

# **Dangerous** **THE** **men**

“ I WAS JUST TRYING TO let him down easy.” With these words begins a story my firm hears several times each month. Before meeting me, this young woman, whose name is Katherine,\* may have told it to her friends and her therapist, then a private detective, a lawyer, a police officer, maybe even a judge, but the problem persisted. It is the story of a dating situation that once seemed innocent, or at least manageable, but is now frightening. It is the story of a former boyfriend or acquaintance who seemed normal but was revealed to be something else.

Stalking is the way some men raise the stakes when a woman doesn't play along with their needs. It is a crime of power, control and intimidation very similar to date rape. Indeed, it could be described as an extended rape: It takes away a woman's freedom and disregards her wishes,

*The right way to respond and protect yourself from the kind of man who just won't let go.*

*An excerpt from THE GIFT OF FEAR, a new book by one of the nation's leading experts on stalking behavior.*

**BY GAVIN DE BECKER**

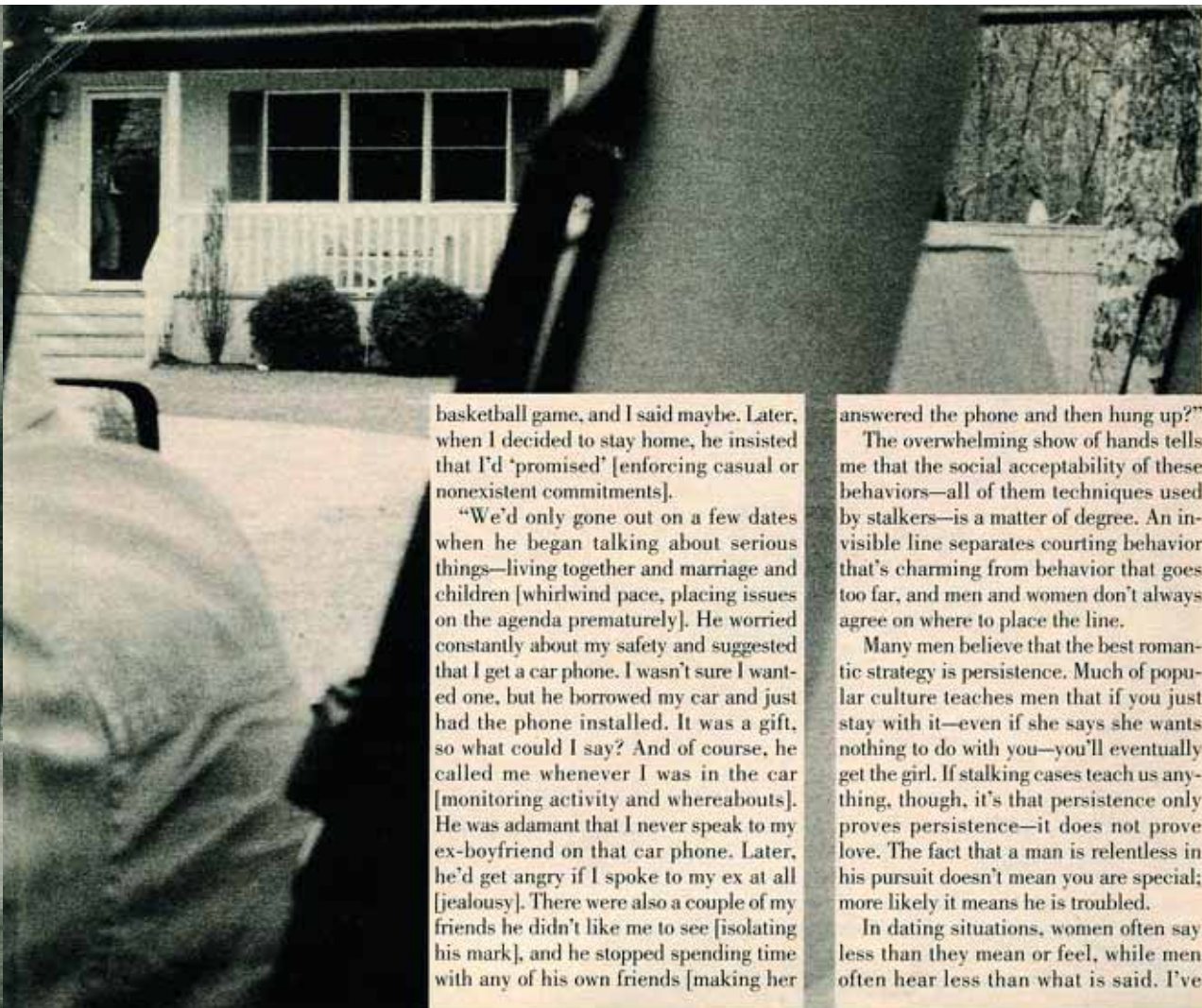
honoring instead the wishes of the man. Whether he is an estranged husband, an ex-boyfriend, a former date, or an unwanted suitor, a stalker enforces society's cruel double standard: that a woman can say no to a man, but she can't make it stick.

