

Internet Dating and Romance Scams

United States citizens should be alert to attempts at fraud by persons claiming to live outside of the U.S., professing friendship, romantic interest, and /or marriage intentions over the Internet.

Typically, once a connection is made, the correspondent (who may claim that they are an active duty military service member) may ask the U.S. citizen to send money or credit card information for living expenses, travel expenses, attorney expenses, or "visa costs". Sometimes, the correspondent notifies the American citizen that a close family member, usually the mother, is in desperate need of surgery and begins to request monetary assistance. Scams have even advanced to the point where the U.S. citizen is informed of a serious or fatal accident to the correspondent and the "family" asks for money to cover hospital or funeral costs. Several citizens report losing thousands of dollars through such scams.

The anonymity of the Internet means that the U.S. citizen cannot be sure of the real name, age, marital status, nationality, employment, or even gender of the correspondent. In every case reported to the embassy, the correspondent turned out to be a fictitious persona created only to lure the U.S. citizen into sending money.

These scammers have created male as well as female characters and entice same sex correspondents as well as those of the opposite sex. A disturbing recent twist are scammers who have connected to U.S. citizens through chat rooms for HIV positive individuals, posed as HIV positive individuals themselves, and asked for money for treatment or travel to the United States.

Correspondents who quickly move to professions of romantic interest or discussion of intimate matters are likely inventions of scammers. A request for funds almost always marks a fraudulent correspondent. **U.S. citizens are cautioned against sending any money to persons they have not actually met.**

Romance scams involve one or more – sometimes all – of the key signs below:

- The scammer and the victim meet online – often through Internet dating or employment sites.
- The scammer asks for money to get out of a bad situation or to provide a service.
- Photographs that the scammer sends of "him/herself" show a very attractive person. The photo appears to have been taken at a professional modeling agency or photographic studio.
- The scammer has incredibly bad luck-- often getting into car crashes, arrested, mugged, beaten, or hospitalized -- usually all within the course of a couple of months. They often claim that their key family members (parents and siblings) are dead. Sometimes, the scammer claims to have an accompanying child overseas who is very sick or has been in an accident.
- The scammer claims to be a native-born American citizen, but uses poor grammar indicative of a non-native English speaker. Sometimes the scammer will use eloquent romantic language that is plagiarized from the Internet.

Gorgeous People in Trouble – The Soldier in Distress

The Setup: An American woman meets an alleged American man through an online dating service. After a successful online courtship, the two agree to meet. However, before they do, he must travel overseas to serve his country in the military. While out of the U.S., he befalls an unexpected tragedy. His life and freedom are in danger, and is counting on her to help her through this difficult time.

The Tragic Circumstances: The traveler allegedly becomes a victim of a violent crime, and needs assistance taking care of their hospital bill. If he does not pay the bill, he could face imprisonment. Often, he claims that he has contacted the U.S. Embassy, but has been refused help.

The Expected Payoff: If she is sympathetic and assists him through his sudden crisis, the girlfriend stands to gain a large degree of gratitude from the young soldier. If all goes well, his gratitude for this emotional support will translate, she hopes, into significant goodwill and affection from him when they finally meet.

The Financial Catch: Part 1: Eventually his needs change from emotional support to financial assistance. The tragedy that befell him entails monetary costs – he must pay the hospital fees before he can return to see his new love. The financial needs range from \$500 for bribes to \$2,000 for the hospital. The unfortunate traveler ends up having serious problems on his way to America. Even after his American girlfriend pays his visa fees and contributes several hundred dollars toward his plane ticket, there are still many more unforeseen expenses.

Part 2: He discovers the host government has a requirement that all departing citizens must prove that they have sufficient funds for travel.

Part 3: To make matters worse, when he finally overcomes all the bureaucratic hurdles – thanks to the girlfriend’s largesse – he has trouble in transit. During his stopover en route, he is allegedly detained by airport immigration authorities who believe his visa to be fake. Now he needs additional funds to pay a fine before embarking for America.

