

9. A Helpful Scam

Vanessa: My kindergarten teacher was everything you wanted out of a kindergarten teacher when you were five years old; she was nice, she had firm routines. You got stickers when you did something good. She was young. I loved her. We'll call her Ms. Chalk.

Even after I moved along and flourished in my academic career, my mom stayed in touch with Ms. Chalk. Then, a few years ago, there was big news. Ms. Chalk had fallen madly in love with an Italian man. They met online; and it was love at first sight. They both just knew. They hadn't met in person yet but he was waiting for her in Italy and they were going to get married. They were going to buy a house together; each of them putting in \$50,000. So, Ms. Chalk wired him the money. And then, of course, he disappeared.

She had already quit her union teaching job to move to Italy. She had given up her house and now she had no savings to rent another one. She ended up living in her car and working as a part time security guard in an office building until she could get a teaching job back, which could take years.

If you were going to ask me to tell you a story about Love At First Sight, this is the one I would tell you. I would tell a cautionary tale. It is high risk. It is potentially high reward; soul mate, fate level, high reward. But the risk is SO high. You are trusting nothing but your instinct and a stranger. Love at first sight is a nice idea. But it can leave you sleeping in your car.

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

A very special person chose Love at First Sight as their trope; my sister-in-law, Suzanne. That's right, we're talking about romantic, smoochy love with the woman who married my brother. She's also my friend, hilarious, a writer and well... wonderful. But yeah -- she has gross taste in boys she's willing to kiss. No one's perfect.

She is also now the amazing mom to my nephew. But at the time that we started recording this, she was 6 months pregnant with the kiddo. And she was doing what a lot of people do when a big change is coming. She was looking forward, but she was also looking backwards. For her story, she was revisiting an outline that she had started years ago, long before she met my brother and knew that she was going to have a happily ever after of her own by having such an awesome sister-in-law.

Suzanne: So my story is based on something I attempted many years ago to write. I, um, I grew up in a family that watched a lot of science fiction. And what I really like about science fiction is that it really challenges, um, just the way we think of things and how many things we've come to accept. So what I'm writing is a science fiction romance novel or novella, and the idea is I have a character who's literally addicted to falling in love. She falls in love at first sight with many

many people, because in this world I've created you can prepped to fall in love with someone. So you go in for this service, it's like OKCupid on steroids, where you are...um, you're brainwashed to fall in love with someone, and she's been brainwashed so many times to fall in love with so many people she's addicted to the service, because she loves that euphoria, that feeling you get in the beginning of a relationship. The problem is that when she's trying to quit, when she finally realizes that these aren't healthy relationships that she's fallen in love with at first sight, she meets someone who's a viable candidate, this young man that her mom tries to set her up with, she immediately rights him off and doesn't give him a shot. But he's actually someone who's healthy, and understands conflict and how to be in a relationship. And they should be together forever.

Vanessa: I love what Suzanne is saying here. That is my problem with Love at First Sight. It seems like either it's "lust at first sight" or it's a love of love, and not a love of a person. I know we have debunked stranger danger... it tends to be people we know who hurt us the most. But Ms. Chalk thought she knew that man... because she fell in love with him at first sight. Love at first sight makes strangers seem like friends-- and they are not. They are strangers who you are giving your trust to, who haven't earned it. They might deserve it. But they haven't earned it.

Suzanne decided to write her novella in bits and pieces-- little word-count goals at a time.

Vanessa: So this romance writing process is like a two to three month process. It's going to be about two more months that we have you on the phone with us. And when are you giving birth?

Suzanne: I'm due in eleven and a half weeks, I'm due in eleven and a half weeks. But I'm not counting down the days.

[laughs]

Vanessa: We're hoping that he comes in ten and a half weeks. Perfectly healthy, just a little early and small. Is there anything at stake for you in doing this process? Why did you say yes to this? You're pregnant, you teach, you have a dog, you have a life. I know you love me, but...

Suzanne: I do love you, But I also want to prove to myself that, um, while I am carrying The Future, I still have my own voice. And I want people to still hear that. I just, I just don't want to stop writing and I work so much better when there are other people relying on me and deadlines and collaboration. So when you asked me, do I want to do this project and you were telling me that you're going to check in on me every week or so, I was like 'oh yeah, that's what I need, that's the stuff, I need a trainer!'

Vanessa: Gym buddy?

Suzanne: Gym buddy!

Vanessa: Are you scared that being a mom is gonna take away your voice?

