[Snap Judgment]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** Okay, so 15 years old, hot, humid Michigan summer day, and trying to start this piece of jump lawnmower before my father gets home and blows his stack. Besides yanking on the cord, kicking in, I don't know what to do, but I do know pop's ain't trying to hear my sorry excuses, so I'm trapped between our unmowed lawn in a hard place. And then, riding down the street like he's leading the parade, our neighbor buzzes up in his fancy fire engine red brand-new riding mower, grinning like he just ate the canary. Turns over to me, gestures at his machine. "Hey, mowing?" [chuckles] "Ha, wha-- actually, you know what? If I could use it for just a couple of hours, I promise I'll take great care of it and pull it right back into your garage." "No, no, no, no, no." He gets off. Tosses me the keys. "It's all yours."

What? I am no dummy. People don't just roll up and hand me expensive things. "Sir, I can't take." "No, no, no, you own it now. I won't be needing stuff like this no more, I'll tell you what." And I can see he's excited, he's fit to bust. "Sir, I can't--" "It's all yours." And he dances back down the street. Thank you. I'm still scared. Figure the police are going to pull up and take my black behind the jail for messing with this nice man's property. But the riding mower, this beautiful riding mower gleams in the afternoon sun, waiting for someone to sit on it.

I sit, rev it up, yee-haw, made quick work at a lawn, then mow the next-door neighbors just for the fun of it. You're welcome. Right when I figure I could make me some money with this, pops pull up. "Boy, put that back to where you got it from." "Mr. Vandersloot gave it to me." "Boy, have you lost your mind?" He marches me down the street to apologize for taking his good man's property. But the house is all locked up. Nobody home. We go back the next day, then the next day, and the day after that. "I'm telling you, he rode it down here and gave it to me." "Boy, stop it all his foolishness." Of course, I know all good things must come to an end, but I'm loving it while it lasts. Two weeks later, [door knock] there's a knock on the door. Mr. Vandersloot looking all sheepish, tired, hat in hand. "Hey, you mind if I get that lawnmower back from you?" "Sure." [keys jangling] I give him the keys. Pops goes out to talk and I don't hear this part. But he clears me of all charges.

Says he got an envelope in the mail says he won a million dollars, so he starts giving away all his stuff, he's going to make a new start. Maybe in a big city, maybe on the beach. It turns out, there's no million dollars. There's just a magazine company fooling with him, and he's sorry. He says he's really sorry about all this confusion. Sorry. Why? I think about the joy, the real joy he had in his face when he thought he made the big score, and the very first thing he tried to do, the thing that was in his heart to do, was to pass it on.

[upbeat music]

Today, on Snap Judgment only once, we proudly present This is Uncomfortable. My name is Glynn Washington. Everybody wins the big prize. Well, you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, every so often, you find yourself in a situation where what you took for granted, the rules of your world, they bend and break. I'm not talking about zero gravity. I'm talking about a bad breakup, losing your job, getting evicted. When things you've taken as a given in life change. These moments happen to everyone. How you choose to deal with it, that's up to you. And that's what today's story is about. A woman's quest to understand her world after it changes under her. Coming from her friends over at Marketplace's, This is Uncomfortable. It's a podcast, a show about life and how money messes with it. Producer Peter Balonon-Rosen has a story.

**Peter:** Let's hear. Can you hear me all right?

**Kari:** Yeah, I can hear you quite well, please tell me--

**Peter:** The other week I had this videocall. The person I was talking to is so protective about her identity that it was cameras off, only talk from an encrypted device. No real names.

**Kari:** Hey, I'm playing with criminals all day long. You will be careful as well in my place, right?

**Peter:** Well, I have you logged in here as Kari. I guess I'll just call you Kari.

**Kari:** Sure.

**Peter:** Okay, cool.

All right. So, yeah, Kari. And this I was able to get out of her. She grew up behind the Iron Curtain, now lives somewhere in Central Europe. She's in her 50s, and she's the type of nerd who considers *Dune* a holy text. Kari tells me at one point she had all the *Dune* books on display, next to Batman, Catwoman, and Harley Quinn action figures. She's also always loved space shows and *Star Wars*.