It doesn't have to be that way. A woman

can not only spot a potential stalker but can get away from him, if she follows her intuition right from the start.

Katherine's story illustrates some of the warning signs—listed here in brackets—of this type of stalker, the man who just won't let go:





basketball game, and I said maybe. Later, when I decided to stay home, he insisted that I'd "promised" [enforcing casual or nonexistent commitments].

"We'd only gone out on a few dates when he began talking about serious things—living together and marriage and children [whirlwind pace, placing issues on the agenda prematurely]. He worried constantly about my safety and suggested that I get a car phone. I wasn't sure I wanted one, but he borrowed my car and just had the phone installed. It was a gift, so what could I say? And of course, he called me whenever I was in the car [monitoring activity and whereabouts]. He was adamant that I never speak to my ex-boyfriend on that car phone. Later, he'd get angry if I spoke to my ex at all [jealousy]. There were also a couple of my friends he didn't like me to see [isolating his mark], and he stopped spending time with any of his own friends [making her

answered the phone and then hung up?"]

The overwhelming show of hands tells me that the social acceptability of these behaviors—all of them techniques used by stalkers—is a matter of degree. An invisible line separates courting behavior that's charming from behavior that goes too far, and men and women don't always agree on where to place the line.

Many men believe that the best romantic strategy is persistence. Much of popular culture teaches men that if you just stay with it—even if she says she wants nothing to do with you—you'll eventually get the girl. If stalking cases teach us anything, though, it's that persistence only proves persistence—it does not prove love. The fact that a man is relentless in his pursuit doesn't mean you are special; more likely it means he is troubled.

In dating situations, women often say less than they mean or feel, while men often hear less than what is said. I've

## WARNING SIGNALS YOU MAY MISS

"I met Bryan\* at a party given by a friend, and he must have asked somebody there for my number [researching the victim] because before I even got home, he'd left me three messages [overly invested]. I told him I didn't want to go out with him, but he was so enthusiastic that I really didn't have any choice [men who cannot let go choose women who cannot say no].

"In the beginning, he spent a lot of time listening and always seemed to know what I wanted. He remembered everything I ever said [hyperattentive]. It was flattering at first, but it also made me uncomfortable [victim intuitively feels smothered]. For example, I once mentioned needing more space for my books, and he just showed up one day with shelves and tools and all the stuff he needed, and just put them up [offering unsolicited help]. I couldn't say no [woman who can't say no]. He always read so much into whatever I said [projecting emotions]. Once he asked me to go to a

responsible for his whole social world]. Finally, when I told him I didn't want to be his girlfriend, he refused to hear it [refusing to hear no]."

Katherine felt uncomfortable with this man right from the start, but like most victims ignored the warning signals. Instead of rejecting Bryan, she tried to let him down easy, at which point Bryan just tightened his hold. In doing so, he strangled the relationship, ensuring that it could never be what he said (and maybe even believed) he wanted. Still, his persistence paid off: Katherine remained involved with him longer than she ever intended. Nearly every victim I've met stayed in contact with her pursuer long after she wanted out.

While giving talks around the country, I sometimes ask the men in the audience, "How many of you have ever found out where a woman lived or worked by means other than asking her? How many have driven by a woman's house to see what cars were there, or called just to see who

successfully lobbied and testified for stalking laws in several states, but I would trade them all for a school curriculum that would teach young men how to hear "no" and young women how to reject. If more women felt comfortable explicitly rejecting, stalking cases would decline dramatically.

