

Hot and Bothered Episode

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Picture this: I arrive in the Bronx after a long drive from Boston. I text my friend, Jen, who I'm here to visit, from her foyer saying, "I'm here!" She doesn't reply, but that's okay, I've been to her place a hundred times. But she does have a door person. He asks my name and I give it, but I'm not on the list. So I call her. No answer. I call her again. Still, no answer. So I tried to convince the doorman that I really know this family. Please, just let me up. I really have to pee. I described the kid, Lulu, four years old, adorable, lots of attitude, often to be found in sunglasses and a tutu. Her mom, Jen, tall, long, almost black hair, chunky glasses, often wearing knitted items.

I avoid using racial language cause... I'm a white lady who feels weird about it. And, I don't want to describe people I love by their skin color. But he cuts right to the chase. "Oh, the Chinese lady with the Mexican kid!" Sure. He lets me in. I get in the elevator and head straight to the eighth floor. As soon as I get off the elevator it becomes clear to me why they weren't answering the phone. Destiny's Child is blaring from their door and giggles abound. I knock loudly. Two sweaty faces emerge, happy to see me. Hugs and kisses happen, but the dancing doesn't stop. After I pee, I jump right in and dance too.

MUSIC

And after the first song is over, the next song comes on. Tom Petty. I ask, shouting a little over the music, "What playlist is this?" Jen answers, "*The Handmaid's Tale* soundtrack!" She laughs. Boy, that's the most Jen thing I've ever heard.

I'm Vanessa Zoltan and this is Hot & Bothered.

Today's writer is my friend, Jen. Jen was first my boss, but she then became one of my best friends. Like soulmate level friends. I officiated her wedding. She knits me all my winter wear. She's like the big sister that I never wanted but am so glad I have. Jen picked the trop "Fake Relationship to True Love." You've seen this trope before, a million times, "She's All That," "The Wedding Date," "Ten Things I

Hate About You," "The Proposal."

Usually with this trope, a bet is involved or an inheritance is at stake, there's a deceit at the heart of this trope. But usually, the couple are in on it together. My mom is bothering me about getting married, you're being harassed by an ex. Let's just pretend we're together. Whoops, now we love each other. Awkward. So it made sense that my friend Jen picked this trope. It's about something that looks shiny on the outside but has something sneaky and insidious on the inside. And Jen is full of light and she crochets blankets and toys for all the babies in her life, and dances with her daughter. And she is obsessed with creepy things. Twilight Zone, Black Mirror, planning for zombie attacks. There are words that gross her out, and she likes to say them all the time and then shriek, "Gross!" and laugh.

So I was excited to see how she was gonna handle this trope.

Jen: Something that I was thinking about, I'm really kind of coming at it from this woman, this woman's perspective is the main character. And...

Vanessa: Does she have a name?

Jen: Not yet.

Vanessa: Okay. I think it should be Shshmesssa Shmoltan.

Jen: *laughs* I don't know why I want to call her Lucia. I mean, Lucia is my daughter. There's something about...and my, my daughter is powerful. There's something that's calling me to talk about what Romance looks like with this new generation. Like, knowing how I'm trying to encourage her and nurture her to be this strong powerful woman. I'm like, what would it be like if that woman went out to find a partner, you know? With all these pressures and, um, the ways in which we do things, you know, to sort of, sort of partner up these days. Um...

Vanessa: Oh my god. I love that. Your character is future Lulu?

Jen: Future Lu.

Vanessa: I love it! Lulu is one of my favorite people in the entire world, so I already love your book!

Jen: Yeah. I kind of do too. So that's my current thought. And then, it's basically, the story starts out with her getting pressured by some group of people, like, what are you doing, you're working a lot, and you're not dating anyone, but you also say you want to have a family, so what are you doing with your life? Like, that kind of thing.

And so, the fake relationship piece comes from her being in these online platforms and sort of going through the motions. But not really, you know, her heart isn't totally in it, but she's doing it because she feels like she has to. And looking through tons of profiles until someone stands out. And, for some reason this person is saying things that sound different, the pictures, you know, he's showing are different than everyone else's. He's not trying to prove anything, which feels different. Everyone else is like, showing their fancy stuff, their fancy trips, in their profile pictures. But then the conflict is that he never responds to her. And, also something, I don't know why I was going down this creepy path, but all of the pictures of him were actually him in scenes, but he would never show his face.

Vanessa: Huh.