The Emotional Catch: In an effort to move the on-line relationship forward, the scam artist is quick to identify himself as the victim’s “boyfriend,” or even “fiancée,” sometimes with promises of marriage as soon as he can return.

The Bottom Line: The above-described scenario is particularly effective because it is not random spam, but is targeted at a specific victim. This scam has innumerable variations. Sometimes the young man – or woman -- in distress claims to be an American self-employed businessman, or Nigerian-American (thus the need to return to Nigeria for family reasons), a British citizen, occasionally not even American at all. Sometimes victims hear from a Nigerian “doctor” who claims to be treating the victim’s friend. Often the victim claims to have been kidnapped in the Niger Delta (the oil-producing region of southern Nigeria). What all the alleged unlucky travelers to Nigeria have in common, of course, is that they all need money. The scam artist may not even be the same gender as his/her on-line identity. Some victims speak on the phone with their on-line friend/scammer. In some cases, victims have already met their on-line correspondent in person once or twice; other aspects of the scam remain identical.

In all, the American citizen victim can lose any or all of the following: Over \$10,000 for hospital bills, \$200 for visa fees, \$800 for supplementing the plane ticket, \$1,000 to supply the BTA [requirement that no longer exists], \$500 for the fine at Heathrow, and hundreds in international phone bills.

Given the amount of time and effort spent by the perpetrator laying the groundwork, many American victims have trouble believing they are being scammed. Victims often report that they had been corresponding with the love interest (scammer) for several months, and only grudgingly recognize the scam for what it is after they learn of the economic realities of life in Nigeria.

Victims of this scam should review our brochure on [Resources for Victims of International Financial Scams](#).

Example A: Emails received by U.S. Consulate General Lagos from concerned victims of romance scams (messages edited for clarity and grammar; names are abbreviated)

Message 1:

Through Yahoo Personals, I was chatting with a woman who claims to be held against her will in a hotel in Lagos for her inability to pay the bill, which she claims wasn't hers to pay in the first place. She also claims the hotel manager seized her passport and her return flight ticket to the US, and will not give them back to her until she pays.

Message 2:

I received the following communiqué from an American citizen named Ms. D. She claims that she had traveled to Nigeria and had her belongings stolen and is "stranded" there. Ms. D. tells me that her return airline ticket is being held "hostage" pending payment of a \$500 hotel bill. She indicated that she is at the M. Hotel and that the manager there is named Mr. S.

Ms. D. has stated that she had her American Express charge card stolen but was told by AmEx that nothing could be done about it..... I find this a bit strange; however, in light of the state of the world's attitude towards Americans, I believe some prudence be exercised in this situation. Accordingly, would you please investigate this situation and help this lady as much as you can.

Message 3:

My boyfriend is stranded in Lagos. His personal assistant has left him there with no money and has stolen his money. He has no way of getting home. I have sent him all the money I can to help him get a plane ticket home. He still needs \$300. Is there anything that can be done? He is a United States citizen. He is from Jacksonville, Florida.

He is in the hospital now, because of the stress of being stranded there. He is in a very bad condition. Having severe pains in his chest. His name is J.A. I am not sure how many hospitals are in Lagos. I am still trying to get more details. If there is anything that can be done, please contact me and let me know please.

Message 4:

My fiancée is there in Lagos, Nigeria. She has been there for about 2 years in school. Thursday evening she was in a car accident and rushed to S. Hospital. She is an American and her name is S.J. from Kinston, NC. She speaks with a heavy African accent after being there for two years.

I have attempted to send her money so that she can leave the country, and both times the guy at Western Union stole the money.

Please help her. Nigeria is no place for an American – especially a woman with no friends, no family and no money.

Message 5:

I am writing to you because I have a very unsettling situation that has occurred. My fiancée departed Lagos via British Airways. She was detained by immigration officials at London's Heathrow Airport. I received a telephone call from an immigration officer. She told me that my fiancée had been detained for expired documents and that they were going to deport my fiancée, unless I, being her fiancé and sponsor, would pay \$2,500 in total fines for violating immigration law. She said that if I can raise the money in time, that they would release her and provide her with new documents so that she could continue her travel to the U.S.

