THE "HOOK"
In September 2017, Equifax, one of America’s three major credit reporting agencies, issued a public statement that the sensitive personal data of 143 million U.S. consumers was exposed during a security breach between May and July 2017. Hackers accessed addresses, names, and Social Security numbers which is sufficient to carry out identity theft. This is an extremely serious breach and with 143 million Americans affected, it is likely that your personal data was stolen and that you may be targeted for “account takeover” fraud or a full identity theft. Once identity thieves have your personal information, they can drain your bank account, run up charges on your credit cards, open new utility accounts, or get medical treatment on your health insurance. An identity thief can even file a tax refund in your name and get your refund.

THE LESSON
To find out if your information was exposed, you can visit Equifax’s website, www.equifaxsecurity2017.com. You will need to enter the last six digits of your Social Security number which is sensitive information so make sure you are on a secure computer and an encrypted network connection. The site will tell you if you’ve been affected by this breach. If you choose to, you can receive a year of free credit monitoring and other services if you enroll before November 21, 2017.

You may also consider adding either a credit freeze or an initial fraud alert to your credit profile. To learn about credit freezes visit: https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0497-credit-freeze-faqs. To learn more about fraud alerts visit: https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0275-place-fraud-alert. A credit freeze prevents opening a new account or credit card in your name and a fraud alert requires businesses to verify your identity before issuing new credit (so they may attempt to contact you) but neither can prevent a fraudster from withdrawing money from your bank account or making charges to your existing credit cards which is why it is important to remain on the lookout for the following signs of credit related fraud:

- There is missing money from your bank account
- Charges appear on your credit card that you do not recognize
- Bills you used to get are no longer being delivered to you
- Companies you’ve never contacted are requesting credit information
- Accounts appear on your credit reports that you do not recognize
- Incorrect personal information on your credit reports
- Wrong amounts showing on your accounts in your credit reports

Whether we like it or not, we are in a brave new world when it comes to fraud. Added vigilance is necessary to avoid becoming a victim. Visit Identitytheft.gov to learn more about this breach and how to prevent identity theft.