**Kari:** Science fiction is a way of helping you to open your mind to unexpected things and to discover things about yourself. It was a time when being a nerd was a stigma. Now, hey, I'm proud to be part of this.

[laughter]

**Peter:** Kari's story doesn't start a long time ago in a galaxy far, far, away. It starts just over a decade ago in Central Europe. She'd move there for love.

**Kari:** I was convinced that I have the perfect marriage until my ex-husband decided that he can have a perfect marriage with someone else.

**Peter:** He left her after 14 years.

**Kari:** I was quite devastated, to be honest with you, because you are in a foreign country. You are not young anymore. [chuckles] You don't have friends, you don't have family, you don't have no one near you.

**Peter:** Kari barely knew the local language conversations were a challenge. Instead, she'd wander solo down city streets and through parks, trying to wear herself out.

**Kari:** Just to keep myself moving and to get enough tired for sleep, to be honest.

**Peter:** Her sci-fi books *Dune*, Philip K. Dick's novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, they provided brief, necessary escapes from her own life.

**Kari:** It's creating a fake reality cocoon to help move ahead.

**Peter:** Eventually, Kari's friends from back home were like, "You got to snap out of this. Come back to the real world."

**Kari:** They came up with the idea, "Hey, how about if you join a dating site?" To be honest with you, I was quite apprehensive about it.

**Peter:** Why is that?

**Kari:** Because I wasn't liking very much the idea of dating online.

**Peter:** Her friends convinced her, "Just talk to another human. It doesn't have to be serious." Kari made a profile on the site called Badoo, and she selected where potential matches could be.

**Kari:** It was worldwide.

**Peter:** Worldwide. Okay.

**Kari:** Yeah. As long as we only talk and it's only online, it's no danger.

**Peter:** Almost immediately, the messages flooded in.

**Kari:** Well, I was shocked and surprised, because let me tell you something, I am not Cindy Crawford or Julia Roberts or something like that. [Peter laughs] To have tons of guys jumping on you in chat and telling you how beautiful you are and how amazing you are and that was the innocent part of it.

**Peter:** There were guys saying romantic things, like how they wanted to watch the sunrise with her, and then other guys saying unromantic things like, exactly what they wanted to do to her until sunrise. In between those guys, there was someone named John.

**Kari:** He's 47 years old, and he's from Los Angeles, California, but he's living in Iraq, and he's US military, part of the peacekeeping force in Iraq.

**Peter:** John had totally normal things to say, like, "How are you? Where are you from?" After a few exchanges, he did the online equivalent of, "Let's get out of here. Go somewhere a little more quiet."

**Kari:** He was saying, "You know something? How about if we move on Yahoo?"

**Peter:** They moved on to Yahoo Messenger. John said he couldn't use a webcam or phone on his military base for security reasons. Over the next few weeks, they messaged and emailed instead. John sent photos, brown hair, crew cut, military garb, straight-faced but with warm eyes. Talking with John, Kari felt he was genuinely interested in her. They'd message an email for hours. Kari sipping coffee at her desk with John, asking her about the sci-fi she was reading, whether she was getting enough sleep, about her dreams of having a family.

**Kari:** Let's be honest, in my real life, no one ever asked about them. [chuckles]

**Peter:** Yeah, that's really kind and caring.

**Kari:** Yeah.

**Peter:** Now, you probably see where this is going. Single woman meets a super nice man halfway across the world on a dating site. Makes you want to scream, "Run. It's a scam." And while we see it coming, Kari didn't. In large part because John had a son.

**Kari:** He was on the front, the kid was somewhere else. So, yeah, I was a little moved by his story.

**Peter:** If Kari thought John was nice, she really fell for his son Felix.

**Kari:** Sweeping me off my feet instantly.

**Peter:** The 14-year-old was living with a caretaker in Ghana while his dad was deployed. John told Kari he couldn't communicate with Felix, went out on combat missions. John asked if Kari could and emailing with Felix. Kari learned he was a lot like her. They were both in foreign lands, both far from family, both in need of a friend.