The officer contacted me later and we began discussion over the fines total amount. She stated that there was an actual fine of \$1,200 for the violation. I stated that I think I could raise \$1,200 to pay. She said if I do that, then my fiancée could still be released and given new documents to continue travel.

On 9 Oct 2004, I collected \$1,200 and sent the money electronically, via the Money Gram Store. I was happy to send the money because I thought that the immigration officials would release my fiancée.

Since Tuesday, 12 Oct. 2004, I have not heard from the immigration officer or my fiancée. I have attempted to contact her via telephone but she never answers. Only the voice messaging service answers to leave a message.

I have been very stressed, worrying and hoping that my fiancée, be released and be allowed to continue travel to U.S. to be with me. I have not heard from her since this ordeal has happened. I want to know if she is in good health and that she is okay. Please, I request of you for help in this terrible situation and I thank you, in advance, for any help you may provide.

Example B: Instant Messages transcript between romance scammers and their victims (some grammar, spelling, and offensive language edited; names are abbreviated)**Conversation 1:**

Scammer: How re you today?
American: I'm doing well. You are SUCH a pretty woman!
Scammer: Where did we meet -- on African Singles or Single Me?
American: Dreammates, maybe?
Scammer: How're you doing?
American: I'm doing fine.....are you in Hawaii?
Scammer: Nope get hooked up with little problem here
American: "Hooked up with a little problem?" Explain, please.

Scammer: You care to know? I don't think you can help me out of this mess.

American: Well.....tell me and we will see.

Scammer: My dad he's from us and my mum is from Spain. So I'm a honest lady. And I'm trustworthy lady. And I don't like people cheating. Right now I'm in West Africa. There was a guy that I met when I'm still at home in Florida (two month ago) so the guy told me that he love me. And I told him that I love him too. So he traveled to West Africa. He called me and chat with me on the phone. He really felt in love with me. So he said I should come and visit him in the hotel. So I went down to West Africa, to the hotel and we meet each other in person. But I don't really know that the guy doesn't love me. We have fun and know much more about each other together in the same room. And the next day I can't find this guy any more he ran away with all my money and my goods. All I need now...

American: All you need now?

Scammer: Your help. If you can help me to raise fund and I will pay you back when I get back to the States.

American: How much do you need?

Scammer: \$500 US dollars.

American: Don't you have a credit card?

Scammer: Yes that [swear word] stole everything away from me.

American: Which credit card is it?

Scammer: American Express.

American: Did you call them to let them know?

Scammer: Yes, I did and there is nothing they can do about it.

American: Not true.

Scammer: Please help me out of this mess and I will pay you back. If you don't believe me then bye.

American: For someone who seems to need help, you have very short patience, why is that?

Scammer: Oh, patience? Is that all you have to tell me when I am stuck here?

American: No, but I would like you to explain what you did to extricate yourself from your situation first. You might have some options.....

Scammer: What option? Please tell me.

American: Is Amex your only credit card?

Scammer: Yes.

American: Can you not get a hold of your father?

Scammer: I have no family. They all died in a plane crash on their way back from UK.

American: Did you have a round trip or one-way ticket?

Scammer: The manager seized my ticket because I am owing the hotel bill

American: Which airline did you fly on?

Scammer: British Airways

American: Which country are you in?

Scammer: West Africa

American: Which airport will you need to fly out from, and where do you need to go?

Scammer: I will come back to the States as soon as the manager gets the money paid. Without that I am going nowhere.

American: How much do you owe?

Scammer: \$500

American: Which hotel are you staying at?

Scammer: Masacca hotel

American: What is the name on your passport? Are you an American citizen?

Scammer: V.D. Yes I am.

Scammer: My father is from America.

American: Have you called the American Consulate?

