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## **Scam Alert – Sweetheart Scams – He Loves Me, Loves Me Not**

by Stacie Harris, Economic Crimes Unit

History of these type of scams trace back to the young girls flirting, flattering, befriending and defrauding the elderly males. Nowadays, this scam is not gender specific, nor is it age limited.

Let me introduce the "Robbing Romeos and Juliets" (hereafter referred to as R&J). These are con-artists that weasel their way into the hearts of their victims, using romance as an avenue to gain your confidence. R&J's perpetrate this scam through church groups, social clubs, online dating or chatting, grocery stores, banks and casinos. It used to be that only the financially well-off widows were the intended victims. Over time, this has changed. R&J's are not only out to gain your financial support, but they're now using their victims to commit these type of scams to mail items purchased with stolen credit cards and identities.

R&J's usually prey upon someone that has suffered a loss of a loved one, whether it is due to an untimely death or even by way of a divorce. The victim is usually feeling very lonely, no self-confidence, and just wants to fill this void in their lives. Any insecurities you may have during this time in your life are exactly what an R&J is looking for. This is the time they sweep you off your feet and gain your confidence by sending you flowers, giving compliments, phone calls or emails to brighten your day. Due to the insecurities the victim may be dealing with in their lives, they find themselves not wanting to let go of this arrangement and will hold on to it by whatever means necessary. R&J's need your emotional dependence. They have nothing to lose.

Once the R&J gains your confidence, they start playing upon your sympathy. Maybe they're unable to feed their children, they may tell you that they've fallen prey to a bad financial deal and need a little help financially to pay bills. R&J's have been known to not only obtain money this way, but also jewelry, cars, land and homes.

How long do they stay around? There's no time limit. If they feel they have a great thing going, they'll stick around for quite a while, or at least until the victim (or their family and friends) get wise to what is going on. It is only a matter of time before your money and the R&J are gone.

Online R&J's win your confidence in much the same way. They're always there to lend an ear to listen, or offer those comforting words and promises of great things to come with them. Many of the R&J's are not even located in the United States. They make promises of coming to visit you or sending you a ticket to visit them someday. Although some of the R&J's will be after just the victim's money, there are some that are after something quite different. An R&J will tell you that they have a small home-based business and that since they are located out of the area from where the merchandise is being ordered from, it would not be as expensive for them if they could just have your help in forwarding on the items. Some of these may even need to be mailed out of the United States. The R&J will even send the victim prepaid postage labels by email for downloading. Unbeknownst to the victim, these prepaid postage labels are more than likely counterfeit, and the items that they are being asked to mail are items that have been purchased with stolen credit card numbers belonging to victims of identity theft. The smooth talking R&J may also tell you that to thank you for your help in this, they'll send you a check. After you receive and acknowledge the check, they may tell you that they sent too much, or the victim may say it is just way too much for them to accept. The R&J will convince the victim to go ahead and deposit the check into their account and wire back a portion of it if that will make them feel better. All the victim has done is deposited a fraudulent check into their account and sent their own good money to the R&J. By the time the bank notifies the victim that the check was no good, this could put them in financial difficulties of their own if they have been spending against the money they thought was in the bank. The bank can, and will, legally hold the victim of this type of scam responsible for the missing funds in the account. If the funds are not replaced, criminal charges could actually be filed against the victim of the sweetheart scam.

Many people who fall prey to this type of scam, never report it. They are overcome by shame, disbelief that it happened to them, fear that family will discover it, or that they are in love with the con-artist. Those that are reported are usually done so by a family member or a friend of the victim.

How do you keep from falling prey to a Casanova Con?

- The cost of a background check is less than that of the financial or emotional loss that you could lose.
- When in person, or online, ask lots of questions. If you don't like the answers you are receiving, or they sound too good to be true, be careful as it may just be a scam.
- If you are doing online dating, use a reputable dating or chat service. Always follow the basic safety tips for online dating found on those websites.
- When meeting someone for the first time, make sure it is in a public place and you have told someone where you are going and who you are with.

If you do fall prey to this type of scam and have already sent money, there is little chance of ever recovering the money. Although you may feel ashamed of falling prey to this type of scam, understand that you are not the first one that they have taken advantage of and more than likely, you will not be their last victim. You still need to report the incident to the local authorities. Reporting it may help the authorities find the con-artist and prevent this from happening to someone else.

***~ IDENTIFY A SCAM BEFORE A SCAM IDENTIFIES YOU! ~***