

The Romance

by  
Deb Norton

Deb Norton  
805.794.0101  
deb@officialdebnorton.com

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Mary Ellen and Jim are at a very nice restaurant. There is candlelight, soft music, all that.

JIM

(A little panicky)  
What is it? What's wrong?

MARY ELLEN

No. Everything's perfect. Perfect restaurant. Perfect guy. If this were my last minute on earth, I'd die a happy woman.

JIM

You know it's funny you should say that because I've been- I've been thinking about the future.

MARY ELLEN

You have?

JIM

Yes. I love you Mary Ellen. Very much. I want- I want to build a future together, with you- you and I. I-

MARY ELLEN

Yes?

JIM

I just- There's something I need to- Because, really, I do think that if we are to have a future together- I mean- This isn't easy for me.

MARY ELLEN

You know you can tell me anything.

JIM

Well, it seems this future I've imagined has a sort of wrinkle in it. But I think that if we really try, we can work it out. Iron it out so to speak. So I wonder if we could speak openly about-

Mary Ellen has taken a bite of her dinner and begins to choke.

JIM (CONT'D)

I'm- Honey? Mary Ellen? Are you-

She looks at him with growing panic.

JIM (CONT'D)  
 Oh come on! Not tonight. I was  
 trying to- You know what? I'm not  
 going to save you, damn it, I'm  
 not.

She continues to choke, clearly in severe distress.

JIM (CONT'D)  
 Please stop this now.

She grabs his hands and presses them to her diaphragm,  
 indicating that she would like him to perform the Heimlich  
 maneuver.

JIM (CONT'D)  
 (To restaurant)  
 No, she's fine. We're fine. We  
 don't need any assistance. Just go  
 on with your dinners.

He takes his hands away and she drops to the floor.

JIM (CONT'D)  
 (To Mary Ellen)  
 Please sweetheart, get up off the  
 floor.

Someone approaches Jim. He grabs a steak knife and a fork.

JIM (CONT'D)  
 I'm warning you buddy, don't be a  
 hero. I'm telling you to back off.  
 Now, all of you, go on and eat.  
 EAT! Mary Ellen you can choke till  
 the cows come home. I love you very  
 much, but I am not saving you  
 anymore.

Mary Ellen gets up and performs the Heimlich maneuver on  
 herself, using the back of her chair. JIM dusts her off a  
 bit, and then holds her chair for her. She sits.

JIM (CONT'D)  
 I've been trying to tell you for  
 months, but every time I get close  
 you have another accident. I  
 thought we couldn't get into too  
 much trouble here. It's on the  
 ground floor.

(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)

There are no flambé dishes. I should have known when you ordered the fish.

MARY ELLEN

All this time? Oh, God. You've only been saving me for my sake.

JIM

No. No, I relished rescuing you. That first time in Aruba? Towing your poor limp body to shore, resuscitating you... The water exploding from your lungs and I felt strong and afterwards I was so thankful for you.

MARY ELLEN

Yes. Coming to and the first thing I see is your face. So determined and full of passion. Oh God, you were so sexy. How can you not want-

JIM

I just- I've become- I'm afraid of losing you, of failing you and then you'd be gone.

MARY ELLEN

But you won't fail me. Of course you won't.

JIM

There have been some close calls. That time you "fell" out of the car when we were going 50? You're shoulder actually bounced on the pavement before I could grab you. That must have been very painful.

MARY ELLEN

Oh, pish. It burned a little. Jim. I don't want you to worry this way. I'm happy. Everything's all right.

JIM

Well, it's not all right. We've been to the emergency room 5 times since then. I know they suspect abuse at Memorial. That nurse with the orange hair gives me these looks that- And who can blame her? You are getting quite a collection of scars.

MARY ELLEN

What do we care about some nurse?  
They're my scars and each one tells  
a little love story about you and  
me.

JIM

Look. Last weekend at the zoo? I  
turned around for one second to buy  
some peanuts and you went over the  
railing-

MARY ELLEN

My necklace fell. I was trying to  
retrieve it when-

JIM

Everything was in slow motion. The  
lions pacing, the sun glinting off  
their sharp white teeth.

(Snapping out of it)

You didn't even give me the benefit  
of a scream. I caught you by your  
shoelace, Mary Ellen. I mean, it's  
just a scrap of string.

MARY ELLEN

You were as quick as a snake.

JIM

No. That was not skill or bravery.  
It was just luck. If your shoelace  
hadn't been untied- I have to say-  
I think you're raising the stakes  
so high- You- You're stacking the  
deck against me.

MARY ELLEN

Stacking? You think I'm stacking?

JIM

What if your shoe had come off in  
my hand?! It's too horrible.

MARY ELLEN

Yes! You pull me back from that  
edge and the closer I've been to  
the edge the more wonderful it is  
to return to you. And then there  
you are, solid and safe.