**Kari:** He want to be home and have a normal family like anyone else. That's a thing I could resonate to.

**Peter:** Felix even started calling Kari "mom."

**Kari:** I tried to have children before, and it wasn't working for me. I imagined that I can maybe have a life, where my life partner has a son of his own and I can consider him my son as well, without any problems.

**Peter:** It felt like a dream come true. Kari was so in love with that dream. That she didn't bat an eye when the money stuff started. One day, Kari was sitting at her desk, emailing John.

**Kari:** When John told me, "You know, Friday end of the week, as it be, it's Felix's birthday."

**Peter:** Oh, okay.

**Kari:** "How about if you buy him a gift to make him feel that you accepted him as your son?"

**Peter:** Kari had about €2500 saved up. She wired 1000 to get a new iPhone for Felix and pay for a birthday party. Then, when Felix needed an emergency surgery, Kari wired another €700 to cover it. In the hospital, Kari was told Felix caught cholera and needed €3000 for treatment.

**Kari:** I freaked out, of course.

**Peter:** Kari, concerned for Felix, scrambled to read whatever she could find online. About cholera in Ghana. And came across this article with info that stopped her in her tracks.

**Kari:** The government in Ghana offers free treatment.

**Peter:** Free treatment?

**Kari:** Yeah. And that was the moment when all my alarm bells start ringing. During along, I found an article about military people being impersonated online.

**Peter:** Kari scrolled through the entire article even what people were saying in the comments section.

**Kari:** Talking about military guys they met online and the money they lost because of those guys and how they believe that they will build a family together. [sighs] Yeah. I realized that something is happening that I don't understand and I need more information about it.

**Peter:** One day, Kari sat down at her computer, pulled up an email from John supposedly sent from a military base in Iraq, and plugged his info into an IP tracker, an online tool that tells you where an email came from.

**Kari:** I was giving an IP that was from a mobile phone in Accra, Ghana.

**Peter:** Accra, the capital of Ghana.

**Kari:** [sighs] In that moment, I realized that, "Yeah, no way my John is the real John. Hey, at least Felix might be real, so go and check Felix."

**Peter:** And all of Felix's emails, the supposed 14-year-old from the exact same IP address as John.

**Kari:** I was speechless for a while, looking at my screen and trying to understand, "What the hell? I'm living a fake romance. Not only that it's a fake romance, it's a fake romance that I am paying for."

**Peter:** Kari was living paycheck to paycheck, barely making ends meet. She had given them €1700, most of her small savings.

**Kari:** I was feeling like a fool, and I was feeling angry at myself because that makes you reevaluate entirely who you really are.

**Peter:** At this point, Kari could have cursed John out, blocked him, moved on. But instead, she got curious and made a decision.

**Kari:** That no matter what, I will not send him any more money, but I will keep the contact to see how things are going.

**Peter:** Interesting. Okay. Why?

**Kari:** Because I tried to understand and I tried to figure it out who is behind and why.

**Peter:** Yeah.

**Kari:** And to be honest with you, I was curious to see how far they will go.

**Peter:** Kari told John she couldn't pay for the cholera treatment. And what do you know? Felix recovered. After that, John told Kari, he wanted Felix to go live with her, but he needed her to send cash for travel documents. When Kari said no, a lawyer got in touch, saying Felix had come into this huge inheritance. They just needed Kari's help paying some legal fees. When Kari declined that, John said he magically found over a million dollars out on a military mission, which he was sending to Kari. She just had to pay for its delivery.

**Kari:** Step by step, he was confirming with each and every message that he is nothing but a scammer.

**Peter:** Yeah, honestly, it sounds exhausting getting asked for money left and right, left and right.

**Kari:** Yeah. To be honest with you, it was, "Obviously for me that this lie doesn't work, we will use another lie, we will use another lie, and we will use another lie."

**Peter:** Six months after meeting John, Kari decided she'd had enough.

**Kari:** I decided that it's time for the romance to end.

**Peter:** Kari sat down at the same desk where she'd sent flirty messages, where she'd confided in John how much she liked Felix and composed an email saying something very different.

