

# CAUGHT IN THE NET

**It seemed like my dreams were finally coming true...**

**M**y Google search showed hundreds of pictures of idyllic houses overlooking pristine beaches. I sighed, thinking how wonderful it would be to buy a place like that for my son Martin. He was 39, newly married and had always wanted to live by the beach. My husband Chris had died a decade earlier and I knew I'd never afford a place like that unless I won the lottery! It was astounding that I'd managed to save \$60,000 for my retirement.

As I checked my emails, my labradors Julio and Rockie snoozed at my feet. *What it must be like not to have a care in the world*, I thought.

Then I noticed an email from someone called Alan Curtis in my inbox. The subject line read: "Congratulations!" Opening it, I was shocked.

Alan was the customer service manager for Samba Private Banking Group - acting on behalf of the multinational company, Google. I'd been selected as one of eight winners in the company's Email Electronic Online Sweepstakes, he said.

I'd won a staggering £650,000 - the equivalent of nearly \$1 million!

"I can't believe it!" I told Martin over the phone.

"How do you know it's for real?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't it be?" I replied.

I used the Google search engine all the time, so it made sense to be one of the winners. Also, I didn't see what anyone could gain by making such a thing up.

"I've Googled the London address in the email and it checks out," I told Martin.

"It just sounds too good to be true," he replied, worried.

To me, it sounded like my prayers had been answered!

I called my friends Wendy and Noelene to share my news but they were concerned, too.

licence and passport for identification purposes.

After pressing send, I sat back and fantasised about spending my winnings. I'd be debt-free, have money to travel, and be able to buy Martin his dream home.

I was buzzing with excitement and didn't sleep a wink.

Days passed with no reply and I felt a bit disheartened.

Then, after a week, I received an email from Alan.

He said the Samba Bank's Funds Transfer Unit required \$1155 to send my prize money.

It made sense: I figured fees are usually charged for foreign currency conversion.



**I wanted Martin to start married life in his dream home**

*I sat back and fantasised about spending my winnings*

"Are you sure it's not a spam email?" asked Wendy.

"People win lotto money and competitions all the time; why is it so hard to believe it could happen to me?" I said.

I wasn't going to let anyone spoil my happiness. That night I replied to Alan's email.

*I'm thrilled to have won*, I wrote, providing all the personal details required to claim my prize. I also sent scanned copies of my driver's

As Martin and my friends hadn't been supportive, I kept quiet about withdrawing the money from my savings and transferring it via Western Union to Alan in London.

A few days later, he told me there was a problem.

As it was such a large sum, Alan said my prize money was being held up by Customs.

He'd spoken with the head of the tax office who'd told him a \$40,000 fee was required to

clear the prize money through Customs. Alan asked me to provide \$10,000 and said he'd cover the rest.

He called me to discuss it. "I'm sorry about this," he said. "Once we've received the payment, we can get the tax-clearance certificate and transfer your winnings. It'll seem like small change once you get your prize money."

Well-spoken and with an English accent, Alan seemed professional and trustworthy so I transferred the funds.

But a few days later, he reported another hold-up.

**Desperate to secure my future and help my son, I put my trust in Alan's emails**



My prize money had made it to Australia, but had been stopped by the Imperial Trust Financial Security Company.

"The funds need to be converted to Australian dollars, and that incurs a conversion fee of \$18,000. This is common practice for such a large sum," Alan said over the phone.

It felt wrong but I was so focused on receiving my prize I just did whatever I had to do.

Over the following weeks, I made several more payments to cover further fees.

Alan and I spent so much time on the phone, we were forming a good relationship.

"What are you going to do with your winnings?" he asked. "A lovely beachfront home for my son," I told him.

"And a holiday for yourself, I hope!" he said, chuckling.

A few months later, while trying to withdraw more of my savings, I was horrified to discover there was nothing left.

Poring over bank statements, I realised I'd transferred every cent of my \$60,000 savings!

But I was so close to getting my prize money. There was just one final hurdle to overcome - a Customs Clear Source of Funds Certificate, and a final settlement fee of \$15,000.

If I didn't pay, I'd be left with absolutely nothing - so I took out a loan to pay the fees.

Afterwards, I didn't hear from Alan for days.

When his email finally came, a scam warning from Google popped up on my screen ...

"What have I done?" I cried, confessing all to Martin.

He immediately contacted the WA Police. The next day, two detectives came to see me.

"We advise you don't reply to the emails," one officer said. "But, I already did ..."

I replied, my voice cracking. With pitying looks, they told me scams were on the rise.

"It's unlikely we'll be able to recover your money," they said.

"Now what do I do?" I said to Martin, completely humiliated.

"We pick up the pieces," he replied.

I want my story to serve as a warning to others. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is.

**Jane Harris, 60, Yokina, WA.**

**Tell us your story & receive up to \$2000**  
See our story coupon for details

AS TOLD TO SONJA KOWANIKO PICTURES: ALF SORBELLO