Suzanne: I am. I'm really scared. I'm scared about, um, sleep deprivation. I'm scared of losing... I think that's what's fortunate about my, um, willingness to write this in little pieces, because I think that's how you have to be with a newborn. Just finding little bits of time for yourself. So this will be a good habit that I'm forming. I'm really scared that it's going to be just about him.

Vanessa: When Suzanne and my brother got married, Suzanne decided not to change her name. She was a produced, award winning playwright - she had a whole life and legacy as Suzanne Bressler. But when she got pregnant, she wanted to have the same last name as her son, and wanted them to sound like a family. So she changed her name from Suzanne Bressler to Suzanne Zoltan. Of course she was scared of losing her voice when her son came around. She was already losing her name.

There is one kind of love at first sight that I believe in. And I believe in it because I saw it with my own eyes. I was waiting to pick my father up at the airport, standing at the gate (it was early 2001), and there were a sea of people waiting at the gate also, all in matching red shirts. I asked one woman what they were up to. And she looked at me with a huge smile on her face and she said, I will never forget it, "my baby is on that plane." She had adopted a baby who was being brought to her by a social worker. I watched as she saw her baby for the first time and burst into tears. I burst into tears. All 30 red shirt wearing people burst into tears. And she held the baby and she said, "Hi, I'm your mama. And I love you." And I believed her.

But that love is a different love, right? That's a vow. It's a promise. I love you right now, and I will love you NO MATTER WHAT. I'm your mama.

It is qualitatively different than romantic love. We sort of want romantic love to be a little bit conditional, right? Like, if it turns out he is a scam artist, and not Italian, we want to love him less.

The timeline that Suzanne and I had initially talked about did not play out for a lot of reasons. So we didn't end up getting back on the phone to talk about this project until a few months later after something very big had happened to her. My nephew was born. Suzanne's story is really skeptical of love at first sight. It is a story where feeling that high of falling in love can be toxic for you. So I was wondering if having a baby changed her mind about the trope. Did she fall in love with her son at first sight? Like I saw that woman do at the airport gate? Like moms sometimes say they do, the first time they hold their baby?

Suzanne: I've been having so many thoughts about love at first sight. It was very sweet, I gave birth at the hospital where my husband works, and some co-

workers stopped by to see us after which is both wonderful and awful because one of his co-workers saw me in the gown that you get in the hospital where your butt is exposed, but some of his co-workers stopped by and brought gifts and one of them gave us this picture frame that said 'love at first sight' and it had a picture of an ultrasound in it. And I was thinking about it and I've heard of people saying 'love at first sight - when I saw that little ultrasound, when I saw that little heart beat it was love at first sight. And I stand by it really wasn't. I mean there were other things that were there - I mean I felt this animalistic bond to the thing. But I still stand by, and I don't know why you can analyze me why it's so important to make the distinction that it's not love - but it's not love right away. I think love grows. I felt connected to this thing and I wanted to take care of this little thing, but it's only now that he's smiling and it almost sounds like laughing and making eye contact with us that it really feels like something like love.

Vanessa: People talk about the idea that there are not enough words for love in English. The love I feel for my mom, Peter and pizza are different kinds of love. The counter example, often sighted, is that the Innuits have multiple words for snow. One for SNOW ON THE GROUND; another for FALLING SNOW; a third for drifting SNOW; a fourth for a SNOWDRIFT.

Maybe that's what Suzanne and I want. A word, different than love, for what happens at first sight. Potential love needs a different word than confirmed love, associated with sacrifice and sleepless nights. Committing to your baby at first sight love, needs a different word than loving a kid that's smiling at you. Yes-- that lady loved her baby at the airport as soon as it was handed to her. But that was 19 years ago. Surely that love has grown and changed since then.

We need more words... more nuance. Because otherwise, Ms. Chalk gets to think that love betrayed her. And love did not betray her. A bad man did. She didn't love him, she hoped him. Stories about being able to fall in love at first sight betrayed her. Love did not.

But at the same time, I found it a bit sad that Suzanne didn't feel like she loved my little nephew at first sight. Not for his sake, she was being an amazing mom to him, but for hers. When we first talked about this project, she had been so scared about losing her sense of self in motherhood. And here she was, with a three-month-old, and the things she was afraid of were actually happening.

Suzanne: I had one friend compare it to a death in the family. Obviously, it's not a sad thing, but just in that your mental routine of how you think about yourself in the world, and you know who you care for and things like that has really changed. It's very different. I've heard of people explaining to me that my brain is like forever altered, which really freaked me out. I don't know if you've heard of this but like after you've been pregnant your brain - they talk about mom brain as this cute funny sitcom thing, but there's actual CT scans they can do on my brain

now and it's forever changed. It made me cry when I heard that, because that's, like, frightening.