Jen: Which feels somewhat creepy, but it was intriguing to me. And that just automatically came to me and that's why it stood out to her. When she was going through these hoards of profile pictures, she saw this person who was trying to kind of share more about his life but without this focus of what I look like.

Has Jen ever been online dating? The people without photos aren't intriguing, they're... married.

Vanessa: So is the fakeness that she, does she like, start telling people she's in a relationship that she's not really in? What, what makes it a fake relationship?

Jen: So, she basically reaches out to him a few times but he never responds. But she sort of becomes wrapped up in this idea of "I have got to meet him."

Vanessa:
Yep.

Jen: I have to find this guy and she sort of, the fakeness is telling her friends, who are the ones pressuring her, that she's actually, you know, seeing this person.

Vanessa: Amazing.

Jen: Kind of to get them off her back, but also she wants to be in this relationship with him so she's really like starting to have, you know, these visions of being together with him before it's actually real. This is why I'm saying it's kind of taken a creepy turn.

Um... lady, you dance with your four year old to *The Handmaid's Tale* soundtrack, no one is surprised that your story is taking a creepier than normal fake relationship to true love turn. I am surprised that it is taking a creepy turn when Lulu, the light of Jen's life, is the main character.

I was confused. I know that Jen wants everything for Lu. So I couldn't figure out what this was about. Like, does she think that not being able to see a man's face is hot? Or that stalking someone is cool? I literally didn't get it.

Vanessa: I'm wondering how you're like... wrapping your head around this simultaneously as like a wish for Lu.

Jen: I
know.

Vanessa: What is, like, the theological, emotional thing that feels true for you about Lulu?

Jen: Mhm.

Vanessa: What are you trying to tell, what are you trying to tell your daughter through this story?

Jen: I think I'm trying to tell her, and I have to really work that idea through a little bit more, because I sort of realized that I wanted to write for future Lu at the end of all of this.

Vanessa: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jen: So, I have to figure out how to weave that in. But I think my intention is to not go with what's popular. To not go with the thing that everybody says you should want. To not necessarily have that be your answer. To be able to decide for yourself, to observe people and things and life yourself. And come to your own definitions. I think that's what I really want for her. That even in this space where it's sort of like, oh, you know, there are norms, right? There are norms in online dating, and there's a certain way that you do things. She has found this guy who is doing something that no-one else is doing, and that's attractive to her in a moment where it feels like everyone's kind of doing what they're "supposed" to be doing.

Even if we haven't online dated, we've all experienced this to a certain extent. For example, my partner Peter didn't know the full extent of my sweatpants collection until a year into our relationship. And I think that he is glad to know that part of me now. Turns out that he has his own collection. But at the beginning, we both pretended that we wore real plants when we watched movies. It's so much better now. This kind of pretending that we do while dating, or at the beginning of relationships is normal, and good to a large extent. Getting more comfortable with each other is good and I honestly would have found it a little bit weird if Peter had worn sweatpants on our third date.

But taken just a little bit further, this kind of behavior does become fake. A deception. A lie. There's a gray area and Jen doesn't want any of that grayness for Lu. She wants Lu to love herself and wear sweats on a second date if Lu

wants to wear sweats on a second date. And I get that too. Not wanting our children to feel like they have to hide any part of themselves. But if this is really a love story for Lulu, I hope that we can move away from Lulu being a stalker who's only interested in a guy who's probably married... because she doesn't know anything about him.

When Jen and I got back on the phone to check in about her story, she'd sent me some pages. I was obviously ready for Twilight Zone level creep. But what she had written was totally different from what we had talked about. It had gotten even creepier than before. And color me dumb, but I couldn't follow why she would write this about, or for, our Lulu.

Vanessa: So, I read your first page, and here's my big question for you: You said that you're writing this in large part for your daughter who is the love of my life, this story is seriously creepy and fucked up.

Jen: I feel like fucked up is a little too much for what I have so far. Well, tell me what you think is creepy.

Vanessa: Well, she describes it as a nightmare.

Jen: Yup.

Vanessa: This young woman wakes up in a room, we don't know where she is, and there are cameras on her all the time.

Jen: Yes.

Vanessa: And there's a creepy mantra on the wall "treat today like no one is watching."

Jen: Yup.

Vanessa: But people ARE watching her.

Jen: Yup.

Vanessa: I don't know if I were to write a story for your daughter, there'd be like puppies...