**Kari:** I know that he is lying to me and I want to know why.

**Peter:** Kari got a reply saying.

**Kari:** "I am very sorry to be frank, I love you and hope to move forward with you. It's because of a hardship which made me to hurt you, but I love you now and hope to meet you one day."

**Peter:** How do you feel when you see that?

**Kari:** I was pissed. That was the moment when I stopped everything and I blocked him everywhere.

**Peter:** And she took things a step further.

**Kari:** I decided to do the right thing and warn people about my scammer.

**Peter:** Kari went on to a message board she found where people posted info about scammers. She posted everything she had on John and Felix. The messages, the photos they'd sent her, destinations for the money requests, their real IP addresses.

**Kari:** And the final messages that I received from him confirming that he's not the person from the emails.

**Peter:** How's that feel?

**Kari:** Empty.

**Peter:** All Kari could hear was her own voice in the back of her head.

**Kari:** Telling me that I'm a fool and I'm an idiot and I deserve what is happening to me. And that was just pushing me down more and more and more. I was [sighs] doubting my own judgment. I was doubting myself. I was feeling that no matter what I'm doing, every time when I choose something, it's ending bad.

**Peter:** Kari started staying home, away from a world that felt out to get her. She stopped cooking, stopped cleaning. Instead, fast food bags and candy wrappers littered the apartment. Making the bed no longer felt worth it.

**Kari:** I was feeling bad about myself.

**Peter:** She even stopped reading her beloved sci-fi novels.

**Kari:** Even if you want to enjoy things that were making you happy before, you cannot. There is a shadow about everything and above everything. I was just wondering if there is any way in this life I can deserve someone honest.

**Peter:** But something kept drawing Kari back to the computer. See, on that website where she'd posted John's information, she'd also found this anonymous chatroom, a place where scam victims could come ask for help and talk about what was going on. Kari had decided to join, not as a victim, but as someone who could help others, find information and confirm whether something was actually a scam.

**Kari:** I was having the feeling that helping them helps me understand what I am dealing with.

**Peter:** Rather than walking away from scams and scammers, like most people would have done, Kari decided to go deeper into the world that hurt her, the world of scammers, on a quest to fight them head-on.

**Kari:** I wasn't going on a mission to become something else. I wasn't trying to be someone else.

[pensive music]

**Glynn:** But sometimes, in the heat of battle, you lose yourself. That's after the break. Stay tuned.

[pensive music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to This Is Uncomfortable. When last we left, Kari had her heart broken by a scammer, but then decided, it was time to fight back.

**Peter:** Okay, so the first thing you got to do if you're going to take on scammers is like any superhero, come up with a name for your crime-fighting persona. Kari, staying very on brand, turned to sci-fi for inspiration.

**Kari:** My online persona is *Firefly*.

**Peter:** *Firefly*, also the name of a cult sci-fi western TV series set in the year 2517. Kari's first stop as *Firefly* was the victim support chatroom, where Kari helped people figure out if they were being scammed. She get home after a full day's work at her office job, sit in her apartment, face buried in her laptop, late into the night, messaging with victims and chain smoking.

**Kari:** Usually when I'm online, I smoke a lot. I don't smoke when I'm away from my computer. [chuckles]

**Peter:** Oh, all right. Some people are social smokers. You are a computer smoker.

**Kari:** Well, it makes sense knowing what I'm doing for fun. [laughs]

**Peter:** With her new hobby, Kari talked to romance scam victims, blackmail scam victims, business owners who'd sent money to scammers filing fake invoices, and people who'd lost money to scammers pretending to be delivery services.

**Kari:** Something was dying inside me every time when I was talking with someone, not sure if it scammed or not, and I was able to tell them, "Yes, you are scammed. Look here, same pictures used on other 10 profiles. Same email address is used with different identities online."

**Peter:** She talked to people who would also talk to their scammers supposed kid, a lawyer and friends, telling them.

**Kari:** "I understand what you are dealing with because I am also like you, because I am a romance scam victim myself." In a way of speaking, it was helping me to rebuild my trust in people, because I was able to show them that not anything online it's fake, and not anyone online, it's after your money.

