

Weekend Herald

The New Zealand Herald

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The Kiwis unexpectedly raising grandchildren

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Life through the lens

Photo: Alex Burton



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'MISLED BY HIS LIES'

Divorcee loses \$580k in romance scam involving criminal posing as US oil worker

Lane Nichols

An overseas scammer posing as an eligible oil rig worker looking for "long-term" love tricked a vulnerable Whanganui divorcee into falling for his online affections before convincing her to send \$580,000 over a period of 14 months so they could be together.

She thought she was funding a Northern Hemisphere oil project until her new boyfriend's temporary cash flow problems were resolved and he could travel to New Zealand.

She believed he would pay her back once he regained access to a \$3 million fortune sitting in a hacked UK bank account.

But the man was a criminal preying on her trust and naivety, and the money was lost overseas.

The elaborate romance scam was only revealed when a friend noticed an open email on the woman's computer and alerted family to the cruel deception.

The victim has now recovered, rekindled her marriage and says she wishes she could "turn back the clock".

Documents obtained by the *Weekend Herald* show the woman only spoke to her supposed boyfriend on the phone once, but communicated daily via the encrypted online Viber app, exchanging thousands of messages and photos.

He claimed he



A photo sent by a scammer using the name Scott Thomas.

Don't get scammed

Watch out for the following red flags:

- Watch for people who always have excuses about why they can't meet you in person or even video call.
- For those who are often in a hard-to-reach place (eg working on oil rigs, in the military, working overseas).
- Watch for people who seem to always have a sob story (eg a child or family member is sick) and there's always a degree of urgency.
- If looking for love online, be wary about who you're speaking to.
- Be careful what you post and make public on the internet. Scammers can use details shared on social media and dating sites to better understand and target you.
- Research the person's photo and profile using online searches to see if the image, name, or details have been used elsewhere.
- Beware if the individual seems too perfect or quickly asks you to leave a dating service or social media site to communicate directly.
- Note if the individual attempts to isolate you from friends and family or requests inappropriate photos or financial information that could later be used to extort you.
- Anyone who has been the victim of a scam can contact Police and report the matter via 105.

Source: NZ Police

came through but the money never arrived.

"My family have recently discovered what has happened, and are helping me to come to terms with the reality that I have been a victim of severe online romance fraud," the victim wrote.

"I deeply regret everything that has happened and wish beyond anything else I could turn back the clock."

The woman's husband said the scam was detailed and prolonged.

It occurred while the couple had been divorced in 2019 and 2020, and before they rekindled their relationship in 2021 and remarried last year.

"If I'd known the details I would have spotted it straight away," he told the *Weekend Herald*. "I guess she's more vulnerable."

He said his wife met the scammer online in September 2019. The man told her he had worked for New Zealand Oil Services but was on contract with Suncor Energy on an oil rig off the Canadian coast.

"The relationship developed, money started being sent and it amounted to over half a million."

While the scammer's story seemed far-fetched, the wife was completely convinced the relationship was real.

"Apparently the guy was immigrating to New Zealand but in fact he's stolen some guy's identity. [The wife] can see the guy's picture but that wasn't actually the guy."

"He was in the oil industry. He was running a team and his funds were tied up and he needed to pay his team. The guy was saying he's coming to New Zealand to be with [the wife] but this was holding him up."

After being confronted by relatives about the scam, the victim was initially "in denial", the husband said.

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