phone speaks.

CALLER (V.O.)
Did you just send a text?

Beat.

Ravi looks around the empty parking lot. Visibly chilled.

RAVI

Are you... watching me?

CALLER (V.O.)

See that guy asking for donations?

Ravi spots a SHABBY MAN at the entrance of the gas station. They make eye contact. The SHABBY MAN gives him a look.

CALLER (V.O.)

That's one of our agents. You can imagine, people run in these situations.

RAVI

I'm not...
(changes mind)
Are we good?

CALLER (V.O.)

I really wish we were. The transaction should have unlocked your application for me to correct the file, but it looks like there's a deeper problem here.
(big sigh)
Unfortunately your file's been flagged to the FBI.

This time, Ravi really does lose his legs. Catching himself, he sits in the middle of the parking lot.

RAVI

No. How can that happen? I've been in good standing since we arrived. I have a job, I follow up...

He takes a deep breath, then like it pains him to say it--

RAVI (CONT'D)

I know you must hear this kind of thing all the time, but my dad just had an operation. And my brother's wife passed away, so... I'm the only one keeping our family afloat. I need to be here, to work--

CALLER (V.O.)

Buddy, I'm not a psychiatrist. But--

Beat.

CALLER (V.O.)
Listen. You fucked up pretty bad.

At the F bomb, Ravi looks a little shocked.

CALLER (V.O.)
But me to you, I was in your shoes once. As an immigrant I mean. So I want to help you. I'm not supposed to do this but I think I can advance your case. You'll need to pay another fee...

RAVI
Yes, anything.

CALLER (V.O.)
It's not cheap to expedite things with the FBI.

Beat. Ravi looks lost.

RAVI
What choice do I have?

CALLER (V.O.)
Alright. I'm going to give you some addresses. Stick with me.

Staying on the phone the whole time, Ravi begins to drain his bank account in a MONTAGE:

- EXT. ATM - DAY: Ravi pulls out cash.
- INT. CONVENIENCE STORE - DAY: Ravi talks the Cashier into letting him buy two cards with cash and credit.
- INT. DEPARTMENT STORE - DAY: Ravi purchases two gift cards.
- INT. CORNER STORE - DAY: Ravi purchases two gift cards and a lighter.
- INT. PHARMACY - NIGHT: Ravi buys a gift card. His card is declined.
- EXT. ATM - NIGHT: Ravi pulls out cash, but hits a limit.

EXT. EMPLOYEE PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Eight gift cards are spread across the hood of Ravi's car. He reads the last numbers into the phone.

CALLER (V.O.)
Alright. Good work, buddy. I'm
going to put you on hold.

The line clicks.

Ravi slumps against his car. He looks exhausted. He glances at his phone: two missed calls from Prisha. He starts to text, but stops. Looks around.

Ten minutes on hold might as well be hours.

Then, the Caller is back.

CALLER (V.O.)
Okay. Everything went through as
promised, but - and I know you
don't want to here this - the flag
on your application isn't gone yet.
I've got one more wall up front of
me. It'll just take one more
payment to crack it.

Ravi's lip trembles.

RAVI
How much?

CALLER (V.O.)
Two thousand.

And just like that, all over Ravi's face is the realization that he's been had.

RAVI
No.

CALLER (V.O.)
Look. Buddy, I don't want to
pressure you, but we're so close--

RAVI
I can't pay anymore.

CALLER (V.O.)
My guys are standing down while I
help you but the FBI will have to
arrest you if--

RAVI
Then they can arrest me.

CALLER (V.O.)

(sigh)

Okay. It's your funeral. Burn the credit cards with the lighter, This was a big favor and I don't want to go down with you.

(beat)

We're watching.

The line clicks.

Like a zombie, Ravi gathers the cards into a little pile on the ground, and squats to light them.

They catch fire.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a car peel out at the edge of the lot - it's a very unoffical-looking beater car.

Ravi's in a daze.

He stares at the little blaze for a moment, like he's burning the cash he's just thrown away.

Then suddenly he SNAPS to - and STOMPS it out. Then gathers the cards.

But when he goes to unlock his car door, he notices a nick in the window seal.

