



BLIND LOVE
 “It was a whirlwind,” says Newell (with Meehan in 2014) of her relationship with Meehan, who moved into a condo she rented on Balboa Island, Calif. (right).



THE REAL-LIFE STORY BEHIND DIRTY JOHN

DEADLY ROMANCE

Debra Newell thought she had finally found her own Prince Charming in John Meehan. But her fairy-tale romance turned into a nightmare

By JOHNNY DODD and CHRISTINE PELISEK

If there’s such a thing as a perfect first date, Debra Newell felt like she was on it that evening in 2014 as she sat across the table from John Meehan, a handsome, charming anesthesiologist she’d met online days earlier on an over-50s dating website. Claiming to have just returned to Southern California from a year spent volunteering with Doctors Without Borders in war-torn Iraq, he peppered her with questions about her life. Newell, a 59-year-old wealthy, successful interior designer with four failed marriages behind her, found herself falling fast and hard. “Everything was perfect in my life,” Newell says. “The only thing missing was love... and I was ready for love.”

What Newell wasn’t ready for was the nightmare that unfolded when they got married after a whirlwind two-month-long romance—and Meehan, a 55-year-old serial con man, went to work terrorizing her, stealing her money, property and alienating her from everyone around her. Newell’s story and how she and her family survived Meehan’s deadly

‘THERE WERE RED FLAGS, BUT I WASN’T WILLING TO LOOK. I FELL SO HARD FOR HIM’
 —DEBRA NEWELL

game of manipulation was the focus of a *Los Angeles Times* six-part investigative series and a wildly popular podcast named *Dirty John*, a nickname Meehan’s college pals gave him. Now the shocking saga is a Bravo scripted hit series starring Connie Britton, nominated for a Golden Globe for the role, and Eric Bana (see sidebar)—and Oxygen will explore the case in the documentary *Dirty John, The Dirty Truth* airing Jan. 14. Says Bravo’s showrunner Alexandra Cunningham: “My goal was to honor all these people that John tried to destroy.”

Newell didn’t know much about Meehan’s past or his present life when the two began dating, but the intensity of his focus on her was immediately intoxicating. The couple quickly moved into a penthouse she rented for them on Balboa Island and kept their quickie wedding secret from her friends and family, including her four grown children. “I’d come home from work and couldn’t wait to spend my evening with him,” says Newell, now 63. “He’d tell me how beautiful

I was, ask me about my day and rub my back. I was infatuated with him.”

Her children weren’t as smitten and were suspicious that the “successful doctor” only drove their mother’s cars and seemed evasive when they asked him questions about his life. Meehan also seemed to be trying to distance their mother from her kids, telling her they were only interested in her money and trying to stir up further animosity within the family. “He’d pretend to be my mom sometimes and text my sister, telling her to shoot herself in the head or jump off her balcony,” says Newell’s youngest daughter, Terra, 27, who grew so frustrated with her lovestruck mom, they stopped speaking. Newell’s kids hired a private investigator who quickly validated their fears: Not only had Meehan never attended medical school, but he had a lengthy felony rap sheet, had served time in Michigan and California prisons for stealing powerful narcotics from numerous hospitals where he worked as a nurse, and had swindled and terrorized multiple women he’d met online while posing as a doctor. He’d only been out of prison for a few days before his first date with Newell. “I was in shock,” she says. “And I was scared and angry.”



Though Newell filed for an annulment, the smooth-talking Meehan tearfully explained that he’d been the victim of an intricate setup and begged her to let him prove his innocence. The reconciliation didn’t last long—Newell soon fled her home and went into hiding. Meehan hired a lawyer, filed for divorce and demanded half her income and ownership in her business. “He told me he would make my life a living hell,” she says. “I lived in constant fear.” He lit her Tesla on fire, emailed nude photos of her to her family and began stalking her.

Meehan was by all accounts desperate and broken when he attempted to pull off his final, most violent plot. On Aug. 20, 2016, he waited for Terra in the parking lot of her Newport Beach apartment complex. “Remember me?” he asked seconds before stabbing her with a knife hidden in a paper

SEX & LIES: DIRTY JOHN ON TV

More than 3.5 million viewers tuned in to *Dirty John*’s launch, making it Bravo’s most watched scripted telecast ever. While showrunner Alexandra Cunningham focused on the Newell family’s saga, she also looked closely at Meehan’s psyche. “To walk around inside John to the extent that I did was interesting,” she says. “But I’m glad to not have to do it anymore.” *Dirty John* airs Sunday nights at 10 p.m. ET on Bravo.



Eric Bana as Meehan with Connie Britton as Newell in *Dirty John*.

LETHAL ATTRACTION

ONLINE CONNECTION

“Things were moving too fast,” says Newell (with photos the couple sent to each other). “But I got caught up in it all. He was smart, handsome and saying all the right things.”



VEGAS ‘I DOS’

“He’d ask me to marry him sometimes a hundred times a day,” says Newell (with Meehan after their December 2014 nuptials in Las Vegas).



A SHOCKING ATTACK

“I thought he was punching me, but he was actually stabbing me,” says Newell’s daughter Terra (at the ER after being attacked in August 2016). “I didn’t have time to think. All I could do is react.”



bag. “I ended up kicking the knife out his hand, grabbed it and started wailing on him, stabbing him in the chest and forehead,” recalls Terra, who credits her survival to fighting techniques she learned from her obsession with the zombie post-apocalyptic drama *The Walking Dead*. “I did the last two into his eye, then into his skull and brain.” Meehan died four days later. “It’s poetic justice in the strongest degree,” says Orange County senior deputy district attorney Matt Murphy. “He victimized women for so long, and at the end of the day he got bettered by a woman.”

Though Newell hasn’t given up on love, she is now using her painful experience to help other women, answering the dozens who write her each week asking for advice. “I’m just not interested in [romance] right now,” says Newell. “This could have happened to anyone, but I don’t want anyone to ever have to go through what I endured.” ●