



# Hard Lessons From Romance Scams

👤 Roger Grimes | Feb 12, 2024

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Seeing as this week is Valentine's Day, I should have written something about rom coms, true love, and trusting your heart more. But this is not one of those posts. This post is about romance scams and how hard they are to defend against, especially once sprung.



In my over 35-year career, I do not think that I have come across a harder, more illogical problem to solve. There is a saying, "The heart has a mind which the mind knows nothing of!"

No truer words have been spoken...especially when it involves romance scams.

A romance scam is where an attacker assumes a fake persona in order to communicate and make someone else fall in love with them, usually for monetary gain, but it can be for other things (e.g., information theft, etc.). Romance scams have been occurring for millennia, but the online digital world has made it so much easier to accomplish and far vaster in its reach.

Scammers love posing as sexy young models, ex-military officers, construction entrepreneurs, and world travelers. They are all supposedly too busy and too "burned" from their last failed relationship to pursue another in their own physical space. But they seem to have plenty of time to text and call. Most are independently wealthy, just waiting for one last big job to complete or for their visa to be approved before they can finally make that flight over and spend forever with the one they proclaim to love.

Every day, tens of thousands of people are in unrequited love with a fake identity. Many victims have lost lots of money, sometimes everything. Sometimes even their friends and family. Love is a very strong motivator among the lonely and previously loveless.

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Once a victim is in love, defeating a romance scam before the victim loses everything and cannot send more money is very hard, if not impossible.

How hard? How impossible?

Prior to 2000, I was the weekly security columnist for InfoWorld/CSO magazines (for 15 years). As part of that role, I occasionally wrote about romance scams and how to defeat them. Since then, I occasionally receive emails from victims of scams or loved ones of scam victims asking for help. The average person did not reach out to me until the victim had lost over \$200,000. Wow!

In every case, I agreed to become personally involved in, I would, as step one, prove that the identity of the romance scammer was fake. I would track down the pictures to the real person they were copied from and show the victim that whoever they were dealing with was using a fake name, had stolen pictures, and was stringing them along. [Today is not as easy because the identities are AI-generated.]

In every single instance, after I proved to the victim that they were communicating with a scammer using a fake identity, it never once resulted in the victim stopping sending money or falling out of love with the scammer. Never. Repeat after me, "The heart has a mind, which the mind knows nothing of!"

Once a person is in love with all the significant dopamine releases flooding their brain and body, it can be very difficult to right that ship. In fact, in most cases, it isn't the victim who breaks off the romance. It is the scammer who does it once the victim has lost everything and can no longer send money.

I have known many victims, who when they ran out of easy money to send to scammers, sold their houses, sold their cars, and took out new loans they could not afford. I have known victims who, when legally prevented from running their own finances, borrowed large sums of money from unsuspecting relatives, who were assured they would be promptly paid back. I have known multiple victims who stole and sold the art of close relatives in order to get money to send to scammers. The average romance scam victim will lie or break off communications with sons, daughters, and friends, if the people close to them disparage the scammers and try to get the victim to break off the romance.

I knew of one woman who fell in love, sold everything, and eventually flew to meet her scammer to begin a new dream life. When she arrived, he was far different than she had been led to believe, was not the successful entrepreneur he made himself out to be, and took her new money that she had brought so they could begin their lives together and partied it away with friends. Even at this point, she was still in love, or so she thought. It was only when he began to get violent with her that she managed to escape out of her own dream and sneak away to safety in the early morning while he was drunk asleep. She was lucky. Many romance scam victims who have met their scammer in-person have been seriously assaulted and murdered.

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Romance scams often fracture previously solid relationships with family and friends. Everyone around the victim can see what is happening, but not the victim in love. I know of one elderly victim who had been legally prevented from running her own finances after sending hundreds of thousands of dollars to a scammer, who resorted to calling the police and claiming her daughter was physically abusing her. She had...I am not making this up...the police arrived to arrest her daughter while her daughter was in the shower. By the time the wet-haired, handcuffed daughter had convinced the police that she had not struck her mother and was actually her legal guardian protecting her interests, her mother had used her daughter's credit cards to get several new gift cards, which she promptly sent to the scammer. She had her daughter arrested and handcuffed for 30 minutes of unwatched access time. How is that for a Mother's Day discussion?

I once had a woman email me wondering if the person she was sending money to was really Yanni as he had claimed. Hint: If you suspect the person you are talking to is not who they say they are, you are usually right and it is not the right relationship for you even if they were the real person you thought they were.