Yeah, I mean my body's different. I mean I expected that to be different but like some of it is comical different, like milk comes out of my boobs now - that's hilarious.

Like everyone talks about forgetting childbirth - childbirth wasn't so bad. I'm like that part was great! It's this part that was hard. Really really hard.

It's still so new, it's eleven weeks out. And I'm hoping that when I get more sleep some of my brain functions come back. And I'm hoping when there's an actual nap time routine that I'm able to set aside time and still do some creative stuff. I made this little - when my brother's wife came to town, she was just helping me tackle - the smallest tasks just feel so much harder with a baby, even just like laundry. All these challenges and I'd been meaning to write a thank you card to some of the people at the hospital where my husband works and where I gave birth and I finally got around to it when she came to visit and so I wrote this thank you note and it was like this little gift basket with the pictures and the sign and I cried after I made it because it was like the first creative thing I did after having my son - I just t felt like a little bit of myself came back.

I think about love as having to do with sacrifice, and it's only when it I actually started caring for him and doing for him, that exchange of him needing me and me doing that it started to grow into an actual love, I think, or what I think of love.

Vanessa: For Suzanne, there are a lot of scary biological changes that come with being a mother. She doesn't know if her brain is ever going to be the same; that's scary. All of these things have just happened to her. So she doesn't want love to also just happen to her. She wants to wrest some control from this onslaught of change.

And her idea of love is a thing that happens gradually, that grows. And that's actually a comforting idea, because puts something back in her control.

And that's what I want too-- I don't want a love that happens to me. That kind of love can trick me into giving a stranger who doesn't deserve it \$50,000. So I am fine just throwing out love at first sight. Too many things are out of our control already. Why add love to that list?

Despite my open hostility to Love at First Sight I know that it has served some people well. Suzanne and I agree about it, but lots of other people feel very differently about the idea. I did a very scientific Twitter poll and 33% people who follow me on twitter and happened to respond to the survey said that they believe in it. They are obviously not all idiots; they're smart enough to follow me on Twitter. In fact, I know someone who is very much not an idiot, and she fell in love at first sight, and not just with a cute baby but with a real live man. Her name is Sasha and I asked her to come into the studio so I could

be mean to her about Love at First Sight; really fight her on it-- have her super explain it to me. Like I'M an idiot. So I asked her, point blank. Did you really fall in love with your boyfriend at first sight?

Suzanne: I've been thinking about this a lot. Um, my immediate answer is yes. But then I've been wondering what is love? I think that the way I feel about him now, after 6 months of being together, 6 months of knowing he exists in the world, is such a deeper more profound feeling than when I first saw him. So it makes me wonder about, you know, was it love at first sight? But at first sight I knew.

Vanessa: So what did you know? You saw him-- tell me about the first time you saw him.

Sasha: So I had been single for a bit and I was interested in dating but I didn't really know how to try. And, um, a friend of mine who you know quite well, Ariana Nedelman...

Vanessa: Oh, I've heard of her.

Sasha: She made me a Tinder account, and I think my first swipe right was the person who's now my boyfriend. I didn't know that he was living in Iceland.

Vanessa: It didn't say that? Doesn't Tinder say that?

Sasha: Um, it does normally, but if you pay something like \$9.99 a month you can change your geographic preferences.

Vanessa: Interesting, okay.

Sasha: So the reason, he's not a creep who just sets his Tinder to be all over the world but um, about three years ago he had tried Tinder for the first time, met a really cute girl, chatted with her for a few weeks, and right before their first date they became Facebook friends, and realized their mutual friends were Grandma, Great Aunt, Great Uncle. And it turns out, this happens a lot in Iceland, they were cousins.

Vanessa: Yeah yeah yeah.

Sasha: So anyway, so he paid \$9.99, got international Tinder, set it to Boston (after some mishaps in Greenland), and um then we swiped each other. So, okay, a couple weeks after we swiped each other, things were going really well in our chats and I invited him to visit me in Boston. So the first time we saw each other was at the airport.

Vanessa: Okay, so you had been talking and...had you talked on the phone?

Sasha: We had talked on the phone once the night before he came.

Vanessa: Okay. And after that phone call, would you have said that you loved him? Or that he was the one?

Sasha: No.

Vanessa: So what, what happened when you saw him that you would say, yes, that was love at first sight?

