

# You have 237 friends. And one crazy stalker.

You talked to a guy for five seconds at a party and now he's hacking into your blog, following you on spring break and sending you bloody valentines. *Kate Torgovnick* talks to four women who just want their inboxes back.

**I**t's a typical morning for Sarah, 25, a self-described do-gooder who lives in Atlanta: She wakes up in her band poster-plastered bedroom, kicks off her covers and walks to the bathroom she shares with two roommates. She showers, gets dressed and sits down at her computer to check her e-mail before work. She has 29 new messages—and 20 are from the same person, sent in a span of less than 12 hours. Yet she has no idea who he is.

"I love you. I can't live without you," reads one e-mail. Another is a rambling message about pretty much nothing. A third contains an MP3 of Blondie's "One Way or Another" (who knew Blondie could sound so threatening?). And a fourth has a subject line that simply reads: "Cunt." But the last e-mail in her inbox is the scariest—it's a picture of Sarah jogging near her house, except her face and neck look like they've been stabbed and there's blood running down her chest. "I started crying when I saw it," Sarah says. "I couldn't believe he'd been watching me and I didn't notice. Not only is this guy unhinged and insane, but he's dangerous."

Sarah received these messages every day for a little over a year. She tried to change her e-mail address, but the notes kept coming. And Sarah's friends told her that they got random weird messages that looked like they were from her about the meaning of love and whatnot. This guy kept hacking into her account even though she changed her password every day.

Our pop culture understanding of stalking is colored by Lifetime movies (*Tori Spelling in Mother, May I Sleep With Danger*; anyone?), where obsessive exes go crazy and leave threatening notes on women's cars. But those movies are way dated. With our advanced technology and increasing accessibility, jealous boyfriends/girlfriends have new ways to harass. In fact, a quarter of young people report receiving hourly texts or phone calls from midnight to 5 a.m. from the person they're dating, just to "check up" on them. But what's more, a recent survey of more than a thousand college-age women found that →

## KEEP THE CREEPS AWAY

You already know better than to post your home address, Social Security number or financial info online. But here are four other ways to keep you (relatively) stalker-proof without having to throw your computer out the window:

**1** Don't post your last name, e-mail address, phone number, schedule, company name or neighborhood, either.

**2** Look over your profiles and make sure nothing reads like a schedule of where to find you, like, "I'm obsessed with Tuesday-night trivia at Gingerman's."

**3** Use the privacy settings on MySpace, Friendster and Facebook—they each offer all sorts of safety features, like blocking people from copying your photos or blocking anyone without a last name or without an e-mail address attached to their account.

**4** Keep your IM "away" messages vague. Nobody needs to know if you're getting some in room 227 at the Garden Hilton anyway.

→ more than half of those who'd been stalked were actually stalked by *strangers*. After years of experts focusing on jilted boyfriends, this was a huge surprise.

It definitely makes sense. Stalkers can learn a lot more about you when you're posting where you work, what time your organic chemistry class lets out or when you're "Online Now!" than if they just did an old-fashioned drive-by to see if your lights were on. And with IM "away" messages, like "Meet me at the bar on 12th Street" or "I'll be at the library until 2 a.m.," we leave crib notes for stalkers without even realizing it.

Sarah thinks her stalker became obsessed with her when she went on an online-dating spree after breaking up with a boyfriend. She'd given a bunch of guys her e-mail address, so it raised no eyebrows when a name she didn't recognize popped up in her inbox. "His first e-mail said, 'You seem really cool—let's meet up at happy hour,'" Sarah remembers. "He seemed smart and funny."

But she was busy for the next two weeks and couldn't find the time to meet him. His e-mails became more frequent and pushy ("You want to meet tonight? Tomorrow? Friday? Saturday?"), and Sarah realized this guy might not be the charmer she'd thought he was. She searched the dating sites she'd been using for his profile but couldn't find him anywhere (she now thinks he must have posted a fake profile somewhere). So she wrote him back and said she wasn't interested in talking anymore.

