

An internet love rat took \$13K & my heart!

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An educated woman, June couldn't believe she fell victim to the evil stalking the internet



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Flicking TV channels, there was one romantic movie after another. 'I'll love you forever, an actress whispered. 'Don't count on it,' I sighed.

I was 47 and separated from my husband of 26 years. I had been on my own for the past year and my tolerance for romance was wearing thin.

'You've got to put yourself out there,' my neighbour Geoff told me one day. 'You'll get snapped up straight away.'

He had a point. As a business manager, I was doing well in the career department - I just needed to be as successful in love. Spurred on by Geoff's encouragement, I registered with some online dating sites.

Trawling through, one profile caught my eye. His name was Curtis Benneth and his sparkling eyes had me intrigued.

'Not bad,' I smiled.

Curtis was my age, from Brisbane and owned a recruitment consultancy.

I'm looking for a relationship, his profile read. Scrolling down I saw he was a widower.

'Poor guy,' I sighed.

I clicked on the Interested button and Curtis' email address came back. Hi, I typed. Your profile sounds interesting.

You're beautiful in your picture, he replied.

I blushed. It had been so long since anyone had told me that.

Chatting away happily, we had everything in common. Anything I told Curtis I enjoyed, he enjoyed too. I'd love walking along the beach with you, he wrote. Me too, I typed, feeling 16 years old all over again.

When Curtis sent me a picture of him swimming with a dolphin, I couldn't help smiling. He looked like such a down-to-earth Aussie bloke. The next day, our emails continued.

My wife died six years ago, he wrote. I'm sorry, I replied, wanting to squeeze his hand.

I got butterflies as I waited for Curtis' messages. 'He's lovely,' I confided to Geoff.

'He could be the one.'

'You deserve it,' he smiled.

The next day Curtis explained he was based in the UK. Oh no, I typed. How will we be together?

Anything's possible, he said.

He seemed so genuine and as our conversations continued, I began to think he was right. Then, just four days after we started

chatting, Curtis had a revelation for me.

I love you, June, he wrote.

It'd been so long since I'd heard those words. It seemed way too soon but I couldn't deny we had something.

I have feelings for you too, I typed back nervously.

That night I thought about a future with Curtis. I desperately wanted to meet him in person. When I logged on the next day, Curtis had another surprise.

I'm going to Nigeria for work, he wrote. I'm tendering for a huge government contract.

Don't ask me to send you any money, I joked. I'd heard about Nigerian scams on the news and thought Curtis would understand my innocent joke.

What do you mean? Curtis replied, sounding very offended. How could you think that?

But after I explained, Curtis calmed down and promised to come to Brisbane when he was finished.

A week later Curtis left me a number to contact him at a hotel in Nigeria. I couldn't wait to hear his voice for the first time. Nervously, I dialled the number but it didn't work. Maybe it's a bad line, I thought.

Calling the hotel's reception, I asked for Curtis' room.

'I'm sorry, but no-one by that name staying is at the hotel,' came the reply.

He's probably listed under a government name, I thought.

That night I ran into Geoff.

'How's the romance?' he asked. 'Great,' I smiled. 'He's in Nigeria for work now.'

'Well, be careful he's not a scammer,' he warned me. 'Don't send him any money.'

'I won't,' I promised.

Back online, I asked Curtis about the phone problems.

It's a misunderstanding, he wrote, reassuring me.

A week later, I was still smitten and was itching to meet my new boyfriend in person. I'll be there soon, sweetie, he promised.

Then he explained that Nigerian businesses worked differently to those in Australia. To successfully fill the contract at work, he would have to fork out some money first.

I've sold my house and car but I'm still short, he wrote. It could be a while until we're together. Unless...I held my breath, dreading his next words...you could lend some money?

I was shocked. Suddenly, I questioned everything Curtis had said. How could you ask me that? I typed furiously. I'm not falling for some scam!

Seething, I buried my face in my hands. But later as I thought of our conversations and the picture of Curtis swimming with the dolphin, it seemed so real to me.

Do I trust him? I thought.

Lying alone in bed that night, I dreamt of Curtis' arms wrapped around me. I knew sending him the money would bring him to me sooner.

Next morning, I took a deep breath and logged on. I'll send you the money, I typed. I'm forever grateful, came Curtis' reply.

Reluctantly, I sent Curtis US\$7000 via a Western Union account. A week later, Curtis had bad news. There's been a delay. It's going to be another two weeks until I can come.

My heart sank, it wasn't just my money on the line, my heart was too. Then Curtis dropped another bombshell.

I'm going to need US\$3500 for airfares, read the message. Once this is over, we'll have everything we want.

I wanted that so much. Let me see what I can do, I typed.

Re-reading some of his emails, I could almost hear his calm voice promising his love. Still, I didn't want to be fooled.

Send me a copy of your itinerary, I wrote. I just need to be sure who you are.

Curtis sent me a list of flights from Nigeria to Brisbane and it reassured me. I almost felt bad for having asked. Later that day I deposited some more money into his account.

Two days later, I nervously drove to Brisbane Airport to meet him for the first time. My thoughts were all over the place. Would our connection be as strong in person? Was he my soul mate?

As passengers flooded into arrivals, I searched anxiously for him. Minutes passed by and the crowds slowly dwindled. He's moving his entire life here, I thought anxiously. He's probably getting his luggage.

But after an hour-and-a-half, Curtis was nowhere to be seen.

At the information desk, the clerk put me on to the police. Typing on a computer, the officer looked up at me.

'He didn't board the flight,' he said. The words broke my heart. 'It's all a scam,' I cried.

But I needed to know for sure. 'Contact the fraud squad,' the officer advised me.

Shortly after, my mobile phone rang. 'This is Dr Adewale from Nigeria,' came a voice. 'Curtis has been in an accident. We need you to send US\$3700 for his operation.'

Shaking my head in shock, I realised how stupid I'd been. I hung up without saying a word.

Phoning the police, I recounted every detail of my story. 'It's all a scam,' the officer confirmed when I had finished.

'How could I be so gullible?' I cried, shocked at the betrayal.

Looking back, the warning signs had all been there but I had stupidly excused them.

Curtis had told me his interests only after I'd told him mine. He said he was widowed to gain my sympathy. He got defensive when I commented about scamming and when he finally asked me to send him some money, he promised me the world in return.

I was left heartbroken and couldn't believe, as an educated woman, I'd fallen for a classic Nigerian romance scam and sent heartless thieves around AU\$13,000 of my hard-earned cash. They'd preyed on my vulnerability and it'd worked.

Today, it's been almost two months since I discovered my online romance was all a lie.

I want to warn others that, if they're in a similar situation and have any suspicions, contact the police. I've come to accept I'll never get my money back but at least I can help others.

Now, I'm slowly moving on. I haven't given up on finding romance. I'm more than happy to give someone my heart but this time, I'll definitely keep my money to myself.

Have you fell victim to online fraud? Ever fallen in love with someone who turned out to be very different to who they said they were? Share your stories by commenting below, and warn other readers of the potential dangers of the internet.