

# A WEB OF LIES

**I thought I'd found love online - but was it too good to be true?**

**D**ark eyes, tanned skin and stunning smile - the girl in the picture was so beautiful.

And the best part was she fancied me, too! After being single for years, I uploaded my profile to a few dating websites. But it turned out I needn't have bothered, because the girl in the picture, Sarah Mensah, 32, contacted me through Facebook.

She was West African and living in Ghana. But the 11-hour time difference wasn't a problem: since my work as a security guard had dried up, I had plenty of spare time. Sarah seemed warm-hearted and kind - the perfect tonic for a lonely guy like me.

The more she told me about herself, the more I found myself falling for her.

But emails and phone calls weren't enough, so I suggested we talk via a video chat.

"Okay baby," she said, hooking up her webcam.

Seeing her on the screen she looked even more beautiful.

After four months of getting to know each other, Sarah said she wanted to visit me.

I was stoked. The only thing was she didn't have enough money to travel all the way to Australia.

I was pretty strapped for cash too but when she said her father, a gold merchant, wanted to help us meet, I was beyond excited.

"He'd love to talk to you, baby," she said.

I couldn't believe Sarah wanted me to meet her father. I was a barrel of nerves the first time we Skyped. But, just

like Sarah, he had a kind heart. "I can help you with gold so that she can visit you," he said.

"Thanks, but how?" I asked. "I can get gold bars shipped to you," he explained. "But it costs a few thousand dollars to arrange the paperwork and I don't have the cash for it."

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. I was unemployed and had no savings.

"We'll just have to save up instead," I suggested.

The next day Sarah told me her dad was upset.

"He wants to help us, but he thinks we don't care," she said.

The last thing I wanted to do was upset him so we decided to buy him a bottle of his favourite scotch.

"Can you transfer me \$50 for it, babe?" she asked.

"Okay," I replied, happy to help make amends.

I transferred her the money online through Western Union, and her dad was chuffed.

It was then I decided to tell my friends and family about Sarah. After all, it was only a matter of time before she'd be in Australia for a visit.

"Are you sure she's legitimate?" my daughter Hayley, 22, asked concerned.

her to everyone properly. Sarah and I continued to chat daily. Our conversations were now even more intimate, and she often surprised me with saucy photos.

Surviving on government payments and saving for her visit wasn't easy. But I'd transfer her small amounts of money to put towards her visa, so she could stay for 12 months.

She told me more about the opportunity to secure gold, and it did sound great. So I found a small loans company and transferred her dad money for the paperwork.

A year after we first spoke, Sarah was finally coming to visit me.

By then, I'd transferred about \$7000 to her, all up. She gave me her flight details and I couldn't wait.

I bought her a cute stuffed toy and I got a new haircut. I was nervous as I waited for her at the airport, watching all the passengers come through the Arrivals gate one by one. But Sarah never appeared.

I worried something bad had happened to her.

When I couldn't reach her, I called her dad on Skype.

"She's been detained in



I was contacted by the authorities



I fell for Sarah

I excitedly awaited her arrival, only to be left standing heartbroken at the airport.

Her dad told me she'd been detained in South Africa again and I transferred more money.

"Are you sure you're really trying to meet me?" I asked.

"Of course! How could you ask such a thing?" she said.

We continued to chat, but I couldn't shake my suspicions.

Weeks later, I received a letter from the WA Police Major Fraud Squad.

They stated the person I'd spoken to known as "Sarah" was an internet scammer.

In their investigation, Project Sunbird, they'd learnt that Nigerian scammers had fleeced West Australians of more than \$6.5 million.

I met with two officers. "Sarah doesn't exist?" I said.

"We don't know who she really is," a detective replied. "Sadly, your money is gone."

I was devastated. The relationship I'd had for nearly 18 months had been a sham. I'd taken out two loans totalling \$10,000 and was now in debt and completely alone!

When I received another message from Sarah I told her I knew she was a scammer.

I never heard from her again. I then attended a police media conference to tell my story and warn others.

It took me months to get over it; I wondered if I'd ever trust anyone again.

