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## Cops warn of online rental scams

If apartment deal looks too good to be true, it probably is, police say

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Bridgette Clark-Carmichael thought she'd found the perfect apartment in downtown Victoria -- a three-bedroom beauty in the Mermaid Wharf building, on Store Street, with a private rooftop patio and a waterfront view. The rent? A mere \$1,300 a month.

But the 23-year-old, who had just moved to the city four months ago, was about to learn the brutal reality of apartment-hunting in Victoria: If it looks too good to be true, you're about to get scammed.

The apartment ad was posted on Craigslist, a free online classified site, and Clark-Carmichael e-mailed the supposed owner: melinda\_sandra@yahoo.com.

"She said she was in India, and unfortunately she had nobody to let me check inside [the apartment], but if I wanted to send a \$900 deposit and \$1,300 for first month's rent she'd courier the key out to me."

Clark-Carmichael thought the request "pretty sketchy." She phoned a property management company, which looked at the online ad and told her the pictures didn't match any known suites inside Mermaid Wharf. The price was also at least \$500 short of market value.

The property management company advised her not to pay a dime. But she said the offer was tempting. August is a notoriously competitive month for rental suites, as more than 15,000 out-of-town university and college students jockey for apartments in a region with Canada's lowest vacancy rate -- 0.3 per cent.

"It was incredibly tempting," said Clark-Carmichael. "I was telling a friend of mine and he was saying, 'Oh maybe money wasn't an objective from this person and maybe they have quite a bit of money and are feeling giving.' I said maybe. I was just looking for this false sense of hope."

Clark-Carmichael had stumbled on one of a series of fraudulent ads plaguing free websites such as Craigslist and UsedVictoria, say police.

"Don't be tempted to jump at the unbelievable offer," said Const. Derek Tolmie, Victoria police community officer. This time of year, desperate university students become a "huge ripe target" for scammers, he said.

Police were sent a scam post on Craigslist last month. It advertised a Victoria condo, but showed only photos of the outside of the building.

The alleged owner claimed to live out-of-province and, in e-mails filled with religious references, offered to mail out keys if the person would first mail the damage deposit, said Tolmie. In the end, someone called the building property manager and determined the

man didn't own the apartment and the suite wasn't even for rent.

"We're starting to see a lot of it now," said Tolmie. "This has been an issue in the Lower Mainland for quite some time.

"If somebody is willing to send you a key to their \$300,000-plus suite, with hardly any references, it's probably a scam.

"People need to do their homework and you need to go physically see the place, talk to someone and have a written contract," added Saanich police Const. Brad Brajcich.

Craigslist and UsedVictoria are generally co-operative in removing identified scams, said Tolmie. Clark-Carmichael e-mailed Craigslist to alert them to her would-be dream apartment and it was removed within a day.

But beyond that, police said it's next to impossible to investigate and solve an online rental fraud. Tolmie said police don't have the tools or resources to track down scammers, who could be anywhere in the world.

For Clark-Carmichael, it now means apartment-hunting on the defensive, using a reputable property management company. Her experience has left her cautious.

"It's ridiculous, but you sort of lose a sense of being trusting in the rental market."

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