He pulls the handle and the door opens - it's unlocked.

Someone's been inside.

INT. KITCHEN - CHOWDHURY HOME - NIGHT

The front door slams and Ravi shuffles into a kitchen as cramped and modest as the rest of the house. He sees his wife PRISHA (30) at the dining table - with her head in her hands.

RAVI

Prisha. I'm so sorry I didn't call--

But when she looks up, it's with tears of sadness.

PRISHA

I made a mistake.

INT. CHOWDHURY HOME - LATER

Ravi and Prisha lay on their bed, staring up at the ceiling - shocked and blank.

RAVI
They knew everything about me.

PRISHA
They make millions of dollars on
scams like these. It's not just us
that falls for them.

RAVI
Thirty-thousand. Our entire
savings.

They both let this hang for a moment. Suddenly, Ravi is
furious.

RAVI (CONT'D)
Who would do such a thing?! I want
to know! I want to see his face!! I
want him to look me in the eye and
tell me...

Ravi can't find the words. And then--

RAVI (CONT'D)
He's evil.

PRISHA
No. He's trying to make ends meet.
He doesn't even get rich from it.

RAVI
Somebody does.

PRISHA
Not him. He's just a runner.
Probably a guy who got caught up in
the mob and can't get out.

He looks at her.

PRISHA (CONT'D)
I googled it.

RAVI
Stop trying to justify this!

Prisha closes her eyes. Tears roll down her cheeks.

RAVI (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you.

Ravi squeezes her hand.

RAVI (CONT'D)

This is the problem with human beings. When they're ONLY motivated by survival, they inevitably turn on each other.

PRISHA

Especially other desperate people.

RAVI

So. What's the moral here? What do they say in social work?

(kisses her hand)

If you can't have money, have empathy?

PRISHA

Without it, the world would end.

Ravi and Prisha nuzzle into each other for a moment.

PRISHA (CONT'D)

Don't get me wrong though. If I ever get my hands on him, he's toast.

That gets a smile from Ravi.

RAVI

We'll figure this out.

He leans over and flicks off the light.

But in the dark, his cell lights up with a text.

RAVI'S MOM

(via text)

Dad's PT Bill: \$1.5K

He flips his phone over, and curls up on his side.

But as night turns to day, Ravi's eyes remain wide open.

INT. CUBICLE - NEXT DAY

Ravi rubs his eyes to the screaming in his headset.

He glances again at the PHOTO pinned in his cubicle - at his happy family at the lakehouse.

RAVI

I'm sorry, Mrs. Roth, I hear you...

On his desk, Ravi's cell phone lights up with a call: UCIS

This time, he doesn't bother with excuses. He hangs up on Mrs. Roth.

Then stares at his animated cell phone.

Finally, he clicks a button on his screen - and the cell phone call pipes into his headset.

CALLER (V.O.)
Hey buddy. I got your file up
again. We gonna finish this today?

Beat.

CALLER (V.O.)
Up to you. It's your life.

Ravi's Boss approaches, eyebrow raised. Ravi sits up.

RAVI
(into headset)
Yes sir. What can I do?

Ravi's Boss gives him a thumbs up as she passes.

As soon she's out of sight, Ravi removes his headset, grabs his cell phone and darts out of his cubicle.

CALLER (V.O.)
Go outside. Turn right. There's an
ATM at the corner store on Baker.

But Ravi runs

DOWN THE STAIRWELL

and exits the building to the rear instead.

EXT. EMPLOYEE PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER

Ravi heads for his car.

CALLER (V.O.)
I don't see you.

RAVI
I came out the back.

CALLER (V.O.)
Then turn left--

RAVI
No. I'm getting in my car.

And he does - after touching the dent in the window seal.

INT. RAVI'S CAR

Ravi starts the engine.

CALLER (V.O.)
What are you doing?

RAVI
I have money, but not at the bank.

Beat. Ravi holds his breath.

CALLER (V.O.)
Where?

As Ravi pulls out of the parking lot he spots the BEATER CAR from the night before, parked on the street - it rolls out, and begins to follow him at a distance.