But I've recently found new love online, this time with a lovely Australian woman. We've met several times.

One thing's for sure: I'll never transfer anyone money again. Meeting people online can be a great experience, but it can also ruin your life.

**Paul Chester, 47, Perth, WA.**

## Our conversations were intimate and she sent me saucy photos

"Of course," I replied. With all the stories about male con-artists scamming women out of their savings, I understood her concern.

But I was no fool and I'd spoken to Sarah lots of times. I'd seen her over the webcam with my own eyes!

From then on, I decided not to disclose any more about our relationship. I'd wait until she was here so I could introduce

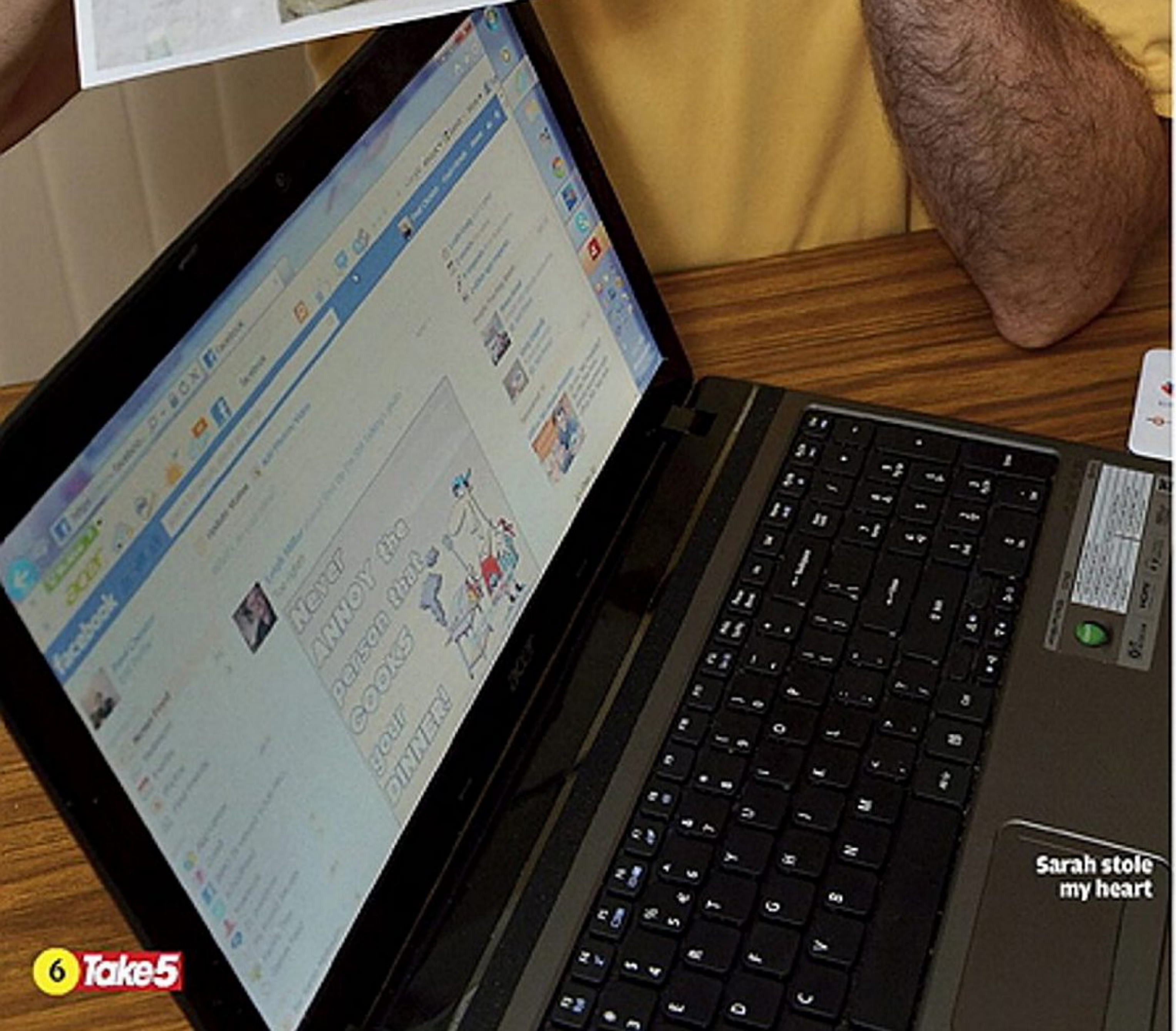
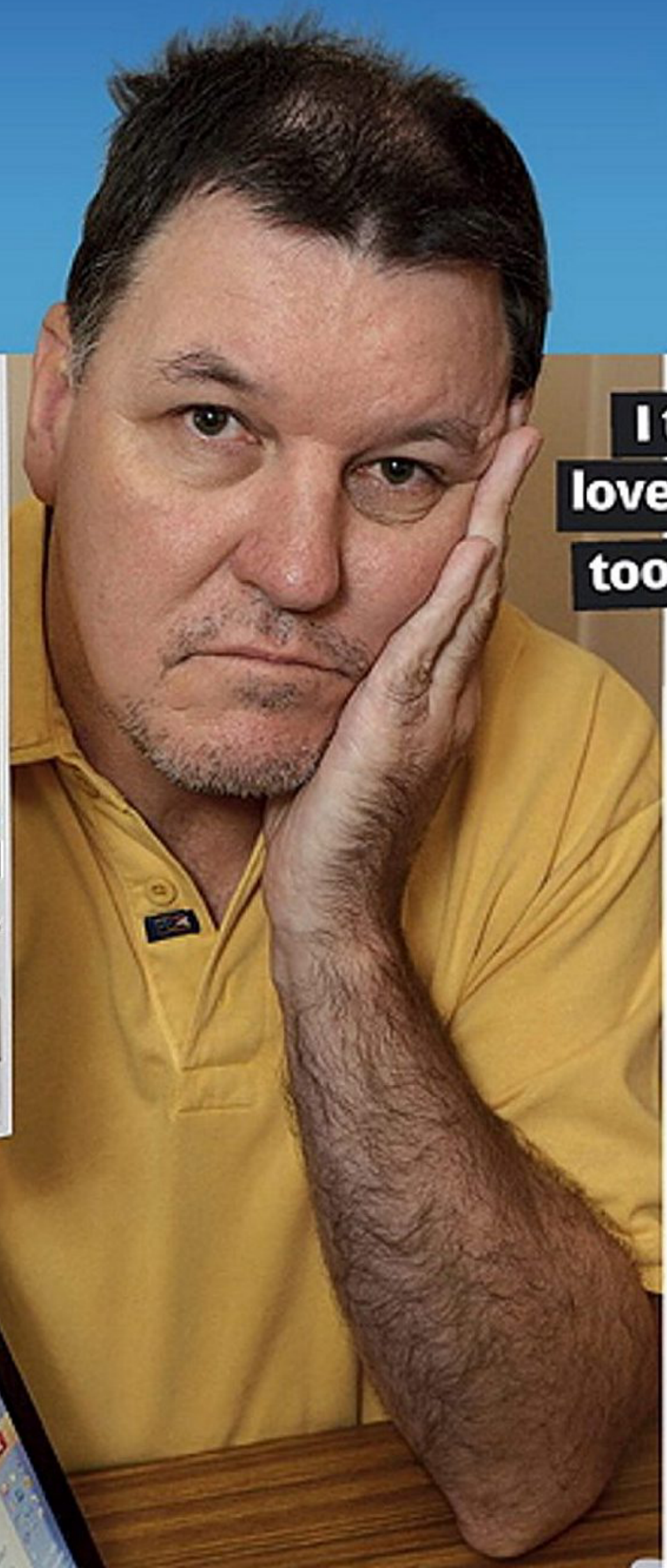
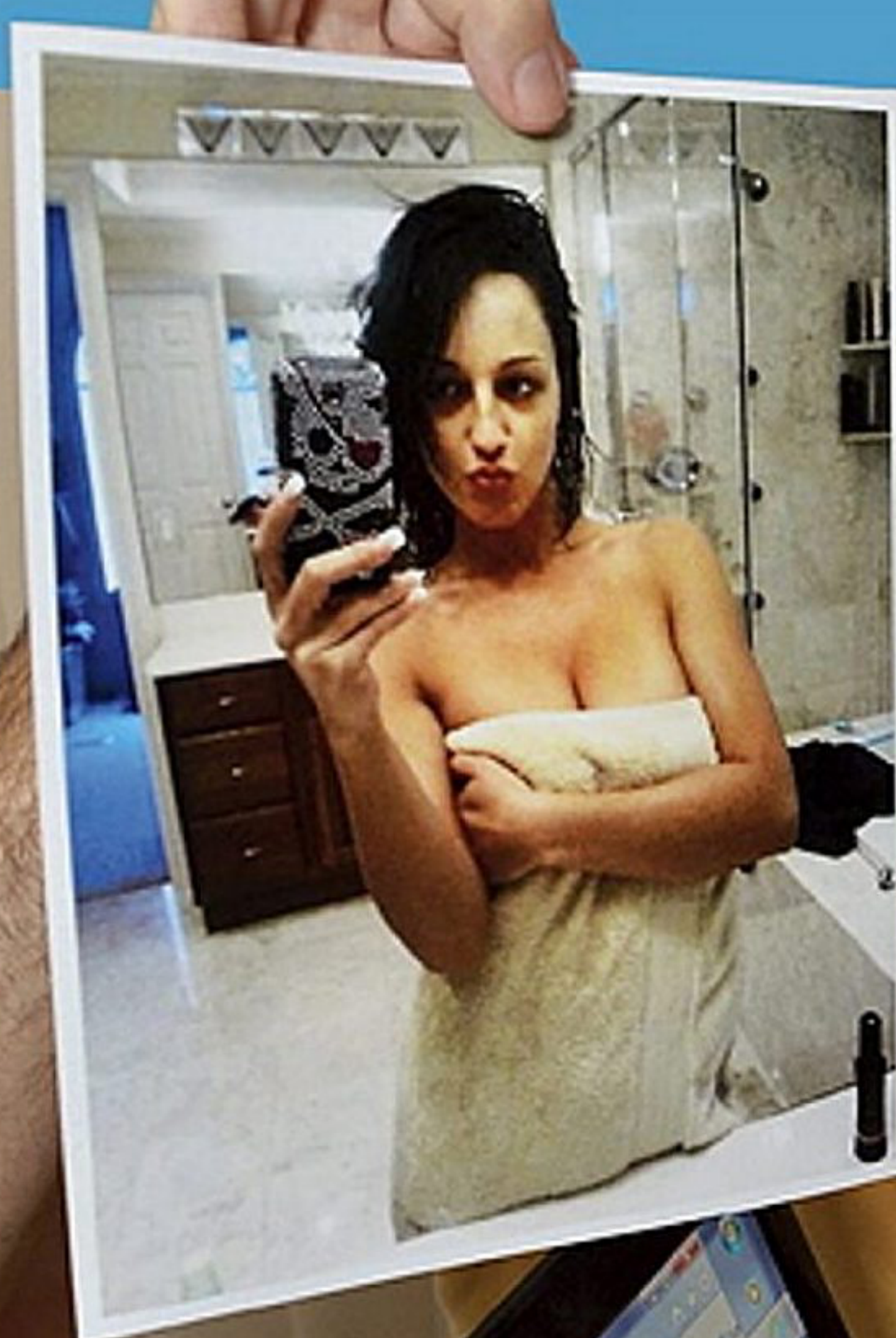
South Africa," he said. "The Australian Embassy wants money for her release!"

"We have to help her," I said. Over the next few weeks, I transferred \$1000 and a month later Sarah was home.

"It was so scary," she said. She was gutted about not making it to Perth.

"I'll try again soon," she said. But a few months later, the same thing happened.

NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED AS TOLD TO SONIA KOWANING PICTURES: ALF SOREBELLO



Sarah stole my heart

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