**Peter:** As Kari talked to a victim after victim, she discovered something.

**Kari:** On one side of the screen, you have the victim, and on the other side of the screen, you have an entire arm of people working to scam you.

**Peter:** Kari learned that scammers are often way more than just one person. There's this whole operation where there's one person whose job it is to rope the victim in, then someone else whose job it is to flirt, then someone else who does the big ask and actually requests money. Plus, this boss of sorts overseeing everything.

**Kari:** He's not directly involved, he's just distributing the work and getting the biggest part of the cash.

**Peter:** Wait. So, if I'm just picturing this, it almost kind of sounds like a corporate environment, right?

**Kari:** Yes.

**Peter:** Where you have the entry-level people, you have their managers, and then you have the CEO at the top.

**Kari:** Yes.

**Peter:** Seeing all this, Kari decided to take things even further. She started getting information from victims and then publicly publishing on a website the emails, the bank accounts, the pictures, the phone numbers, the same messages used over and over to rope victims in, and anything else used by these scamming organizations. And this move came with a risk.

**Kari:** You are dealing with criminals, and those criminals have infrastructure all over the world. Anything associated with your real life can put yourself in danger. If not yourself, someone dear to you if they managed to identify you.

**Peter:** How nervous about that were you?

**Kari:** I was nervous about it because, yeah, you don't have any type of security if you don't build it yourself.

**Peter:** Kari worked to encrypt her computer and scrub the internet of any traces of her real life. Which is why she won't tell me her real name or location now. There'd be nothing out there for anyone who wanted to stop her from trying to stop scammers.

**Kari:** Well, at that point in my life, I had nothing else more important to do from my perspective, to be honest, because there were people that I can help avoid being in the same shitty situation I put myself in.

**Peter:** Kari hoped to make scammer's lives harder and to reach potential victims before they send money.

**Kari:** It's becoming frustrating because it doesn't matter what you are doing and how much you are exposing, there will always be victims more as you can handle.

**Peter:** Now, Kari, as *Firefly*, had befriended other regulars on these anti-scam message boards. And when she said how frustrated she was.

**Kari:** They encouraged me to start baiting.

**Peter:** To join a group of people known as Scambaiters.

**Kari:** That was another group of people voluntarily interacting with scammers online.

**Peter:** Wait, interacting with scammers, how?

**Kari:** Replying to their emails and going back and forth and gathering information.

**Peter:** Kari saw they were people who crusade across the internet and basically deliver their own version of street justice to scammers like Batman but instead of mask and cape, it's username and keyboard. People who create online personas and pretend to fall for scams in order to directly get information about scammers and their tactics and then expose them.

**Kari:** I was quite reluctant about it because I wasn't sure that I can do it without reacting poorly and screaming, "You are a scammer," with each and every reply that I will send.

**Peter:** Plus, Kari tells me she'd always tried to be an honest person. This would be going online, pretending to be someone she's not, basically using the same tactics John had used on her. Plus, she wasn't sure if Scambaiters were actually good guys.

**Kari:** One thing that I didn't like very, very, much was a thing called Safari.

**Peter:** A Safari is this online competition between baiters to see who can make a scammer travel the farthest, often across international borders or into war zones by promising scammers there's money waiting.

**Kari:** Or you make a scammer build a church from sandbags.

**Peter:** This actually happened, Kari learned. A few years back, baiters convinced a scammer he'd get hundreds of thousands of dollars if he built a monument out of £8000 of sandbags, then traveled to the Sahara Desert for a fake conference. When the scammer went, he ended up getting stranded, going days without food.

**Kari:** I don't want a scammer dead. I want a scammer in jail for what he has done.

**Peter:** Kari's friends from the forums were like, "Well, you could be what's called an ethical baiter."

**Kari:** An ethical baiter, it's a person interacting with the scammer, wasting the scammer's time as much as possible to keep him away from real victims, and in the meantime, gathering information about the scammer and the scam infrastructure used in that particular scam.