**Yanni** is a long-time, somewhat famous Greek musician and composer. Her online Yanni promised to divorce his famous wife, Linda Evans, if he could just get some money. Apparently, Yanni was very unhappy with his marriage to Linda Evans, but she was in control of his life and millions. But in secret, he was writing to the victim and asking for money. If the victim sent him money, he would somehow use it to make his escape, divorce Linda Evans, and marry the victim.

I did a quick Google search. Yanni had a nine-year relationship with Linda Evans in the 1990s, but had never married her. When I revealed there was no divorce to be had, the victim said I was wrong...that Wikipedia was wrong. And she continued sending money until she was broke and bankrupt.

I once convinced a woman that the man she was sending money to was not who she thought he was. After a few weeks, she wrote back telling me she was still sending the scammer money. "Why?", I asked. She replied, "He's the only one saying he loves me. I know he's not real, but it's worth the money I send him each month!"

Repeated after me, "The mind..."

I do not mean to make it sound like only women are the victims. I've had plenty of friends...good friends...think some beautiful Russian model was tired of the snow and crass, drunken Russian men and they could not wait to make a new life and hold hands with their far older and less attractive American boyfriend. It is only when I show the victims that their Russian bride-to-be has many different names and used the same ploys across the Internet did they begin to see the light. But they all still sent money hoping that one last monetary gift would be enough so their Russian girlfriend could visit them. But in every case, the Russian girlfriend ran into visa problems, which always required more money to resolve. Rinse and repeat.

## Defenses

Well, once someone is in love, it is extremely difficult to get them to see reality and stop sending money. Showing them that their loved one is using a false identity does not seem to help, although it does not seem to hurt either. I would always start there. Do some Internet searches on the person's name and any sent images. You can do 'reverse image' searches on pictures using Google, Bing, or any of the dozens of commercial services that do it. I love [www.pimeyes.com](http://www.pimeyes.com). It is scary good.

If you can show them that the identity they are dealing with is not real, it is a good starting place for the other information you bring.

I have great success with doing Internet searches on the romantic language they have used to make the person fall in love with them. Find a very romantic saying that was sent to the victim, for example, "I cannot wait to hold your hand and tell the whole world that I love you!" and put that into an Internet search engine, alone, or along with the identity's name. Oftentimes, you will get plenty of hits because this is not the first time the scammer has used the same language on different victims. For some reason, this sort of proof seems to mean more than even the identity proofing. I have seen this "wake up" more victims into at least questioning their loved one's motives.

Most romance scams are predicated on the victim sending the scammer money. There is always a reason why the scammer needs money. Tell the victim that true love will stay even if the other person does not get money, and to then withhold the next payment of money and say they are not going to send any more money to see what happens. The scammer will reply sweetly until the victim sticks to their commitment and repeats that they will not send money. At this point, the scammer will usually start calling them names, insulting them, and threatening them. It is not what true loves usually do.

The best defense is to educate people before they fall for a romance scam. Let your friends and family members who might be moving into the dating scene know that romance scams are a real threat. It is estimated that up to a third of all identities on many dating sites are romance scammers. Let them know that real romantic partners do not start asking for money early on in the relationship and do not get mad if they do not send money.

That is really all you can do.

An internet search engine is your best friend. And being a compassionate friend or family member if a loved one falls for a romance scam is the best that we can all do. Once the money runs out, the romance scam always falls apart. Be there to be a good friend. They are going to need it.

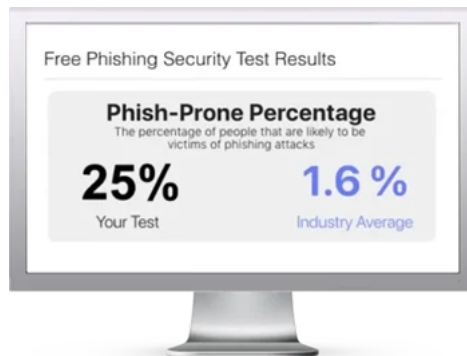
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## ABOUT ROGER GRIMES

Roger A. Grimes, CISO Advisor for KnowBe4, Inc., is the author of 15 books and over 1500 articles, specializing in host security and preventing hacker and malware attacks. Roger is a frequent speaker at national computer security conferences and his presentations are fast-paced and filled with useful facts and recommendations.



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