One rule applies to all types of unwanted pursuit: Do not negotiate. Once you make the decision that you don't want a relationship with a particular man, tell him so, explicitly. But only tell him once. After that rejection, almost any further contact will be seen as negotiation.

If a woman tells a man over and over again that she doesn't want to talk to him, she should realize that she is talking to him, and every time she does it, she betrays her own resolve. If a woman ignores 30 messages (Continued on page 234)

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from a pursuer and then finally gives in and returns his last call, no matter what she says to him in that conversation, what he has learned is that the cost of reaching her is leaving 30 messages. For this type of man, any contact will be seen as progress.

Of course, a victim may be worried that she'll provoke him by failing to respond and may try softening her rejection. Often the result is that he believes she is conflicted, uncertain, really likes him but just doesn't know it yet. When a woman says, "It's just that I don't want to be in a relationship right now," a potential stalker hears only the words "right now." To him, this means she will want to be in a relationship later. A more truthful, and effective, rejection would be, "I don't want to be in a relationship with you." Unless it's that clear, and sometimes even when it is, he won't hear it.

If she says, "You're a great guy and you have a lot to offer, but I'm not the one for you; my head's just not in the right place these days," this man thinks: She really likes me, it's just that she's confused; I've got to prove to her that she's the one for me. He will challenge each reason she offers.

A woman should never explain *why* she doesn't want a relationship but should simply make clear that she has thought it over, that this is her final decision and that she expects him to respect it. Why should a woman have to explain intimate aspects of her life, plans and romantic choices to someone with whom she doesn't want a relationship? A rejection based on any condition—say, that she wants to move to another city—just gives him something to challenge. Conditional rejections are not rejections. They are discussions.

Let's imagine a woman has let pass several opportunities to pursue a relationship with a suitor. Every hint, response, action and inaction has communicated that she is not interested. If the man still pursues at this point, it is time for an unconditional and explicit rejection. Because few men have heard it and few women have spoken it, here is what an unconditional and explicit rejection sounds like: "No matter what you may have assumed until now, and no matter for what reason you assumed it, I have no romantic interest in you whatsoever. I am certain I never will. I expect that, now that you know this, you'll put your attention elsewhere, which I understand, because that's what I intend to do."

There is only one appropriate response to this: acceptance. However the man communicates this, the basic concept would ideally be: "I hear you, I understand, and while I am disappointed, I will certainly respect your decision."

I said there's only one appropriate reaction. Unfortunately, there are hundreds of inappropriate reactions, and while they take many forms, their basic message is: "I do not accept your decision." If a man debates, doubts, negotiates or attempts to change her mind, a woman should recognize that her decision to stop seeing this man was the right one. Instead of being challenged by his relentless pursuit, her resolve should be strengthened. No woman should be in a relationship with someone who does not hear what she says and who does not recognize her feelings. Moreover, if he has failed to understand a message this clear and explicit, his reaction to any ambiguous statements, the kind that are made when a man's being let down easy, can only be imagined.

What if a woman has explicitly said no and the man escalates his pursuit with persistent phone calls and messages; showing up uninvited at work, school or home; following her or even trying to enlist her friends or family in his campaign? Assuming she has communicated one explicit rejection, it is very important that no further response be given.

I repeat: When a woman chooses to communicate with someone she has explicitly rejected, her actions don't match her words. Her pursuer can then decide for himself which actions or words actually represent her feelings. Not surprisingly, he'll choose the ones that serve him. Often, such a man will leave phone messages that ostensibly offer closure, but that are actually crudely concealed efforts to get a response—and remember, he views any response as progress.

When the stalker is someone a woman has dated, she may have to listen to friends make unhelpful comments like, "You must have encouraged the guy in some way" or "You must enjoy being pursued." If the stalking continues, someone will inevitably advise her to change her phone number. Our office does *not* recommend this strategy, because as any victim will tell you, the stalker always manages to get the new number.

A better plan is to get a second phone line, give the new number to the people she wants to hear from and keep her old number hooked to an answering machine or voice mail so that the stalker is not even aware she has another number. She can check her messages, and when she

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receives calls from people she wants to speak with, she can call them back and give them her new number. Eventually, the only person leaving messages on the old number is the unwanted pursuer. In this way, his calls are documented. She should keep the message tapes in case she decides later to file a formal complaint with the police. More important, each time he leaves a message, he gets a message: that she can avoid the temptation to respond to his manipulations.