**Peter:** Nothing illegal, nothing to try and hurt the scammer. Just deceiving a scammer like a scammer does to others, and then flagging scam tactics to law enforcement, banks, and dating sites.

**Kari:** That was feeling amazing. That was the moment when I decided to become a Scambaiter.

**Peter:** Going with what she knows, Kari decided to focus on romance scammers. Her first task, figure out her approach.

**Kari:** You want to be a honeytrap or you want to be a vinegar-trap?

**Peter:** [chuckles] Say that again.

**Kari:** You want to be a honeytrap or you want to be a vinegar-trap

**Peter:** Honeytrap or vinegar-trap. She tells me honeytrap is where you go on a dating site, act kind of sweet, kind of plain, like honey, in order to lure a scammer in. A vinegar-trap, well, that's the total opposite. You act like someone only a scammer would go after.

**Kari:** Someone so horrible that no normal, decent human will ever contact on a dating site.

**Peter:** Can I just say, I love that term vinegar-trap?

**Kari:** Yeah, well, that's the term. [chuckles]

**Peter:** Kari decided she wanted to see what it'd be like to get scammed as a guy, and she was going to go honeytrap.

**Kari:** My first persona was 56 years old, divorced, bald, drinking a lot of beer and searching for his other half.

**Peter:** She made sure her laptop was extra encrypted and untraceable and went looking for love in all the wrong places. Free dating sites with bad security, places known for scammers. It was as if her bald, beer-drinking man was GQ's sexiest man of the year. The messages came pouring in.

**Kari:** It was overwhelming.

**Peter:** The first one was from a scammer claiming to be an heiress trapped in a refugee camp.

**Kari:** Her father left a fortune, and if I can help her get that money in my bank account, she will come to join me and live happily forever.

**Peter:** Before long, Kari was getting five or six messages like that a day. She'd play along with every single one before work, after work, sitting at her computer, chain-smoking.

**Kari:** I never interacted with them first. I never winked. I never smiled at them. Nothing. I just sit there waiting for them to contact me. And that's when the fun starts.

**Peter:** Kari saw scamming was worldwide. There were scammers from Ukraine pretending to beautiful women who'd start messaging you, then want you to pay for a translation service they were using. Scammers in Ghana, pretending to be porn stars ready to sell gold and land to come live with you. Russian scammers who'd make plans to travel to meet you, but then always get arrested at the airport and need you to bail them out. Plus, Chinese romance scammers, fake delivery scammers in Eastern Europe, Cameroonian scammers with fake businesses. You're seeing all this with just that one guy account that you make?

**Kari:** Yeah. In the meantime, I decided to be a female as well.

**Peter:** This time, Kari went full-on vinegar.

**Kari:** She was a heavy smoker, a heavy drinker, and she was not attractive at all.

**Peter:** Kari uses a picture from a meme going around, a lady with pink star-shaped glasses, super messy hair, and teeth edited to look like a rabbit.

**Kari:** Yeah, she was a star. [laughs]

**Peter:** I got to ask, did it feel hypocritical at all to be setting up these accounts, pretending to be someone you're not?

**Kari:** No. As long as you didn't interact with real people.

**Peter:** As her personas, Kari would gather info about the scripted messages scammers would send, the financial accounts they'd want her to send money to. The different players involved in any scheme and post it all publicly. Plus, she and other Scambaiters would flag to banks different accounts and wire transfers involved in fraud activities.

**Kari:** It was learning something new every day.

**Peter:** It kept her coming back. Plus, keeping scammers interested without sending money, it turned into this game of sorts. I feel like that's one of the places where you could have some fun with it.

**Kari:** Yeah.

**Peter:** Still, not everything went as planned.

**Kari:** I end up with my very first death threat.

**Peter:** One time, Kari was baiting a scammer who used a different email with every victim. When Kari exposed his info he knew exactly who was behind it.

**Kari:** In that case, he promised that he will find me, and he will put a bullet in my head if he's finding me.

**Peter:** Oh, God. How did that feel?

**Kari:** Yeah, well, I was laughing. He wasn't cool. He pretended to be so, telling me that he will put the FBI after me and he will execute me, and giving me details on how he will be doing it. It was hilarious.