I couldn't quite follow what was going on here. Jen, in this new version of what she was writing, has people pretending to be in relationships in order to appease society. She has people being pressured into life choices that are binding and far from true to who they are. In all of our interviews, Jen keeps returning to this idea of people's fakeness. Or people performing. And I couldn't quite understand why. I watched her date and I don't think she got scammed or tricked in any major way. At least not that I can remember.

Jen: What this character realizes, that took me a long time to realize myself, was this is not about coming to a person and being a clean slate, you're a person with your own ideas, thoughts, dreams, preferences, right? I was really, I think my biggest mistake of the past was coming to people and being open to having them shape not just what our relationship was going to be and what our dynamic would be, but really who I was in the context of our relationship, who I was, and then who I was sort of wound up changing I think, based on who I was with them wound up having bigger ripple effects about how I spent my time when I wasn't with them even, you know, what I did with my life, I think wound up getting affected by who I became for the good of this relationship, so it influenced me way too much.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Oh. She's not scared of other people's fakeness, she's scared of her own. She is scared that she could, or Lulu could, be a version of herself to get a boy to like her. And then be stuck playing that part for the rest of her life. She isn't scared that Lu will hide her sweats for a year, or that her partner will never find her sweatpants drawer. She's scared that Lulu will hide her thoughts, her intelligence, her opinions. She's scared that Lulu will make herself small for someone. And then feel trapped in that cage for the rest of her life. And that's a rational fear for a

mother to have for her daughter.

There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about how I'm five pounds away from being happy. That is a way in which the cameras are watching me. I sometimes try to calculate the hours of my life that I would get back if I could take back all of the minutes that I have worried about those five pounds. All of the books that I could have read, rather than the unhealthy thought patterns I accumulated. The patriarchy wants to keep women feeling watched. And now that I think about it, Jen is much more watched than I am. I watched Jen. We met at work and then she became my boss and my mentor. So it made sense for me to watch her. But also, she's immensely watchable. She's hilarious, like, pee in your pants in public hilarious. And brilliant. She has a loud, infectious laugh, she's conspicuously beautiful with fantastic style and wears a lot of bright colors. She was class president at Wellesley, like Hillary Clinton. She's tall, and she's also biracial.

Vanessa: I'm wondering if you feel like, part of being, your biracial identity is, like, seeing that fakeness and duplicity in others more, because they don't know where to put you. Am I pathologizing you too much?

Jen: *laughs* No, no, I can see that. So much of my life has been just reflecting on what is real, or what is, you know, true enough, like you said, being kind of questioned even as a kid, or starting as a kid, um, are you this enough or are you that enough, are you really like us. I think I've thought a lot about "What does it mean to fit in," what does it mean to be this category of person, but to still feel like I could have my own identity, right. Cause I think the thing about race and classification of that kind is that we expect it to look a very certain way. So, yeah, I think I've grown up kind of interrogating, well, if I don't look like that but I am that, then what does that mean? There's probably a bigger range that we should accept as being a part of this community, or being a part of this culture or race. Um, yeah.

I am sure that when I first met Jen I had thoughts about her race. That I noticed it in a real way. But I sometimes would forget the way that I forget my dad has an accent. The forgetfulness of the privileged person, whose skin color is seen as base normal. I want to see my forgetfulness as a compliment. I saw her as Jewish and as a woman, as just like me. But color blindness is not a compliment. It is a convenient obliviousness to the realities that the other person is living in. One day in the office she came to me to confirm our Roshannah plans and this white

woman who sat near me and overheard our conversation made such a big deal that Jen didn't look Jewish. And then basically wanted Jen's entire family history to understand how Jen looked the way she did and was Jewish.

Jen handled it gorgeously. Calm, and yet instructive through one word answers. I was livid. The anger of an armchair liberal who had the time to be offended by this interaction because I had to deal with it so infrequently. She hears these things all the time, chipping away at her. What are you? People ask her constantly. She knows what they mean, of course, but what they are saying to her again and again is "what are you?" I asked her, if her experience as a biracial woman was playing a role in how she was imagining Lulu's future and how she was raising her daughter.