His e-mails took a turn for the worse, with curse words and proclamations of love. "I hoped in the beginning that if I ignored him, he would get the point and go away," Sarah says. "But now that he's sent me that bloody photo, I feel like if I do anything to provoke him, he might try to kill me. It's the scariest feeling I've ever felt in my life."

**R**enee, a 26-year-old film producer in Los Angeles, is having a similar experience, though she's more pissed off than scared. At an industry party this year, she chatted with a guy who seemed normal at first. "He wanted to send me a screenplay, so I pulled out my business card and gave it to him, like I always do when I'm talking business," Renee says. "I don't remember much, but I think he was around my age. I don't think he was cute. If I'd been flirting, I'd at least remember what he looked like."

The guy started sending her creepy e-mails the next day. "He said, 'Your perfume drove me crazy,' which seemed really inappropriate. He wrote me at least once a week for a few weeks, and then added me to some group e-mail list," Renee says. "At first, he just rubbed me the wrong way. One e-mail said, 'If a woman says she's athletic, it means she's fat. If she says she's easygoing, she probably has herpes.' It sounded like he was angry with women."

Renee tried asking the guy nicely to stop writing her. This was the response she got: "YOU FUCKING WHORE. I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE SUCH A BITCH."

Renee worked with her company's IT department to block his e-mails, but they keep coming. "My job is communication," she says. "It's a big deal for me to change my e-mail address, because I have thousands of contacts. You don't realize how much information you give people with something as simple as a business card."

Six months after she'd started receiving her daily barrage of messages and Blondie tracks, Sarah was home alone one night watching *Grey's Anatomy* while her roommates were at work. She glanced out the window of her house and saw a blue Honda parked out front that she'd never seen before. "I started to panic," she says. "Then I heard the gate in the backyard unlatch."

Sarah called the police, who came by a few minutes later to search her yard. Then they knocked on neighbors' doors to find out whose car it was. "It belonged to a woman visiting my neighbor," she says. "The police were nice, but they talked to me like I was a little girl."

*The last e-mail has a picture of Sarah jogging near her house, except her face and neck look like they've been stabbed and there's blood running down her chest.*

They didn't seem to understand why I was terrified."

Michelle Garcia of the Stalking Resource Center says that's often the case. "With stalking, it's very crazy-making behavior for the victim. You can imagine the reaction if you call 911 and say, 'There's a rose on my doorstep.' They might say, 'That's nice. I wish someone did that for me,'" she says.

All 50 states began enacting anti-stalking laws in the early '90s, but they were drafted before the widespread use of e-mail, GPS and camera phones. Last year, President Bush finally signed a bill making cyberstalking and online harassment a crime (hey, he's done one good thing). But you can't sue someone or get a restraining order against them if you don't know who they are.

"Online stalking is a relatively new crime, and it's complex," says Carol Jordan, the researcher who noted the increase in stranger-stalking. "The police can't just show up at the scene and look for evidence. They have to document a pattern of conduct."

**U**nlike Sarah and Renee, 22-year-old Melissa didn't realize that someone was keeping tabs on her. One night, she was at her dorm's dining hall with two good friends. "They were asking me, 'Why didn't you respond to us on MySpace?'" Melissa says. "I was like, 'You guys are so funny. I don't have a MySpace page.'" They looked at her like she was crazy.

Melissa went home and searched for her name—and found a profile she had no idea existed. “The person had pictures of me that my friends had posted on their pages, like from spring break. They had my hometown, my interests, my religion. They had ‘friend requested’ people I knew,” she says. “There were only two things on the page that they got wrong—they said I was 5’9”, and I’m really 5’6”. And anyone who knows me knows I’ve had a serious boyfriend for a long time. This profile said I was looking for the love of my life. I would *never* use those words.”

Melissa was freaked out. “It has to be someone who knows me a little, but I have no idea if it’s a guy or a girl. And I have no idea what their intent is,” she says. “I always thought I was doing a good job of shielding my private information. This could happen to anyone.”

Melissa contacted MySpace to have the page taken down, which it did. But she says the process was a hassle because she had to snap a photo of herself holding a sign with the fake profile’s ID number written on it. MySpace requires this to make sure people have a good reason for taking a profile down and don’t just want to, say, piss off an ex. MySpace handles these situations on a case-by-case basis. Sarah had to follow up several times before the page was actually erased.