**Peter:** Was there a small part of you that was a little worried?

**Kari:** No. The danger is real if you give them the chance, but you don't give them that chance.

**Peter:** But Kari had this other problem. Her hobby was taking over her life. Before she knew it, she was talking to hundred scammers, playing out hundred different storylines all at the same time.

**Kari:** To interact with such a huge amount of people online doesn't leave you much time for anything else. You barely have time to eat, to sleep.

**Peter:** Kari was spending way more time writing emails as a fake person than as herself. She was pulling all-nighters to message scammers 10, 12 hours at a time, then rushing home from her 9:00 to 5:00 office job to do it all again.

**Kari:** It's becoming frustrating after a while because you became an extension of your computer. That's a problem when you really want to not forget yourself into your online persona, not to get lost.

**Peter:** There was always another scammer around the corner. So, searching for a way to get her life back, Kari took a moment to think about this entire world of scammers.

**Kari:** They are all over the damn place, but they end up all in the same point, and that's fake sites.

**Peter:** Kari decided to change her strategy again because she saw in a lot of the scams. Scammers went out of their way to make websites to back up their stories. Like, if a scammer was pretending to be a CEO, their fake company would have a fake website to prove that, yes, they are the CEO of an important company. Plus, sites for fake banks and fake shipping services.

**Kari:** Or the scam messages you receive, almost each third one is leading to a fake site.

**Peter:** Kari saw all these sites with the same layout, the same blue background, and the same spinning globe icon in the corner. Looking at them, Kari had this light bulb moment. She wondered if she could knock out these sites, could that stop multiple scams at the same time? Kari rounded up other baiters to work together to find scam websites that look the same. They started with sites with that spinning globe in the corner.

**Kari:** And we identified 120 fake couriers.

**Peter:** 120 websites, all with the same look, all using fake delivery scams.

**Kari:** It was scary because each and every of those sites had between 250 and 300 victims each.

**Glynn:** Each?

**Kari:** Yes.

**Peter:** That's 30,000 scam victims. Kari and the other Scambaiters reported each website to the site's registrar. A business like GoDaddy that hosts websites. And at the same time, boom. All 120 are suspended.

**Kari:** That was feeling like a victory. I was quite happy about it because I imagine that's the end of it. So naïve I was, right.

**Peter:** Because then, just a few months later, sites with the same spinning globe, all seemingly made by the same person were popping up again. People in the scam-baiting world actually have a term for people who make these fake sites. They call them Faker Makers.

**Kari:** We suspended everything this Faker Makers created five times in a row.

**Peter:** Oh, it kind of feels like playing, like, internet Whac-A-Mole. Like, as soon as something pops up, you can whack at once, but it'll pop up again.

**Kari:** Yeah.

**Peter:** I got to ask, why keep up with this? It kind of feels like you're fighting an uphill battle that you're never going to win if I'm honest.

**Kari:** Yeah, I agree with you. But, hey, at least you can try to keep the place clean.

**Peter:** It's the little wins that keep Kari from walking away. Like when she successfully outed her elusive Faker Maker by digging up the name of the person who registered the sites.

**Kari:** We identified him. He was a Nigerian living in Malaysia. By the look of it, he lost the trust of his employer.

**Peter:** Kari keeps watching and waiting and chasing scammers down.

**Kari:** For most of my fellow baiters, the scammers are their pets. For me, they are not pets. Pets have souls.

**Peter:** You don't think scammers have souls?

**Kari:** No.

**Peter:** Saying people don't have souls is pretty harsh.

**Kari:** Well, in one of the baits, I pretended to be a terminally ill cancer victim. Having money just for my medication to keep me alive. The scammer was even asking for that money. You have people living on the street because they lost their houses and their jobs after being victims of scams. They don't give a damn about their victims to victims, it's just an ATM machine for them. Do you believe they have souls?

**Peter:** I mean, I hear that they're doing something wrong, but it's hard for me not to look at other people as also people.

**Kari:** I'm sorry to say it, but someone that will do anything for money, it's at a different level.

**Peter:** Switching up tactics to focus on fake sites rather than hundreds of individual scammers has given Kari something important, time. Time to focus on her own life again.