Jen: I definitely do have anxiety about my daughter facing those same, sort of, experiences where folks have expectations of her or make assumptions of her. And I don't know what they will be for her. I mean, I've been thinking about this a lot and it feels early in that she's trying to understand what identity means still. Um, so, she's not asking a ton of questions yet, but it's something I'm really conscious of. It's like, I had this weird, hopeful expectation that once I had a kid I would have someone who looked like me, like my brothers look like me, but my parents, people would always think that my mom was my babysitter and my dad was my creepy older boyfriend, like "what" um, laughs, I've had such awkward, awkward, horrible moments, but no one ever thought I belonged to them, and I was excited to have a daughter who belonged to me, and she looks nothing like me, um, and actually I think might pass for white. And so, I have feelings about that, I have to process it more for sure, but it's really interesting since I've been, like I was raised as though I were white, without a lot of racial consciousness, but had one, on my own, even though I didn't really know how to talk about it as a kid, because I was having experiences that told me I wasn't white only, and so it's interesting to feel such a strong racial identity myself and wondering, like, what is that going to be for her.

Ah. I misunderstood that room. It's not a creepy message painted on the wall. It's a room that Jen has decorated for Lu. Jen is saying "I know that there are cameras watching you, even when you sleep. But please, my sweet little girl, treat today like no one is watching. Figure out a way to be entirely yourself in this shit world. Figure out a way to forget about the cameras." Which is why Jen is so obsessed with fakeness.

Jen: I am obsessed with it. Yeah, I've just been thinking a lot at this point in my career, right, starting my own business, and really reflecting on what my career has been up until now. I think I've realized how much, how much I was doing that was not authentic but what I thought I needed to do to navigate the workplace effectively and to be successful as a woman of color. And so at this point in my life, I'm like no more fakeness, no more, no more, no more. Um, to the dismay of my husband and sometimes my family. Like, I'm not, I'm not gonna just swallow things if I have negative reactions anymore and I'm not gonna pretzel myself to be someone who you want me to be. I'm gonna be myself. And it's been a process to find out even who that is after so long of trying to be this thing, right. Um, so I think the idea of fakeness feels very suffocating to me. It feels like the pressure to do something that you don't necessarily need or want in your life, and that is the last thing I wanted for Lucia.

The way I'm raising her, and the way I'm hoping she lives her life is one where she can really be in touch with her own desires and emotions and dreams and can really make those choices for herself, instead of, I have felt at times like I'm just riding the waves and figuring out what people want from me and trying to kind of match what the leader's doing, right, because I think that's going to help me be successful here. I've really experienced the opposite and have now come into a place where I've figured out how to be authentic for myself, um, and it's been quite a journey, and one that, like I said, I really want her, I want her to walk on that path, um, from, you know, from a young age starting now, I want to support her in seeing what that looks like.

Vanessa: I'm so sorry that you've spent so long feeling like you can't be yourself. I just, I love you so much.

Jen: I know. Thank you. I appreciate it.

Vanessa: I don't like that at all.

Jen: I know. I don't either and I, I know so many other women of color, people of color, who have experienced the same thing, and it, you know has been shocking to me that I didn't even quite realize how much of it I was doing until the past few years. Um, where I feel like the discourse is there now, my consciousness, um around it has increased, just as we talk about, right, like what does white, dominant culture look like? Realizing like, woah, I was subscribing to all of those things, I was trying to get good at all of those

things, because I just thought that was being professional. It's been painful and painful to realize, but also just feels good to be on this side now, where I'm like, okay, now I get it. I get what I was in, and um, I don't have to do that anymore. I can find spaces that are healthy for me and I can, you know, just live my life. I mean, it's, it's in our country so it's not like you can 100% escape it, but I think it's nice to be super aware of it now so I can, you know, make choices where I can make choices.

So here's my issue though. This is supposed to be a Romance novel. And Romance novels are about hope. They're about writing our way to a happily ever after. And I don't see how this is that. I do not want to be a white lady, obliviously pushing for a happily ever after, when Jen, a woman more in touch with the precariousness of the world because she is a woman of color, is saying otherwise. And also, I believe that hope is essential theologically and in the genre of Romance novels.

Vanessa: So I'm wondering in terms of writing your story, cause you talk so much about how writing this story is very much wrapped up in your daughter, in Lulu, and so I'm wondering why you're writing this bleak story. Why is this the story that you're writing for your daughter?

Jen: Yeah. It's funny that you see it as bleak, because I just see it as, like, what's happening, or what's possibly happening already.

Vanessa: Are people being sent to farms? To partner up?

Jen: Yes. You haven't gotten any of those invites?

Vanessa: Not yet.