We also suggest that the outgoing message be recorded by a female friend, because he may be calling just to hear his object's voice. While people believe that an outgoing message with a male voice will lead the pursuer to believe his victim is in a new relationship, more commonly it leads him to investigate further.

When a pursuer has actually dated or had a relationship with his victim, he may be so desperate to hold on that he'll settle for any kind of contact. Though he'd rather be her boyfriend, he'll accept being just a friend. Eventually, though he'd rather be a friend, he'll accept being

an enemy if that's the only position available. As a stalking ex-boyfriend wrote to a young client of ours: "You'll be thinking of me. You may not be thinking good thoughts, but you'll be thinking of me."

Another rule: The only way to stop contact is to stop contact. As noted above, I suggest one explicit rejection, and after that, absolutely no contact. If you call the pursuer back, or agree to meet, or send him a note or have somebody warn him off, you buy another six weeks of his unwanted pursuit. Some victims think it will help to have a male friend, new boyfriend or male family member tell the stalker to stop. Most who try this learn that the stalker takes it as evidence that his love object must be conflicted. Otherwise she would have told him herself.

Sending the police to warn off a pursuer may seem the obvious thing to do, but it rarely has the desired effect, in my experience. Though pursuers may behave alarmingly, most have not broken the law, so the police have few options. When police visit and say, in effect, "Cut this out or you'll get into trouble," the pursuer intuitively knows that if they could have arrested him, they would have. So what's the message of the visit? That the greatest

possible weapon in his victim's arsenal—sending the police after him—came and went without a problem. The cops stopped by, they talked to him and they left. Who got stronger, the victim or the pursuer?

Of course, the police should be involved if the stalker has committed an actionable crime that, if prosecuted, would result in improving the victim's safety or putting a high cost on the stalker's behavior. But the first time a stalker should see police is when they show up to arrest him, not when they stop by to chat.

Victims of stalking are often advised to get a restraining order. I would argue that, as with battered wives, it is important to evaluate which cases are likely to be improved by court intervention and which might be worsened. Much depends upon how far the case has escalated and how much the stalker has emotionally invested. If a man has been actively pursuing the same victim for years and has already ignored warnings and interventions, then a restraining order isn't likely to help. Antistalking laws differ from state to state but generally speaking, restraining orders obtained soon after a pursuer has ignored a single explicit rejection will be more effective and create less risk for the woman



than those obtained after many months or years of stalking in which the pursuer has made a significant emotional investment.

Court orders frequently work with a naive pursuer, someone who simply does not realize the inappropriateness of his behavior. Being a bit thick and unsophisticated, he may think, I am in love with this person, I am only acting the way people in love act. The naive pursuer is usually distinguishable from other stalkers by his lack of machismo. He rarely displays anger at being rejected. He just seems to go along, happily believing he is courting someone. He stays with it until someone makes it completely clear to him that his approach is inappropriate, unacceptable and counterproductive.

Dating involves several risks: the risk of disappointment, the risk of boredom, the risk of rejection and the risk of letting some troubled, scary man into your life. I am not proposing a checklist of blunt questions, but I do suggest that all the information a woman needs is there on a first date, to be mined through artful conversation.

For example, during the date, a woman might turn the conversation to the man's most recent breakup and notice how he describes it. Does he accept responsibility for his part? Is he still invested? Was he slow to let go, slow to hear or accept what the woman communicated? Has he let go yet? Who broke up with whom?

(This last question is an important one because stalkers rarely initiate break-ups.) Has he had several love-at-first-sight relationships? Falling for people in a big way based on just a little exposure to them, particularly if this is a pattern, is a valuable sign. She should also observe how often the man tries to change her mind, even on little things.

Stalkers are by definition people who do not give up easily. But most do let go, if their victims avoid engaging them. Usually they have to attach a tentacle to someone else before totally detaching from their current object. Until that happens, the best approach is abstinence—no contact with him, no implied contact with him through intermediaries or letters. To put things in perspective, very few date-stalking cases end in violence. Romantic pursuers do not usually jump from harassment to homicide without apparent and detectable escalations along the way.

A woman can avoid these situations by saying what she means from the start, even if it means letting him down hard. Your intuition is now loaded, so listen. ●

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