**Kari:** I learned to disconnect, just take a step back and stay away from everything serious for a few days. I'm going to watch movies. I'm going to see concerts, things that are making me happy. [laughs]

**Peter:** Which is how recently Kari met a cute guy. She was out at this rock concert in her city.

**Kari:** I was singing and clapping myself, and I became aware of the disturbance somewhere around me. [chuckles]

**Peter:** She looked over, saw this guy belting along to the band, wearing a blue t-shirt and jeans, a huge smile on his face.

**Kari:** He was singing so false. Unbelievable, but with such a conviction. [laughs]

**Peter:** Oh, he wasn't nailing it. It didn't sound that good?

**Kari:** [laughs] But it was hilarious and funny. I start laughing, and he realized that I am laughing and we start talking, and, yeah, we went for a coffee after that.

**Peter:** And the conversation felt refreshing. They've been seeing each other for a few months now.

**Kari:** It's pleasant to be yourself and not pretend to be someone else.

**Peter:** And you're sure he's real?

**Kari:** More than sure, yes.

[laughter]

**Peter:** How does he feel about you being a Scambaiter?

**Kari:** Well, he knows that I am playing games online.

**Peter:** Playing games?

**Kari:** Yeah. What I'm doing. It's a game, right? He doesn't know the details of what I'm doing online.

**Peter:** He doesn't know?

**Kari:** No.

**Peter:** Oh, interesting. Why keep it a secret?

**Kari:** Because it's part of my life that is not involving real life, and he's having nothing to do with it. Why expose him to stress that he doesn't need to deal with, it's my problem to deal with.

**Peter:** I mean, okay, I kind of get that, but it also seems this is, like, a really huge part of your life. It's kind of odd to not talk about it, no?

**Kari:** Do you believe that this part of my life is the kind of topic that you can have with a person that you met for a few months and you believe that you might have something with?

**Peter:** Are you worried that it would be like a turn-off?

**Kari:** No, I'm not. Just it's refreshing to be yourself from time to time. [laughs]

**Peter:** Sure.

**Kari:** It's giving me energy for what I am doing because if you don't have a strong foundation in your real life, you cannot do what we are doing every day.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** That was Producer Peter Balonon-Rosen. A version of this story aired on Marketplace's, This Is Uncomfortable, a show about life and how money messes with it. If you want to hear more, check out This Is Uncomfortable wherever you get podcast. A big thanks to the entire team over there for their work on this piece. Reema Khrais, Zoe Saunders, Karen Duffin, Alice Wilder, Marque Greene, Drew Jostad, and Kunal Patel.

Original score for that story was by Dirk Schwarzhoff.

[upbeat music]

Oh, yes, it's that time. It's that time. If you want more, if you need more, travel the world with Snap. Take the podcast in your pocket wherever you go, hours of adventure awaits *snapjudgment.org*. If you want to join the Snaptastic conversation, know, we're on Twitter, Facebook, on Instagram. Don't miss a beat. Snap was brought to you by the team that has never fallen for an internet scam. Except, of course, to the producer Mr. Mark Ristich. I told him repeatedly that Chad [unintelligible [00:42:04] was not the name of the Nigerian prince. But some things you have to learn the hard way. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, David Exumé, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Bo Walsh, Annie Nguyen, Zahra Noorbakhsh.

You may have heard that this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, when your scammer asks you to send some money, you could tell them that you would, but you're going to need him to send you a few dollars in order for gas to drive to where you keep your money. See? And you could do that, and still not be as far away from the news as this is but this is PRX

[upbeat music]

Snappers, if you're enjoying this Snap spotlight of This Is Uncomfortable from Marketplace, there is so much more to check out. Their current season explores that tricky tension between our expectations and reality. Let's face it, we're not always rational creatures, especially when it comes to money. Our wishful thinking can cloud our judgment. Of course, money has a way of complicating just about everything. Check out seven seasons that dive into life and how money messes with it on This Is Uncomfortable, wherever you get your podcast.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*