Jen: Yikes. That's awkward. I just feel like, this feeling of pressure and this idea of like, paying for happiness, I'm gonna pay and then this will be figured out for me, you know like, I don't know it just feels like, why not commodify it, right, like it's already being commodified in certain ways, and this is just like, maybe a fancier, resort-y version of it. Um, so it feels like it could possibly exist somewhere already.

Vanessa: I mean I guess you're right. There are like, single cruises.

Jen:
Yeah.

Vanessa: Yeah, and the richer you are the more money you can throw at finding a mate.

Jen: Yes.

Vanessa: Okay, fine you've depressed me.

I'm not gonna push Jen on this. She is right and wise. And I sure as hell am not gonna be another person forcing Jen into my conception of the world. And, it makes me sad. I don't even want fictional Lulu to have to fall in love at the animal farm. And the point of this podcast was supposed to be about creating safe spaces of escape. So I brought this angst that I was feeling to one of the smartest Romance thinkers out there. Jamie Green, who we've heard from before in her writing about Romance in Trump's America amidst rising racism and hate for the New York Times. I was hoping that she could help me work through my sadness and my mixed feelings about Jen's sad Romance novel.

MUSIC

Vanessa: So, Jamie, we are dealing right now with one of my best friends, who is writing, just like, a really sad Romance novel. She is writing a Romance novel where she's trying to imagine her daughter in the future, still being awesome, but in a really broken, broken world. And it's a beautiful novel and I think it is wrestling with very real things, like are cameras literally always going to be watching us to such an extent of government extension that we don't feel as though we can behave like ourselves anymore. My question is just, is this still a Romance novel if the love story is the central story and it has a Happily Ever After, which is the definition you gave us at the beginning of this series, but it just doesn't read to me as a Romance novel.

Jamie: I mean, my first question is, like, does it need to be a Romance novel? Does that matter? It sounds like a powerful and compelling novel, and lots of books that aren't Romances have happy endings. Like, there's no rule against happy endings and strong plot lines around a relationship in sci-fi fantasy or anything else. I mean, I guess in mystery it would be a little weird if the main plot line was a love story. So that's my first question because especially you're describing where the sort of, sadness and weight seems to come from in this novel, it doesn't sound like it's from the relationship it sounds like it's from the world. And the questions that you said this book is interested in exploring aren't questions about a relationship or about falling in love or about what falling in love does to a person. They're about the world and the implications for us and how we think about the future. And those can obviously come up in Romance but that, to me, sounds like a clue that this is something that maybe has evolved into something else.

Vanessa: I'm curious about the role in Romance, you know this podcast started because I was feeling so depressed about the state of the world that I was turning to Romance a) as a place to self sooth, and b) as a place to like, really get hope and be like, look, there can be good men, we can at least imagine them. And if we can imagine them then they can be real. So, and we have wonderful writers out there, right like Jasmine Guillory, her second to most recent Romance novel has a protest in it that gets violent along racial lines, right, we have Romance that deals with contemporary issues that are scary and awful. So I'm wondering if you think it's Romance's responsibility to deal with these issues head on or to still be creating respite.

Jamie: The question of responsibility is really tricky. You're talking about responsibility in a very political sense. And I do think that there are ethical questions like, how do you, you know, what do you ignore in the world, or what do you engage with. Is the way to express that responsibility and to fulfill that responsibility necessarily to engage on the surface with the political and ethical questions of our moment? I don't know, I think that there are lots of ways to do it. You know, there's the responsibility to the genre, which is central of story happy ending. There's the responsibility to the readers, which is to take care of them in a way, like, I think that Romances can get dark and can be sad and can include pain, whether that's the personal pain of the characters or engaging with the broader political pain in the country, and obviously personal pain and political pain overlap and are one in the same, but not all personal pain is about politics. And so lots of Romances do engage with that. But I think that the responsibility to the reader then is

always to take care of them and never take them somewhere too dark or too painful that the Romance can't bring them to a happy ending that isn't just a happy ending for the characters but is a Happy moment, a peaceful moment, a positive feeling for the reader by the end. And I think if you, if there's too much you can go so far that you can't get back up to that ending.

Vanessa: Yeah, I think that the advice that I want to take back to my friend is just permission to make this not a Romance novel. I love the idea of us expanding this genre. But I love that Romance is this very specific place of escape. I also think that different readers need different things to escape to and this book has made me really question what it is that I love about Romance, and I want the genre to be more and more invitational and be like, all stories are welcome here, and then be like, but not too sad of stories because that's the point.

