Long-time friend and colleague Stephen Cobb, CISSP sends the following warning about an auction-related scam (“I” refers to Stephen throughout and names have been changed to avoid lawsuits):

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In early April, I failed to win an auction for an $800/£420 item by just a few pounds. The item was listed by someone in South Gloucestershire, England. I think the listing itself was entirely legitimate. A few days later I was contacted via eBay e-mail, supposedly by the seller, saying:

“You expressed interest in Item number 6165275772 by bidding, however the auction has ended with another member as the high bidder. In compliance with eBay policy, the seller of that item is making this Second Chance Offer to you at your bid price of £415.00. The seller has issued this Second Chance Offer because the winning bidder was unable to complete the transaction. . . “

However, the name associated with this message, “Dave Alabaz,” did not seem to match the lister of the item (far722 -- but those names are sometimes obscure). When I contacted Dave via his Yahoo e-mail address he asked for my mailing address. I felt this made him sound legit and gave it to him (it is not exactly a secret) along with an offer to pay him via PayPal. But he turned this down, telling me to follow instructions in the message that I would get from eBay.

I did then receive an e-mail from aw-confirm@ebay.com stating “You have agreed to purchase the following eBay item from far722 on Mar-29-05.” The e-mail asked me to pay through Western Union. The seller gave me the name and street address of the Western Union recipient as Patsy Alabmaz, in London, not South Gloucestershire.

Here is some of the e-mail:

“Currently, this seller has a US$ 20,000.00 deposit in an eBay managed purchase protection account. Transactions with this eBay seller are covered by purchase protection against fraud and description errors. For your safety, this account was locked today, for 30 days time. The seller is unable to withdraw any money from it, within this period.”

This sounded fishy and the source of the HTML message looked fishy. One disguised link led to a log-in at Yahoo e-mail! So I went to the eBay Q&A forum and described this stuff. Everyone there shouted SCAM!

Presumably this is perpetrated by someone watching the bidding for a high end item then hitting one or more “losers” with e-mail to their eBay bidding ID, correctly listing their losing bids and offering to sell them the exact same item. Quite enticing to a keen buyer, even though logic tells you that the scammer very definitely does not have the item--we are talking about serial
numbered items here—it went to the auction winner.

But of course the weak link in any scam is getting the cash from the mark and if this truly is a fraudulent transaction the scammer seems to be using Patsy Alabaz to get paid (a real person or an ironic pseudonym?).

There may be another cut-out in this scam that allows the scammer to get the money despite there being no Patsy at that address. But just in case it was worth pursuing, I passed the information along to the security folks eBay. I did not reply to Mr. Alabaz but I’d like to think that eBay did, and arranged to have someone from Scotland Yard meet Patsy Alabaz when she went to collect payment.

The simple lesson is don’t fall for Second Chance offers. The bigger lesson is to think twice about buying big ticket items over the Internet. A few days after the “Patsy” incident, I came across a Kubota tractor legitimately listed for sale on a tractor dealer’s Web site, but fraudulently listed on eBay. The latter listing used the same photos but offered a much lower price, payable by money order to an address in Europe. When I contacted the real owner of the tractor he told me the Secret Service were already on the case.

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About the Author

A twenty-five year computer audit and security veteran, Stephen Cobb has written extensively on these subjects and has founded several successful computer security companies. He is also an Adjunct Professor of Information Assurance at Norwich University.

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