It’s not like you should be freaking out and deleting your pages from all social-networking sites. Cases like

*“He called and said, ‘My rental car is right out front.’ ... He started hacking into my blog and writing rude, hateful things about my friends. He said I was a slut and a tease.”*

these are very rare, and MySpace itself has a 24-hour security team that responds to people who write about problems they’re having with other users. Still, if you want to avoid stalkers, you have to be smart about how you use these sites (see “Keep the Creeps Away,” left), which would probably be a good idea anyway, considering the fact that MySpace was recently sued by the families of four teenagers who were sexually abused by people they met on the site.

Jessie, a 29-year-old in Chicago, was going through one of those periods when her corporate job was so draining, she didn’t have the energy to make plans with friends. “I basically went to work, stayed late and came home, so chat rooms were my lifeline to other people,” she says. She

was pumped when she met a guy online named Darren. “We talked about everything, and he’d write me poetry. It was cheesy, but it was nice,” she says. “Then he started mailing me flowers and love letters at work, which seemed like too much. But he lived halfway across the country, so I never felt threatened.”

But then Darren started calling her all the time. Jessie got a bad vibe, so she stopped answering her phone. “He’d leave messages like, ‘Why aren’t you answering?’ He sounded like a jealous boyfriend,” she says. Then one day, he wrote to tell her he was coming to Chicago “on business.” She said she didn’t want to see him. “He called me at work a few days later and was like, ‘My rental car is right out front,’” she says.

Jessie asked him to leave, but the stalking didn’t end there. When a friend searched her computer for spyware, sure enough, it was there. Jessie thinks Darren, a computer programmer, must have sent it through an e-mail attachment. “I had a blog, and he started hacking into it and writing rude, hateful things about my friends,” she says. “He’d also say things about me—that I was a slut and a tease.”

A few months later, Darren came to Chicago again and got arrested for drunk driving while he was trying to find her. “I got calls from his family members—he’d apparently told them I was his girlfriend—and they wanted me to bail him out of jail. I was like, ‘No way,’” she says. “He somehow got out and called me. At that point, I told him very clearly that I never wanted to hear from him again.”

Luckily, Darren stopped contacting her. But Jessie always worries that he might resurface. She recently set up a support-group Web site (taking-back-control.com), and when it was hacked into a month ago, she suspected that Darren was behind it.

Being stalked changes how you go about even the most mundane parts of your life. These days, Renee gets a nervous feeling every time she walks out of her office, Melissa still searches for her name on MySpace every now and then to make sure she’s not there, and Jessie worries that even the e-mails she sends to her mom are being secretly read by others.

Sarah is not only terrified to meet people online, she’s terrified to meet new people, period. “A new assistant was hired at work, and when he’d try to talk to me, I’d walk away with no explanation. I was rude for weeks, because I was scared he might be the guy,” she says. “A few days ago, one of my roommates said she had a guy friend coming to visit. She said he would stay on our couch and I freaked out, like ‘I can’t have a strange guy staying in my living room.’ Having something like this happen to you makes you feel like an absolute basket case. I’m gonna need a lot of therapy.” ■

*The names and identifying details of the women in this story have been changed so we don’t egg on the creeps who are harassing them.*

