

The number of websites offering Internet match-making, online dating or relationship services has increase exponentially. With 2 billion Internet users worldwide as of January 2007, it is no wonder that more and more people are exploring the idea of meeting someone special via the Internet. There are plenty of success stories. This article, however, is a brief look at the darker side of online dating, and the potential pitfalls and risks.

Wymoo International, a global background check and investigative firm, has offered the following true case which occurred in 2006. Names and details have been changed or omitted to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the client. Some of the criminals in this case were eventually apprehended, although the client never fully recovered his financial or emotional loss. The aim here is to prevent future victims.

In February 2006, Paul McCrae, a successful U.S. business person, decided to explore the world of online dating. He signed up on a popular U.S. dating site and was soon contacted by Stephanie Blair of the United Kingdom. Stephanie appeared to be an honest, educated and hard-working girl. She was working in St. Petersburg, Russia as a financial analyst for a bristish investment bank. She made no requests for money, she sent daily emails and routinely phoned Paul in the U.S. She sent gifts for his birthday, and never expressed interest in moving to the States.

Months passed and the relationship progressed with phone calls, emails, letters, gifts, chatting via a webcam, etc. Paul, eventhough he had never met Stephanie in person, felt he could truly trust this person. Her pictures and voice were beautiful. She had a good job in St. Petersburg, came from a good family, and she had studied at a London university. She appeared to be the real thing. Paul finally agreed to visit her in Russia. He was in love.

In October, two weeks prior to Paul's scheduled flight to Russia, Paul received a phone call. It was Stephanie. She was crying. She had horrible news. She had been in a car accident and had a broken leg, broken ribs, and required a surgery on her lower back. She could not walk and was flown to a different hospital in St. Petersburg where the surgery was to be performed. The hospital required payment in advance, and Stephanie's credit cards were not accepted. She was desperate and needed cash.

Stephanie went through a total of 3 surgeries that same week. Paul spoke with staff at the hospital who updated him on her condition and the costs. She was expected to fully recover but it would take time. The total medical care cost was \$38,000 USD, all of which was paid for by Paul, who wired the money to the hospital representative via Western Union. After the final payment, Paul never heard from her again. The fraud was complete.

How did this happen? Paul had known this person for 9 months. He had trusted her, and she had never asked for money until her accident. They had plans together for their future. Paul was skeptical, approached the relationship with caution, but believed in her and loved her completely. His total loss was close to \$40,000 USD, and the emotional damage substantial.

Stephanie was a professional criminal. She new how to play the game. She knew she had to

invest time and money in the relationship for the big pay off. In fact, she worked for a business operating in international fraud. Male managers directed and paid the women employees a handsome salary, while instructing and teaching the female employees how to play the role.

Paul contacted Wymoo International after the relationship had ended. The investigation uncovered the criminals behind the scam and authorities in St. Petersburg and Moscow were alerted to the criminal's identity. The group was broken up and at least one person ended up in police custody. Warnings on blacklists and the Internet were made about the others. Paul recovered part of his financial losses but will never forget the experience.

The moral of the story is, if involved with anyone in a foreign country via a relationship on the Internet, get a background check. Be safe and sleep well at night knowing your intuition is right. Don't be a victim of the new advance fee fraud.

Be safe and happy hunting