Sasha: So I was, just to set the scene, I was prepared for anything. I have never ever met a stranger like this. So I was...we had even talked about it. We were both nervous, and we both were prepared, maybe we would just end up being good friends. You know, we were both ready to not have a spark. And we had talked about that. So I was standing there...we had jokingly said maybe he won't recognize me at the airport because he is, has pretty striking features, he looks a bit like a Viking and he had a really big beard at the time. So I knew I'd recognize him. But I was worried maybe he wouldn't recognize me, because it was Boston winter and every single person in Boston wears a long black puffy jacket in the winter. So I told him I would be holding a flower. So I had a sunflower. And he walked up to me and we didn't even say hi to each other we just kissed. Immediately. And sparks flew. And I thought, I want to kiss him a million more times. So there was, there was something very intense that was a physical and emotional reaction to seeing him.

Vanessa: So let me just say, A, that I am so happy for you and I didn't really like your last boyfriend, and you just seem so happy and wonderful in this new partnership and I'm thrilled. Now I'm going to show my hand and say I do not believe in love at first sight, and I don't think that's what happened.

Sasha: What do you think happened?

Vanessa: I wasn't there! You don't want to yell at me that that's so rude?

Sasha: I mean, I'm not sure either, it sounds totally insane to me too. I've never thought...I don't know I don't think love at first sight makes sense, but I think when you feel it, when you see someone and feel this way, it just is. There's no denying it.

Vanessa: So to me falling in love is a process of like possibilities not being closed off, right? It's like, being in love with someone is like walking through a series of doors, none of which close. Or the ones that do close it turns out that you're like willing to put some effort into breaking down. So like the first door didn't close, you know? Like, you spoke on Tinder and you found out that he lives in Iceland, and that could have been a door that you were like, never mind.

Instead you were like, no, that's actually a door I'm fine with like sort of pushing open, and you walked through. And then the attraction door turns out was like really big and you could just walk right through. And those are some big hurdles, right? That's like further along in this journey than any of us get with most people.

Sasha: I think I would use a different analogy. I don't think we're walking down a hallway with a million doors. I would use the, love at first sight, the analogy I would use is a seed. I think the first time we saw each other there was a little tiny baby seed of love. And then with those first minutes together, it became a tiny little sprout. And then with actual quality time together - I don't feel like we could have ever closed any doors, I don't think it was an option for us. That's why I don't think the door metaphor worked. I think our little sprout just started growing and growing, and it's a very strong sprout because it has to grow in Iceland where nothing grows. And somehow it just grew and grew and grew but it never had the option of not growing.

Vanessa: You're ta--, you're talking about him as if he's your soulmate.

Sasha: Yeah. Well he brought up, he brought up soulmate first. We've spent four times together now, we refer to them each as one date. So our first date he came to visit for a week. Day three, we were standing by a lighthouse, and there were some very strange purple lights coming from a warehouse nearby. We thought maybe they were having a satanic orgy or something. So we were standing by a lighthouse, lit by purple, glowing, flashing, lights. And he got suddenly very quiet. And the waves were splashing, and it was probably a full moon, it was a really dramatic moment. And he got very quiet, and I asked what, what's going on? And he said, "I know that you're my soulmate." That was on our third day together. So I don't know, the idea of soulmates it's, it's confusing for me, I don't know I feel like there's a million ways our lives can go, there's, it's totally unknown who we're going to bump into of all the people on Earth. So it's hard for me. I'm not sure if I'm completely committed to this idea that there's only one soulmate. Maybe not all love is known at first sight, but some love is.

Vanessa: So do you not think it's possible that you could have had those exact same feelings that you had the first time you saw your boyfriend, and then 3 days later it turned out that he sucked?

Sasha: That's so hard to answer because that isn't what happened. You know, there were some thoughts in my mind.... Like, okay, so we had our first couple kisses, I finally introduce myself, we said hi, we started walking to the car, um, and I did have a couple other things going through my mind like, he's wearing crazy pants, and could I love a man with such a beard, you know? There were some thoughts in my mind. Or like, why did he choose to wear a vest? A formal, a very formal vest, it's handsome, but it was a lot for the first moment, you know?

Vanessa: Yeah, it's hard.

Sasha: So, so I'm not saying that you know he showed up and he was the Prince Charming I imagined when I was ten and had my first crush on the guy from the television show Hey Dude. My sweetheart did not look like that, and he has crazy fashion choices. But I don't know, there, there was such a powerful feeling of you have to get to know this man. And you have very strong attraction to this man. And there's something incredibly deep and powerful about your connection.