Jamie: Well, I mean, like, it's literally impossible for all stories to be welcome here. Because not all stories have happy endings, not all stories are about people falling in love. But that's the thing with Romance, there's this inherent tension where there are firm boundaries. And your friend's book sounds like it does have a central love story and does end with the couple falling in love, and this is also from the way you're describing it, you know, so I haven't read it and I don't know if the current draft matches the writer's intentions, that can be another thing, like maybe-

Vanessa: Totally.

Jamie: Maybe in her process she's in a moment right now where she's really engaged with the world building and the thematic questions around the world, and needs to pare that back a little if she wants it to still be a Romance. Like, how does that sort of fall into the background, or how does that motivate the Romance. Like, I'm thinking about Alyssa Cole's *Loyal League* series, which is, you know, set against the Civil War, set against a very horrific moment in history, especially for characters who have been enslaved or have loved ones who have been enslaved, and it's a very tricky balance. And so in the third book, you know, she has her characters really being motivated by this world and in learning about how they fit into the broader world, that's what allows the Romance to happen. So, like, the heroine in that book has a lot to learn about how slavery works and what it means for the people who are caught up in it. And a lot of guilt to face. She has to make that sort of journey as well. But, what makes it a Romance is

that she's in this context, making that journey in order to build this relationship. So, even though there's all of this other weight and baggage and pain around the characters and between the characters, all of that feeds into the Romance very specifically.

Vanessa: You are so helpful. Because I think that the thing that I need to go back and say to my friend, we're gonna talk about the book one more time, if this could be part of your writing process, where you need to be building this world, and just sort of holding space for her to either let this become not a Romance novel, and then the gift of the genre is that it held a safe enough space for her to want to explore this. And maybe it won't end up within the genre the way that, you know, the *Loyal Leagues* series does, maybe it will, but even when Romance isn't the end product, I think thinking about the fact that you're writing a Romance can create a safe enough space in your head for you to write your daughter as a badass heroine in a terrible world.

Jamie: Yeah, and I'm a huge believer in tricking yourself into writing as a process thing. So, giving yourself assignments narrows the task so much and takes a lot of the pressure off your brain so that there's more room for your creative brain to work. And I think that's the beautiful part of creativity that maybe your friend has discovered that in saying like, "I'm gonna focus on the love story" she allowed her brain to unearth all these concerns and questions from her subconscious maybe, I don't know if she sat down and said like, "I want to engage with the question of the surveillance state" or if she was like, "I'm gonna write a Romance," and it turned out she had a lot of fascinating ideas about surveillance and about the future. And I think that that's amazing and like, whether she then goes back and revises to focus things on the Romance, or just embraces this weird, beautiful thing that showed up out of nowhere, I think either way it's been very successful.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Jamie: And like, for a reader who's looking for the sort of, comfort and reassurance that we often go to Romance for, that's still there. Like, there's lots of sci-fi and fantasy that makes me feel really good and hopeful about the world. And plenty of it is dystopian. *laughs* So, you know, Romance offers a lot to readers, it's not the only thing that can offer those things to readers. And I think you can engage with the political questions of the world and engage with human pain and provide hope, lots of other authors in non-Romance genres are trying to give us new ways of imagining the future, not just new ways of imagining relationships. So they're very connected.

MUSIC

I started this project because Romance novels were the way that I could contemplate the apocalypse without succumbing to despair. Romances didn't make me forget about the apocalypse. But Romance novels did keep reminding me why I wanted the world to survive. They are important to me and to many of us. Because they keep us motivated. They are something to soothe, but also something to live for. But Jen doesn't want to write a book that soothes me. And that's great. Just like we all have our own love languages, we all have our own despair and hope languages. Romance isn't Jen's despair hope language. Lulu is.

Vanessa: So Jen, I think it's safe to say a) you're one of my best friends, like, closest friends in the world, and b) you and I are both obsessed with the apocalypse.

Jen: Yes, that's true.

Vanessa: But where we diverge is, I'm like, "Apocalypse! Happy stories! I will only watch Mindy Kaling" and you are like, "Apocalypse! I will only watch sad, terrifying things like Black Mirror." Thoughts? What do you think is going on in these really different reactions? We're really similar people.