JIM

I simply can't continue to- to- My nerves are just a mess. I never have a moment of true peace when I'm with you. There are always sharp objects, bookcases that could crush you, heavy traffic, heights.

MARY ELLEN

You're afraid I'll die.

JIM

Yes!

MARY ELLEN

I won't.

JIM

You can't know that.

MARY ELLEN

I'm in control when I have my accidents. I mean it kind of sucks the romance out of it to say this but, I untied my shoe for you. I want you to succeed.

JIM

I wonder if you really do anymore.

MARY ELLEN

Well, there's a little thing called trust, you know?

JIM

I just have to come right out and say it. I've lost my nerve.

MARY ELLEN

Oh Sweetie.

(In hushed tones)

I'm sure it's just temporary.

JIM

I really don't think it is.

MARY ELLEN

You are my white knight and, you know, the important thing in a situation like this is to get right back on that horse.

JIM

(After a beat)

Mary Ellen, I brought you here so that I could propose marriage.

MARY ELLEN

Oh. Jim.

JIM

I had always wanted to propose marriage in a hot air balloon.

MARY ELLEN

Oh, how romant-

JIM

I pictured us floating gently above a rolling landscape of fall colors, everything bathed in the golden glow of the sunset. But I didn't think you could resist throwing yourself from the basket. So- People change. They don't just want the same thing forever and ever. I've changed. I need you to accept that.

MARY ELLEN

Jim.

JIM

Yes, Mary Ellen?

MARY ELLEN

I'm not going to let this come between us.

JIM

You're not?

MARY ELLEN

No.

JIM

(Hopeful)

Really?

MARY ELLEN

Really.

Mary Ellen stabs herself in the stomach with a steak knife.

JIM  
Good Christ!

MARY ELLEN  
Get back on that horse, Baby.

JIM  
Goddammit, Mary Ellen, this is really the limit. This is not an accident. This is self-mutilation.

A patron tries to intervene again.

JIM (CONT'D)  
Yeah, you keep-a-comin', and you just see what happens.

MARY ELLEN  
Whoa, I think I'm going to faint.

JIM  
Fine. Faint. Faint all you want.

MARY ELLEN  
Faint all I- I am mortally wounded. Fly to my aid.

JIM  
That's not a mortal wound. Worst-case scenario you'll be off solids for a couple of weeks.

MARY ELLEN  
Okay... If that's the way you need it.

She grabs another steak knife and holds it to her throat.

JIM  
No!

MARY ELLEN  
Because I am willing to do what it takes, Jim.

She holds the knife to her wrist.

JIM  
Don't!

She puts the knife in her mouth like a gun.

JIM (CONT'D)

Please, don't! This is how you fight for us? You're gonna bleed to death in front of me?

MARY ELLEN

(Trying to talk around the knife)

I'm trying to help you.

He grabs the knife away from her.

JIM

This is not helping. This is hurting. It's hurting me. It's obviously hurting you.

(Falling apart)

I can't go on being afraid all the time.

MARY ELLEN

It's okay to be afraid, Jim. There's so much to fear when you love someone. But you can't let it rule you because then you aren't really living.

JIM

That sounds right when you say it, but... I just think- This can't be how it works.

(To the room)

Will someone please call 911?

MARY ELLEN

You would let total strangers put their hands on me?

Jim nods Miserably.

MARY ELLEN (CONT'D)

Oh, my God, Jim..

JIM

I think it's best if we make a clean break of it. I don't think I can take it any other way.

MARY ELLEN

Break?!

JIM

Well, look at you! I don't need...  
 (Gesturing at the knife)  
 this to love you. And I'm not some  
 man of steel. I'm a history  
 professor. I'm a would-be devoted  
 husband. That's all I am. I wish  
 you wanted...  
 (Gesturing to himself)  
 This...

MARY ELLEN

Oh, no. I'm such an idiot. I didn't  
 know- What am I doing? I don't need  
 you to be anything.

JIM

Do you mean it?

MARY ELLEN

Call 911  
 (Weakly, to the room)  
 Someone call 911...

JIM

Oh, Mary Ellen! I never wanted to  
 be without you. You're my whole-  
 everything.

He hugs her passionately. She yelps.

JIM (CONT'D)

Oh, Sorry, sweetie.

MARY ELLEN

It's nothing.

JIM

We have to get you to the ER.

MARY ELLEN

No, no... We should let the  
 paramedics... Fresh start for us...

JIM

I can't do that to you.

MARY ELLEN

Okay.

He rips off his shirt and carefully covers the wound with it.

JIM  
Hold this over the wound.

He scoops her up in his arms.

JIM (CONT'D)  
We'll remember this always as our  
last time.

MARY ELLEN  
(Fading fast)  
You're my shining white light. I  
mean knight.

JIM  
Oh God, you're so beautiful when  
you're like this. What am I saying?

Moving toward the door, he is every bit the white knight.