



Fake Investment Offers & the Romance-to-Investment Trap

How “pig butchering” scams turn a new online friend into a fake trading app, and how to spot it before you lose anything.

A Lumaset Foundation guide • Part of the free Stay-Safe-Online series

Who it's for: anyone who talks with people online, especially anyone who's formed a new online friendship or relationship. **Plain language, no jargon.**

WHAT'S INSIDE THIS GUIDE

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Who we are

Lumaset Foundation is a nonprofit that helps everyday people stay safe and confident online. We make clear, plain-language lessons about spotting scams and using technology, and we keep everything 100% free, with no account and no catch. We are a registered 501(c)(3) charity based in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Why we made this guide

This is one of the fastest-growing and most devastating scams in the country, and it rarely looks like a scam at first. It looks like a new friend, or a new romance, who happens to be great at crypto. FINRA and the FBI have both issued repeated warnings as losses climb into the billions.

Remember: Anyone you've never met in person who brings up an investment “opportunity” is the single biggest warning sign in this entire guide.

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What “Pig Butchering” Actually Means

What it is. A long-con investment scam where a stranger builds trust over weeks or months (often posing as a romantic interest, old classmate, or successful trader) before introducing a fake investment.

Why it matters. FINRA warns these “relationship investment scams” have exploded in recent years, combining the emotional manipulation of a romance scam with the financial devastation of investment fraud. The FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center reported crypto investment scam losses of over \$7.2 billion in 2025, a 25% jump from the year before.

How the Relationship Is Built First

How it works. Contact usually starts on social media, a dating app, or even a “wrong number” text. The scammer invests weeks building a warm, patient relationship, never asking for money early. Trust is the entire product being built here, before any mention of money.

Red flags

- Someone you've never met in person who is unusually attentive.
- Someone who avoids video calls or in-person meetings, with a ready excuse every time.
- A new contact who eventually mentions how well their investments are doing.

The Fake Trading App

What it is. Once trust is built, the scammer introduces a trading platform or app, often realistic-looking, showing fake profits that grow the more you “invest.”

How it works. Early small withdrawals may even be allowed, to build confidence. Larger amounts are then encouraged, sometimes with an invented “tax” or “fee” required before a big withdrawal is allowed. That fee is the final theft; the platform and the funds are never real.

Red flags

- An app or website you cannot find independent reviews of.
- Any request for a “fee” or “tax” to release your own money.
- Guaranteed or unusually high returns.

Red Flags Real Investments Never Have

Do this now

- 1.** A real investment never requires a fee to withdraw your own money.
- 2.** No legitimate advisor asks you to move money through someone you've only met online.
- 3.** Verify any advisor or platform through FINRA BrokerCheck (brokercheck.finra.org) before sending anything.
- 4.** Never let anyone remotely control your device to “help” you trade.

What to Do If You're Already In

1. Stop sending money immediately, whatever story you're given for "just one more" payment.
2. Save every message and transaction record.
3. Contact your bank and, if crypto was involved, the exchange, right away.
4. Report at ic3.gov (FBI) and reportfraud.ftc.gov, and see our free guide, *Scammed? Your First 48 Hours*.

Remember: This is not embarrassing. These scams are professionally run and fool careful, smart people every day.

Putting It Together

The relationship is the bait; the “investment” is the hook. Anyone you haven't met in person, who eventually brings up money or trading, deserves a hard pause, no matter how real the connection feels.

Keep learning, free.

This guide is a start. Our free course **Spot the Scam • Level 1: Protecting Yourself Online** covers every common scam pattern, step by step. If you've already sent money, our free guide **Scammed? Your First 48 Hours** is the next step.

- **No account. No cost. No catch.** Ever.
- Start anytime at lumoset.org.
- Know someone in a new online relationship? Please share this with them.

Key Terms in This Guide

Pig Butchering: A long-con scam where a stranger builds a fake friendship or romance over weeks before introducing a fraudulent investment or trading app.

Romance Scam: When someone builds a fake romantic relationship online, often over months, before asking for money, gift cards, or an “investment.”

Sources

FINRA, Relationship Investment Scams (“Pig Butchering”) (finra.org) · FBI, Cryptocurrency and AI Scams Bilk Americans of Billions (2025 IC3 data, fbi.gov).

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