

Tracey thought she'd met the man of her dreams. She couldn't have been more wrong...

Tracey Holmes, 48, Perth, WA

BLACKMAILED

by my ONLINE LOVER

Looking back, I can't believe I fell for his deception

Dreamy brown eyes, rugged good looks, muscular physique... Could this man help me find happiness again?

When my marriage of 20 years ended 12 months ago, I felt devastated and alone. To top it off, I'd also lost my job. My confidence had taken a battering.

Desperate for company, I turned to online dating. After setting up a profile I met a few guys, although our dates didn't lead to anything serious.

Then I found Ted Hamilton. His photo alone made butterflies swirl in my stomach. *I'd love to get to know you*, I typed, sending him a message. When he replied days later, I was thrilled!

Soon, messages flowed easily between us. It was just what I needed to forget my worries.

Ted told me he was an American businessman who supplied companies with wood.

Even though he lived in California in the states, the distance didn't matter. He was intelligent, professional and not afraid to tell me about his daughter Jessica, 11. *I want her to have a mother figure*, he wrote.

His honesty made me open up about my kids, Gemma, 24, Zoe, 20, and Logan, 18, too.

A week later, we chatted for the first time over the phone. 'I'm in Brazil for business,'

he explained. His voice was so sexy. I was hypnotised! We'd message each other all day and talk on the phone at night. Suddenly I didn't feel so lonely anymore.

Within a month, I was in love. Ted felt the same and we began making plans for the future.

'I can't wait for you to meet the kids,' I beamed.

One night, a few days later, Ted called saying that he really missed me. 'Send me a photo of yourself,' he said, suggesting I might pose for him in lingerie.

I was a little shy at first. But then I thought, *what's the harm? We'd committed to each other after all.*

So, stepping into my most feminine underwear, I snapped a few cheeky shots.

'You're beautiful,' he whispered. I felt so special.

Not long after though, Ted called in a panic. He'd invested all his savings in his business and needed extra cash to pay his tax bill - \$22,000 in total.

'Please can you help me?' he begged. My heart went out to him. By now I'd do *anything* for my man. But I didn't have the money and friends and family weren't able to help either.

What could I do?

'If I lose the business it will be your fault!' Ted hissed the next time he called.

When he started becoming distant with me, I felt terrible. If only I could help, everything would be all right. I didn't want to be lonely again...

So, I started applying for jobs and landed a role in advertising and marketing early this year.

From that moment, almost every cent I earned went to Ted. *It's for our future*, I reasoned.

The first \$3000 I gave him paid for his hotel bills. 'Thank

you so much,' he said lovingly,

suggesting that it'd be cheaper if I

gave him access to my computer and bank account

so I didn't have to pay fees.

I know what you're thinking - wasn't I worried? But the truth is, I trusted Ted completely and was obsessed with helping him.

I'd willingly go without, so he had enough to keep his business going. Over the next few months I gave him \$25,000 in total.

'Mum, you need to stop!' Gemma urged. I couldn't help feeling she was interfering, so I sent the money in secret.

But gradually, Ted became distant again. When he started only getting in touch when he

wanted something, I confronted him. 'This isn't good enough,' I cried. 'I deserve better!'

But he told me I was overreacting. Maybe I was...

One day, I was searching online for some relationship advice when I stumbled across a website called 800NOTES that enables you to type in a phone number to get details of who it belongs to.

Curious, I typed in Ted's digits. What came back left me absolutely stunned.

The man using this number is a scammer! someone posted on the site. *Ted Hamilton is not who he says he is...* What?

'You don't believe it do you?' Ted asked me when I told him.

I didn't want to, but suddenly it was like a veil had been lifted from my eyes. I'd been a fool. Now I could see him clearly for what he was. A conman.

The next time he rang for money, I refused. That's when his charm turned sinister.

'Think about your children,' he hissed. 'I know everything about you Tracey.'

Terrified, I hung up the phone. What had I done? Still trembling, I called the police.

'I think I've been scammed,' I cried. The whole sorry story came tumbling out, but my torment wasn't over yet.

If you don't give me

money I'm going to release your photos online, Ted wrote.

Oh no. I'd forgotten about the images I'd sent him when I was under his spell. If those pictures were leaked it would ruin me. 'Please don't,' I pleaded. 'I have children.'

When Ted kept blackmailing me, I gave him my last \$1900. Then he demanded another \$10,000 but I had nothing left.

At rock bottom I gave all the information I had to the police.

Telling them about the photos was hard enough. Being honest with my kids was even more difficult. 'We're just glad you can see the truth now,' Gemma said.

A month later, I've closed my bank and email accounts, but Ted's still trying to contact me on Skype. The police are investigating and believe the photos 'Ted' sent of himself were taken from an innocent man's social media site.

I'm sharing my story because I want 'Ted' to be caught - but most importantly, I want to warn others. Please, learn from my mistake. ■

As told to Smita Mistry

LOVE & LIES

Detective Senior Constable Rob Martin from WA Police Major Fraud Squad says:

'Dating scams where lonely men and women are fraudulently induced into sending thousands of dollars to overseas criminal groups, in the belief that there is a real prospect of long-term relationships, is of major and growing concern. Both the psychological and financial effect on victims and their families is horrendous.'

Tracey has greatly assisted our team by telling her story to warn others of the dangers of being caught up in these schemes and the disastrous consequences that follow.'

For more information on scams, visit the WA ScamNet website at www.scamnet.wa.gov.au or go to www.scamwatch.gov.au.



'Ted' passed off this innocent man's photo as his own - it was likely stolen off a social media site

'If you don't give me money, I'll release your photos...'



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