## IF THESE STORIES SOUND EERILY FAMILIAR...

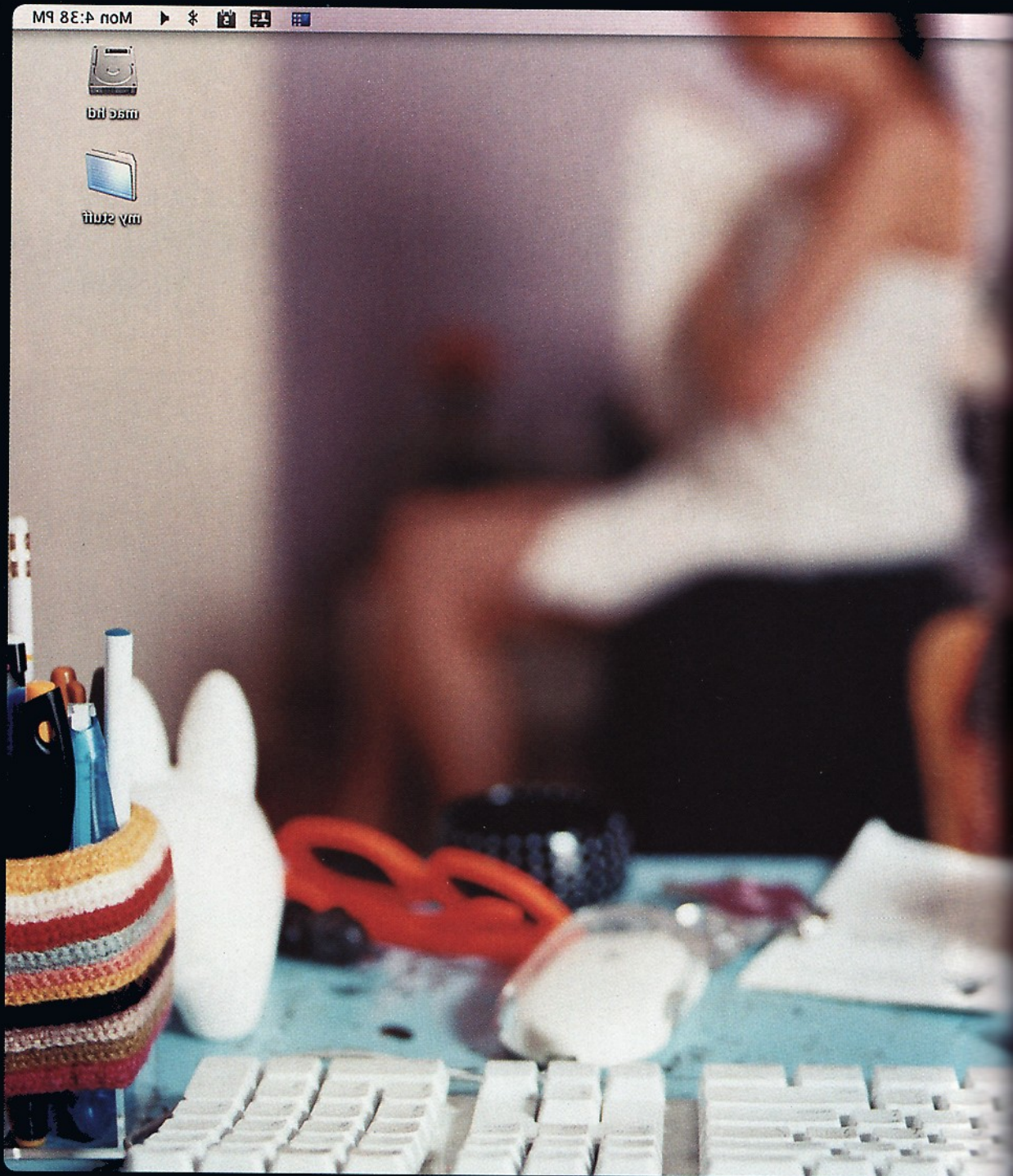
**1** Don’t respond to your stalker. Michelle Garcia of the Stalking Resource Center says, “If he calls 24 times and you answer on the 25th time and say, ‘Stop calling me,’ what it says to him is, ‘It’s gonna take 25 phone calls to hear her voice.’”

**2** Call someone. A victim advocates association like the Stalking Resource Center (800-FYI-CALL) or Safe Horizon (safehorizon.org) can help you assess the threat and explain your legal options.

**3** Use your sixth sense. If you don’t feel safe, call the police.

**4** Document harassment. Print out e-mails. Take photos of texts. Record phone messages. Keep gifts or letters that are sent to you. All of this will help paint a picture for the police of what’s freaking you out.

**5** Trace anonymous messages. If you’re getting e-mails from an anonymous source, it’s possible to trace the IP address to a specific computer server. Talk to the cops about this, because it generally requires a subpoena from a court clerk.



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