Jen: I feel like I need both. I think the reason why I like watching post apocalyptic is because it feels like there's always some element, you know, small to large, of reality. And it, it always makes me feel like I'm preparing myself, you know? That I'm not blissfully like, "everything's gonna be fine," you know? But, reminding myself that there are risks in continuing down certain paths, right, that there are troubling things happening right now that will have really big consequences for this world, us as individuals, etc. So, I like the balance, actually, I don't tell you about the frivolous, fun, ridiculous things I watch. But also in a lot of apocalyptic things there's like some glimmer of hope. I love the Handmaid's Tale because she's, she's super fierce and she fights and she keeps fighting and figuring how to get the hell out of there and save people, so it also feels empowering. Show me the bleakest situation and how you could potentially

get out of it.

Vanessa: So what you're trying to show Lu is even if things get bleak, she will be able to find a way.

Jen: Yes. And that she could continue to be herself in all of it. The expectations might still be there, the, like, creepy ways of manufacturing it all might increase over time, but she doesn't have to go with all of that.

Vanessa: That's really beautiful.

So maybe it's even more hopeful that her daughter will end up okay in this dystopian mess than if her daughter was going to end up okay in a peacoat on the Upper West Side while Harry Connick Junior croons. It's easy to fall in love and be awesome while singing "Surrey With a Fringe On Top" on 92nd and Riverside. But in the apocalypse? Good luck. The faceless person who the character Lu falls in love with isn't faceless because they're married. They're faceless because it doesn't matter who they are. It only matters to Jen who Lulu is. And that she lives like no one is watching.

Jen: Okay my little Lu, I have some questions for you. First, what is your full name?

Lu: Lucia Izzi
Fontaine.

Jen: Perfect. How is your morning so far?

Lu:
Good.

Jen: *laughs* Um, what do you think you're gonna be when you grow up? What do you think you're gonna be like when you grow up?

Lu: A
scientist!

Jen: Oohhhh. And, what do you think you're gonna be like as a person?

Lu:
Strong.

Jen: Ooohhh. That's great. You're already strong, huh? And what else,
strong...

Lu: Proud.

Jen: Ooohh. That's a good word too. Anything else?

Lu: Not too
much.

**Yeah. Lulu will be just
fine.**

MUSIC

**And now, for this week's assignment from Julia
Quinn.**

Vanessa: Hi,
Julia!

Julia: Hi, how are you?

Vanessa: Good, how are you doing today?

Julia: I'm great.

Vanessa: So we're recording this a little ahead of when it comes out and you are about to go to England to see the *Brigertons* set.

Julia: Yes, I'm so excited.

Vanessa: I'm so excited for the show to come out and for you to become best friends with Julie Andrews and then for me to become friends with Julie Andrews and for this whole thing to be happening to me.

Julia: So really that's the whole reason you've befriended me, is so you can be friends with Julie Andrews who I'm probably not even gonna get to meet. *laughs*

Vanessa: No, I befriended you years before I knew of your Julie Andrews connection, *laughs* you can't accuse me of that.

Julia: Okay, okay.

Vanessa: So Julia, when last we left our listeners, they were scripting a moment of complete despair. Now, we need to come out of that despair I would imagine.

Julia: Yes, because these are Romances. So there has to be happy endings. So, you know, we do not end on despair.

Vanessa: Right, so what recommendations do you have for this clearing up of the

black moment.

Julia: We tend to want to see the guy grovel. Like, a good grovel is great.

Vanessa:
Amen.

Julia: Yeah. But it doesn't have to be the hero. I mean, certainly the heroine can be groveling too. Or they can both grovel. But, at some point somebody needs to be sort of, like, flayed open and just saying I'm sorry, I love you, I hurt you, there has to be some sort of conversation around it. Because even if your trope is not the big misunderstanding, part of what makes a Romance is some sort of misunderstanding. Because if there's no misunderstanding then its just gonna be smooth sailing the whole way. And while you might have a few laughs in there, you know, you don't have your conflict and you don't have much of a story. Redemption has to involve the open lines of communication.

Vanessa: Yeah, and so it's this moment where everybody can finally talk honestly. And usually the reader has been holding a little bit more information than any individual character has had. And so this is the moment where the characters have all the information and all of the messiness starts to get cleared up. And so, a good redemption scene can just be so satisfying. People get to finally say the things that they've always wanted to say.