Vanessa: What I realized in talking to Sasha was that believing in love at first sight can reap really high rewards. It can lead to incredibly romantic moments with lighthouses and funky lighting... the kind of romantic moments that honestly, I don't have.

I also realized that what's at stake is not whether or not love at first sight actually exists. Who am I to tell somebody else that they were wrong about their experiences of their own life? But talking about whether or not love at first sight exists becomes a boring, treacherous semantic argument about the nature of love. What bothers me is not whether Love at First Sight exists. It's that I don't think we should be telling stories about it. Just like it's true that sometimes you can have sex and not get pregnant, that doesn't mean that we should tell a lots of stories about the pull-out method. Just because something exists does not mean it should be a story we want to tell. I think women take huge risks and put themselves in terrifying positions because of the hope of Love At First Sight love.

And in our world, I don't want women taking risks for men.

I started reading Romance novels in large part because I was devastated as a rapist moved into the oval office, my childhood sit-com dad went to jail for drugging and assaulting women, and the man who produced the movies that made me love movies got outed as a mafia-level-conspirator against women. I always knew that men got the benefit of the doubt over women; we believed Clarence Thomas over Anita Hill when she testified before congress that he was a serial sexual harasser. But I was an ignorant idiot and didn't know that there was a woman sitting in the wings who could corroborate Professor Hill's story, who Congress didn't let testify. I thought there was at least a sheen of authenticity when they said "we don't know for sure what happens behind closed doors" and "it's a he said/she said situation". I didn't realize that men were knowingly protecting each other to "not let a little pussy grabbing" get in the way of their success.

I am admittedly an asshole for not getting it for so long. But I get it now. And I get it in my bones. I love Romance novels. But in the real world, when I am on the subway, or walking on an empty street and notice a man noticing me, I am not thinking about falling in love with him. I am thinking about how I am scared. I strategize about crossing streets, I pretend that I am talking on the phone, so I don't have to answer his calls for me to smile.

I think love at first sight stories don't get women ready to be scared of BAD MEN. And we need to be ready. Not just to resist the individual bad men, who take advantage of our Ms. Chalks; but of the entire machine that was built so willing to exploit us.

It's been a year since Sasha and I talked, and just the other day, her boyfriend bought a flight to move to Niger, where Sasha is working and he doesn't know another living soul, to be with her. Love at First Sight Love can get us to do amazing things. But it is just too risky for me. And can't we have big, wonderful payoffs even if we don't believe in love at first sight? I hope so.

Luckily, I had one more conversation with Suzanne scheduled on the topic. She didn't believe in love at first sight with her son. How was it going now? Was there still a huge, delightful payoff?

Vanessa: How would you differentiate falling in love with my brother from falling in love with my nephew, was that the most awkward way to say that? That was my goal.

Suzanne: No it is not awkward, and you want to know something? It was a different kind of love, but it was a very similar process because I did not fall in love with your brother at first sight.

Vanessa: What!?

Suzanne: I know!

Vanessa: Give him back!

Suzanne: It's gonna be hard to do, because I do love him now, but when I first saw him it was online, so it was a photograph, so I wasn't getting the full story, but I saw someone who likes to travel, because I saw a picture of him somewhere else in the world. When I met him and also really liked him and thought, we could be friends, and from there I started to love him more and trust him, and it just grew. So it was a sort of similar thing with my son, where first I saw a picture of him and I'm like, he seems alright, he's got a heartbeat.

Vanessa: Just what I'm looking for in a baby.

Suzanne: That's what I want, yeah. But yeah I really, I mean part of it is the sleep, I definitely have found him so much cuter since he's been sleeping through the night, just mentally was in a dark place because I was starving for sleep before that everything just felt darker and like what is this alien that came into our life and has changed everything and doesn't bring anything to the table and just takes, and it was dark, but now he's just this ball of light and reminds us what's important and helps us see beauty in the tiniest thing and it's pretty amazing.

Vanessa: I said earlier that loving a baby is a vow/promise, but there are vows involved in romantic love. I just don't think those vows should come at first sight, whereas I do think they should come at first sight with a baby. Baby should be vow, then love. Adult should be love then vow.

And honestly, there are some conditional aspects of love of a baby too - it's easier to find them cute when you've had some sleep. It's easier to love them when they can smile at you.