Scammer: The one here told me that the manager said I will have to pay the bill before he can release my ticket and after that they can do any other help for me.

American: You are being held against your will?

Scammer: But why asking all this question? All I want from you is just that you help me out of here and I will pay you back when I get back to the States. Are you willing to help me?

American: I am, but you must give me reason to believe that this is not just another scam as well.

Scammer: Ok what will I do for you to believe me?

American: How do I know you're not the guy that ditched you and are using her id?

Scammer: The hotel manager's name is Mr. Solomon

American: Is West Africa the name of the country you are in?

Scammer: No. Nigeria.

American: Are you sure about the name of the hotel? I don't see it listed anywhere.

Scammer: I think you can't see it in the USA

American: V., I need to take care of something. I will have to return. I have an emergency here. My son called me on his cell. He has been involved in a car accident.

Conversation 2:

Scammer. And how are we going to meet?

American: It'll be in March but I can fly you here if you can't pay your way.

Scammer: When?

American: Mid march

Scammer: Ok

American: Have you ever rode in a big truck around America?

Scammer: No

American: You wanna?

Scammer: If you want me.

American: Ok cool! Then we can do all sorts of things then!! If you have an open mind it can be a ton of fun on the road!

Scammer: Like what?

American: You'll get to see things that you've never seen before. It's like having a tour of the United States. And I'll be your personal tour guide!

Scammer: Ok, but I think you should have let me come and see your lovely face before ending of this month. Why March?

American: I have to get settled in Nashville first so I have a place for you to come to.

Scammer: See, when I love you I love you for real.

American: Plus that's when I know I'll have the money to pay for your ticket over here.

Scammer: I will be sleeping in where you sleep...

American: You're so sweet!

Scammer: And if you don't mind we will go to Ohio to my dad's house.

American: We could do that.

Scammer: Thanks. So if you wish I come, send the money trough Western Union so I will pay for the ticket.

American: Can't I pay for the ticket form over here?

Scammer: Yes, I do agree and that could have been the best, but Nigeria government says it does not improve their economy system so they have banned any imported ticked buying in other countries.

American: [expletive] that [expletive]! Ok, I'll find out how much that'll cost me.

Scammer: Can you imagine this Nigeria? That's is why I hate them. The ticket is \$1200. You will send it trough Western Union. Then I will go and collect and pay the ticket.

American: I'm sending the \$1200 to a bank?

Scammer: Yes. Let me ask you a question. Because I need true love. If you know that you really love me and you want to marry me then send the money. I will come and see you, but if you don't love me and you never want to marry me please, I don't want to see your money and don't send any. Please, I need true love.

American: I printed your pictures off of the dating site and I look at them everyday. I hope you don't mind.

Scammer: Let me tell you, if you will see me from morning 'til night when I come you will. And if you will talk for hundreds hours I will with you, Honey. I love you because I have a strong believe that you are a trust worthy man and man that will be a father of my children.

American: The men are going to see this drop dead gorgeous dirty blonde haired, blue eyed girl walking through the airport and they are going to just fall out at the sight of you!!

Scammer: And nothing they would do because I belong to you C.

American: I cant believe my luck!! Is these pictures really you?? My God I would be the happiest man walking!!!!!!

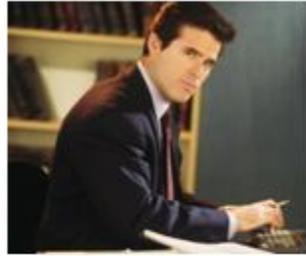
Scammer: I love you honey and I will always love you since you continue treating me well

American: Is the girl in these pictures really you?! I just can't get over your beauty!!!! I can't believe my luck!!!!!!

Scammer: C., would you send the money this week so I may buy ticket

American: Aww babe, I don't have the money yet. I will get it, though. Don't you worry your pretty lil head, hun.

Example C: Types of photos used by "Gorgeous People in Trouble" scammers--



Example D: Types of fake passport used by romance scammers to convince victims of their travel intentions