Julia: Or they've been scared to say really. Because they feel safe. Now, looking at it from a more plot driven angle, for some people the black moment is going to be a plot driven thing in which your redemption might have to be more action based. I mean it could be a grand gesture rather than necessarily the grovel. Again, this is one of those things where it just goes to show, you know, all Romances are not alike and just because it starts with a meet cute and ends with a happily ever after, there are a myriad different ways that you get there. And one thing I'm realizing as I'm giving these assignments is that the further you get into the book, the less specific my assignments are and can be. At this point, it's up to you and it's up to your characters and it's up to what you've created to figure out how to get them into the light.

Vanessa: I think that makes sense I just think that, right, what I'm getting from this conversation is that the essential thing is that you tie up every loose end. And every problem you've made becomes an asset to the happily ever after. And this is the moment where all of those loose ends have to be tied up.

Julia: Yes, you need to tie up these loose ends. So yeah, I guess that is the assignment to do your redemption is to figure out what these loose ends are. What did you do in your story to create your black moment. Take a few minutes to write them down, why did they break up, or why did they reach this point where you think that maybe a happily ever after can't happen. And jot that down, maybe you've got one major thing, one minor thing. Maybe it's just one thing, I don't know. But write those down so that you actually know what they are in your head so when you go to write the redemption you have this at the forefront of your mind. Being like, I need to solve this. They need to make sure they talk about that, this is what has to be cleared up. Yeah, so there's your assignment.

Vanessa: *laughs* So that is your assignment everybody. Write your redemption scenes, get your couples back together, and we can't wait to hear them. And Julia, we'll talk to you in two weeks.

Julia: I'll be here.

MUSIC

Before we go, Jen's story reminded me of my favorite poem. So I asked my mom to read it. And then tell me what she thought about it. It's called Good Bones, and it's by Maggie Smith.

Mom: Good Bones, by Maggie Smith.

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.

Life is short, and I've shortened
mine

in a thousand delicious, ill-advised
ways,

a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways

I'll keep from my children. The world is at
least

fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative

estimate, though I keep this from my children.

For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.

For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,

sunk in a lake. Life is short and the
world
is at least half terrible, and for every
kind

stranger, there is one who would break
you,

though I keep this from my children. I am trying

to sell them the world. Any decent
realtor,

walking you through a real shithole, chirps
on

about good bones: This place could be
beautiful,

right? You could make this place beautiful.

Vanessa: Mom, what do you think about that
poem?

Mom: I find it very sad actually. There's too much truth behind
it.

Vanessa: So I've been working with our beloved Jen on her Romance novel. And she has her main character be future Lulu, but she set it in this really dystopian future and it just seems like Jen is so sad about the world that she's brought Lulu into. And so I'm wondering if you feel similarly as someone who has grandchildren in this world and as fires blaze around you in LA today, if you feel the same way.

Mom: Actually it's really interesting because when we were thinking of having children the idea of looking at the world around you did not occur to your father and I. Maybe

naively and out of stupidity but it did not. At this point in the world we are in today, I do think twice about all of it. Even more than twice because there is so much ugliness out there and climate change is just really becoming more and more worrisome. So I take it much more to heart today than I did back when the three of you were born.

Vanessa: Do you think it's more important to hope for a better future or to be really realistic and say, "No, most likely the world that we are living in is going to look like x, y, and z."

Mom: My personality calls for hope. I always try to see and look for, and see the good things in whatever. And I would continue to hope that it will get better, we will get smarter, we will manage it better, because to think otherwise I think would be very depressing and could influence the entire way of how someone lives. And that's being a double victim one to your environment, and then being a victim of your own, resisting it.

Vanessa: Thanks, Mom. I'm sorry that the world you willingly brought me into sucks so much.

Mom: I'm sorry too. I would have wanted a much nicer place for all of you. And it will still happen.

MUSIC

If you want to read Jen's story, or if you want to share your writing assignments go to our website, hotandbotheredrompod.com

Follow us on twitter and instagram @therompod Leave us a review on iTunes Support us on Patreon Our Romance Teacher is Julia Quin We are a co-production of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media Exec produced and co-written by me, Vanessa Zoltan and Ariana Nedelman Our

Production Team is: Chelsea Ursin

Julia Argy Brigid

Goggin Hannah

Goldbach Janielle

Kastner Caroline

Hamilton Jenna

Hannum Will Short

Alexander Mark

Jonathan Villalobos

Bella O'Brien

Our music is from Firstcom and Nick

Bohl

Special Thanks this week, to Jasmine Guillory, Lulu Fontaine, and my mom.

Thanks mom.