Mail-Order Bride Scams

by M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP
Associate Professor, Information Assurance
Norwich University, Northfield VT

My friend Raoul is a highly intelligent, cultured man with a background in theater and radio who recently suffered a marriage breakdown. He called me up to ask me about whether it was safe to pay for stuff on the Internet using his credit card. Naturally, I gave him the usual spiel about safe credit-card use on the Internet being pretty much the same as in the real world: just as you may trust a waiter in a restaurant to take your credit card away to the back and bring it back to you with your bill without having copied the card, you may trust an Internet vendor to the same degree if you have grounds for doing so. In other words, trustworthiness does not depend on the technology but on the nature of the vendor. If you have a reason to trust someone doing business on the Internet, you are no worse off than doing business with the same person without the Internet. Check references, look for complaints, and avoid the known cheats.

However, years of doing technical support drove me to find out what the larger picture was. I’d hate to provide an answer that could lead someone into trouble because I didn’t understand the context. I asked, “But what is this about? What are you buying?”

Raoul said he was interested in paying for translation services to communicate with Russian (actually former-Soviet-Union, but I’ll just write “Russian” for convenience) women. Alarm bells immediately went off in my head.

I explained to Raoul that mail-order brides and introduction services are a classic scam for taking gullible men’s money. Criminals use photographs of attractive women to induce men to correspond with people claiming to be those women; profits come charging for introductions, billing inflated rates for travel arrangements and even charging for dates (hmm, why travel so far for an “escort service”?)). Sometimes, Russian women actually marry foreigners, especially Americans, move to the United States, gain citizenship based on their marriage, and promptly divorce their hapless victims as soon as possible – with a nice divorce settlement to boot.

Worse still, the women in such situations may actually be victims of human trafficking rings. Prof Suzanne H. Jackson of George Washington Law School summarized the situation in her July 2004 testimony <http://www.senate.gov/~foreign/testimony/2004/JacksonTestimony040713.pdf> before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate. Prof Jackson pointed out that the premises of the “international matchmaking organizations” (IMOs) include assumptions that the women being advertised are all generic, stereotyped products of their cultures – homebodies, docile, traditional and also sexy – who are devoid of individuality and will gladly become wives of anyone who applies. “Select one, she’s yours!” suggests a typical service. Some of these sites advertise minors for “marriage” and are supporting statutory rape. Some of criminals use the visas arranged for “brides” as a means of bringing slaves (yes, slaves) into the US and Europe for prostitution; some women are forcibly addicted to narcotics. In other cases, married people have bought a “bride” as a full-time prostitute and housekeeper, keeping the victim behind bars and in fear of the immigration police.
I directed him to type “Russian marriage scams” into a search engine. The top site on the GOOGLE list when I searched was AGENCYSCAMS.com, run by someone calling himself “Jim.” Jim writes, “My name is Jim. That is all you get. I am ruining the business of criminals. I get death threats from girls, guys (and I am sure, some mafia members) all the time. I don't feel like listing my full info and getting killed.” Jim explains his policies and procedures in detail <http://agencyscams.com/Who.html> and he seems legitimate to me.

One of his smartest tools is correlation of names and pictures. He tracks the multiple identities of these supposedly lovelorn Russian women and identifies the many names used for the same picture. Multiple identities for the same woman are a pretty good indicator of fraud.

The site has good, clear information for beginners and lots of specific case reports that should warn gullible, hopeful people off the scams. Perhaps the most significant lesson that Jim provides in one of his writings is that establishing a real relationship takes work: trying to make it easier by e-mail and a focus on remote Russian beauties isn’t likely to work. Instead of dreaming about pneumatic, idealized women, how about getting to know some real ones? Be kind, be thoughtful, be truthful, and do stuff together that you both find meaningful.


This is your Advice-to-the-Lovestarved columnist signing off for today. Da svedanya [Good-bye]!

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M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP is Program Director of the Master of Science in Information Assurance <http://www.graduate.norwich.edu/infoassurance/> and CTO of the School of Graduate Studies at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at <mailto:mekabay@gmail.com>; Web site at <http://www.mekabay.com/index.htm>.

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