

Drugged & duped: Bolaris' perfect storm

THE GUY tossed restlessly in his bed, night after night, for the better part of a year.

He couldn't sleep. He had nightmares whenever he did - bizarre, Kafkaesque snippets of dialogue involving the Russian mob, a pair of mysterious, dark-haired women, a goofy-looking painting and an incomprehensible credit-card bill.

The shadowy characters and confusing plots from the bad dreams haunted John Bolaris in real life, too.

Yeah, *that* John Bolaris.

Few people know that the affable local weatherman's life was turned upside down during a visit to Miami Beach last spring that started out pleasantly and ended with his getting drugged - twice - while his credit card was used by Eastern European scam artists to rack up \$43,000 worth of expenses in just two days, while he staggered around in a stupor.

Even fewer people would probably believe that story, with all its seemingly borrowed-from-the-movies clichés.

American Express, Bolaris' credit-card company, didn't buy it. The company abruptly ended an investigation into his claims and demanded that he pay the five-figure bill.

Bolaris balked, and American Express referred his account to a collection agency, which decimated his credit score. He recently filed a civil lawsuit against the credit giant.

The FBI believed Bolaris. In fact, his testimony helped a federal grand jury last month indict 17 members of a massive wire-fraud scheme that victimized 87 out-of-town men who had visited South Beach bars and restaurants between February 2010 and last month.

"It really has been a year of hell, dealing with all of this," said Bolaris, victim No. 88. "I don't even know where to begin."

Last March, his pal bailed at the last second. Bolaris went anyway.

He checked into his Miami Beach hotel, the Fontainebleau, and headed to dinner at another hotel. A few diners recognized him from TV and started asking about the weather.

Unbeknown to Bolaris, federal authorities said, two Latvian women - Marina Turcina and Anna Kilimatova - had been watching him. They sized him up - good-looking middle-aged guy with an expensive watch - and made their move.

"They came up from behind me, and said, 'Are you weather presenter?'"

"The bartender said, 'Yeah, he's a weatherman!' " Bolaris said.

"They asked me if I could guess where they were from. I said Poland. They said they were from

Marina, 24, and Anna, 25, were dark-haired, blue-eyed and beautiful, and were elegantly dressed. Bolaris said he ordered them wine.

Fast forward a few minutes. "We were sitting by a pool bar, and they asked if I did shots," Bolaris said. "I said no.

"One of them started rubbing me, opened my mouth, and said, 'Do [a] shot.' "

It was days before Bolaris figured out that the women had slipped him a roofie, the infamous date-rape drug.

"I remember someone holding me up and making me sign something," he said.

"Then I woke up in a taxi. My shirt was stained with red wine, and I had this huge painting of a woman's head."

He tracked down Marina and Anna, who said he had bid for the painting at the fundraiser. They met him at his hotel - ostensibly to return his sunglasses, which they had taken by accident - and promised to straighten the whole thing out, if only Bolaris would share a cab with them to the Caviar Bar, where one of the women said she left her purse.

Bolaris obliged. Then he was drugged again, according to the FBI.

"They got me twice," he said. "I couldn't put anything together. I had no idea what happened."

A few days later, Bolaris said, he got a phone call from American Express. The company asked about the \$43,000 he had just spent on booze and caviar in South Beach.

Bolaris was apoplectic. The charges, he said, were outrageous and clearly the result of a scam.

"They promised they would look into it," Bolaris said. "Two weeks later, I got a call from their fraud department. They said, 'You're liable.'"

"They said, 'You were at the Caviar Bar . . . we have pictures, and you were having a good time,' " Bolaris said.

The credit card company sent him receipts from purchases that were made with his card. "None of them had my signature," he said.

Bolaris hired Philadelphia attorney Chuck Peruto Jr. to sort out the situation. Letters were sent and phone calls were made, but American Express was adamant that Bolaris had not been the victim of a scam, and had to pay the huge bill.

"They closed my account and referred me to a collection agency," Bolaris said. "My credit was ruined. I was humiliated and embarrassed."

American Express declined last night to comment. Bolaris' lawsuit claims that the company had failed to protect him against fraud, and seeks more than \$50,000 in damages.

The FBI picked up the case, and asked Bolaris to testify before a grand jury.

Last month, the feds busted 17 members of the Eastern European ring, which relied on "bar girls" from overseas who targeted wealthy out-of-towners at South Beach bars.

The FBI said the women hunted late at night for men who wore expensive watches and shoes, and typically lured their prey to private clubs run by other members of the ring. The clubs - including the Caviar Bar - were just fronts, and were not open to the public.

The men were often drugged or fed a heavy stream of alcohol until they were barely coherent.

Some "victims are propped up by the B-Girls long enough to obtain signatures on credit card receipts," the FBI wrote in a criminal complaint.

"Helping to take down those criminals," Bolaris said, "that felt really good. That was my redemption."