RAVI
It's hidden.

Ravi sets his phone in the cupholder and taps his screen until it processes: SHARE LOCATION.

INT. SOCIAL WORK CENTER - SAME

Prisha is handing folders to a YOUNG INDIAN FAMILY when her phone comes alive with a message:

"RAVI - GPS LOCATION SHARED"

She impulsively turns her phone over.

But as the Young Family speaks to her she looks distracted back at her phone.

INT. RAVI'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Ravi drives fast, frequently checking that the beater car is still visible following him.

CALLER (V.O.)
Look buddy, I really need you to do this my way. I made it clear I'm sticking my neck out here for you--

RAVI

I know. Thank you for all your help, Mr... sorry, I didn't even get your name yesterday.

Caller chuckles.

CALLER (V.O.)

That's right. You work in customer service, don't you? Funny choice for a software engineer.

RAVI

I'm an IT specialist.

CALLER (V.O.)

Well I wish I had that background. These systems, like I mentioned, they can be ironclad. Sorry this hasn't been smoother--

RAVI

Please, don't apologize. But tell me, since it will be in cash would you prefer to take it in person?

Silence. Ravi turns. The beater follows.

RAVI (CONT'D)

I know you're following me.

More silence.

RAVI (CONT'D)

It's alright. I don't keep a weapon in my car. But you already knew that.

Beat on the line. The Caller's voice shifts ever so slightly.

CALLER (V.O.)

Where are we going?

RAVI

Thanks for your patience. We're almost there.

Ravi's car turns down a little-traveled dirt road - then he speeds up, kicking up dust.

EXT. LAKEHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

It's the house from the old photo in Ravi's cubicle.

He screeches up to the mailbox and opens it, takes out the mail - and discreetly peels off a sign posted which reads: "CLOSED FOR THE FALL - RENTALS RESUME IN APRIL"

CALLER (V.O.)
What are you doing?

RAVI
Getting my mail.

As Ravi pulls up to the house and parks, he hears a second voice in the background of the call.

Ravi strains to hear it.

CALLER (V.O.)
We know it's not your house.

Ravi is shook. He takes a deep breath.

RAVI
No, it's not. I've stayed here before... I buried something nearby. I just need to get a shovel.

The beater car is parked behind him, a safe distance away. Ravi adjusts his mirror and sees two figures in the car. One of them is clearly holding a gun.

CALLER (V.O.)
You shouldn't lie to the federal government.

Ravi gasps. Panics. Thinks.

RAVI
No. But you're lying, too.

The call goes dead.

Suddenly, Ravi bursts from the car and takes off RUNNING.

Behind him, one man spills out of the beater car - the other follows more slowly.

Ravi rounds the back of the house, enters the

SHED

and emerges with a softball bat.

The men are still unseen as Ravi darts around to the back of the shed, and presses himself against it. Then waits.

On the other side of the shed, the door opens.

Footsteps are heard inside.

Quietly, holding his breath, Ravi edges around until he's beside the door of the shed - waiting, bat poised high.

And as soon as one MAN exits--

Ravi swings the bat at him - but misses, and catches the man's gun instead. It goes flying.

It's a scuffle as Ravi and the Man fight to reach the gun. Punches are thrown.

But Ravi reaches the gun first. He turns and without thinking - and pulls the trigger.

The Man falls.

Blood flows. Horrified, Ravi struggles to his feet.

The Man dying on the ground is Indian - like Ravi. And when he struggles to speak, it's clear he's the Caller.

CALLER

Buddy, you really fucked up. If I die, they'll own your ass.

(beat)

Because no one else is going to clean up your mess. Not here.

A noise is heard in the shed. Ravi turns, aims the gun. Tries to keep his hands from shaking.

RAVI

Come out! I have a gun!

The shed door creaks open and a SECOND MAN appears, head low.

But when he looks up to face Ravi, Ravi drops the gun.

The two stare at each other for a long moment, in clear recognition.

Then, in utter disbelief -

RAVI (CONT'D)

Zane?

But before Ravi's brother can respond, Prisha is bringing a shovel down on the back of Zane's head.

And everything goes black.

END