Vanessa: So here's my thing about love at first sight. For me it's just confirmation bias, it's just like, you look back, like I remember when I first saw Peter, I was very charmed by the sight of him, I was running a little late, he was sitting at the bar we were meeting at, and he was grading papers, and he was wearing old man glasses which I found endearing, and now looking back, knowing that we're going to be together for years and all these things, I think that if I were a slightly different person, I could convince myself that I fell in love at first sight.

Suzanne: It's really interesting you say that, because a friend of my called me and was lamenting with her, you know, two month old baby, that, well first the birth didn't go as she thought it would, she thought it was gonna be this really intense magical thing and it was not like that. And then when she met the baby, she didn't feel that instant bond and was really concerned and upset and sad and she called me to tell me about it, and she was like, I don't want to share this with a lot of people because you know, I feel like I'll be judged or they'll think there's something wrong with me but I didn't really feel this strong connection right away, I didn't look into her eyes and be like I'm your mom, I'm always going to be there for you and it's really interesting because she was raised hearing that narrative about love at first sight, that like, when I looked at you and I held you in my arms I knew you were my child, and she heard all those stories and I was raised oppositely, like my mom told me that babies are boring the first three months, and they don't do anything but sleep and poop, and that's what I was raised understanding that babies don't become fun until they can smile and laugh. So I very much expected when I looked at my child for the first time that I wasn't going to have that overwhelming feeling right away but that it was going to grow. This is my family's mantra of how we look at babies, like that's just how we view them, but my friend was so disappointed because she couldn't feel that right away, and then it was interesting because months later she tells me it's really crazy, I look back on that and I feel like I fell in love with her at first sight. She's like, I remember calling you, I remember telling you that I didn't have that feeling, but I can look back on those memories and now that I know her and see who she is, I can remember, I'm almost implanting that memory into my mind.

Vanessa: Well and I think that it's really, I mean there's so many comforting things about the idea of love at first sight, right? It means that there's a soulmate

quality. And I think the love at first sight storyline isn't always told with natural birth, but you often hear it with adoption too, right like as soon as I saw my kid, I knew that they were mine. I think for exactly the reasons you are talking about, I think marriage is really hard, but if you're telling yourself a story like, "but I feel in love with them at first sight, I just knew." You are going to work harder to keep that up. I think love at first sight is completely made up, and I also think that it's a really helpful scam.

Vanessa: It's a helpful scam *sometimes*. When you have a baby in your arms that you've lost the receipt for, or a husband who you love and respect but have found annoying for the last two months.

That woman, waiting for her baby at the terminal gate, would not have been benefited by not believing in love at first sight. And love at first sight allowed Sasha and her boyfriend to believe that it is worth taking huge risks for each other. And that is beautiful. I don't want the worst parts of the patriarchy to be what determines how I walk through the world. And I don't think being scared makes you safe. And I am so happy for Sasha.

All love is risky. Suzanne knew that she wouldn't fall in love with her baby at first sight. She was scared that he would take her sleep away and her voice away. And for a while, he did. And she still decided to become a mom. She was scared. And she was brave.

I guess I just want a little bit of skepticism? Some caution. Because it isn't brave if you aren't scared. It isn't romantic love without earned trust. I guess I just think it's something else. But we don't have a word for that something else yet. So I understand why people call it love at first sight, until someone invents the word.

Suzanne might be able to invent a new word... with her changed brain, her patient practice of raising a good man in a toxic world and her not-lost voice. Suzanne didn't finish her Romance novel. I was not as good as a gym buddy as she deserved and being pregnant and a new mom was, well, hard. But just because she didn't finish this Romance novel does not mean that she lost her voice. Her voice has changed... but it's as strong as ever.

And now for this week's assignment with Julia Quinn.

Vanessa: Hi Julia!

Julia: Hi! How are you?

Vanessa: I am very well thank you, how are you?

Julia: I'm doing great!

Vanessa: Good! Have we figured out your title for this show? We've called you expert author and fairy godmother, what else? Writing Goddess! Muse!

Julia: I could be a Writing Goddess!

Vanessa: Great! Goddess of writing.

Julia: Ooh, I like that better.

Vanessa: Okay, great. So, we have had people do their meet cute, we have had them create distinctive dialogue styles, they know their two main characters, now, what happens?

Julia: Well, they have to have a kiss.

Vanessa: Obviously.

Julia: Now somebody who works on this show who I won't mention, but her initials are V.Z., keeps forgetting that we have to do this episode and keeps going "oh, now we're going to do our first sex scene episode," and I'm like "no no!" Kiss first!"

Vanessa: [laughs] What? I think, let's skip the silly business, but you're all, first kiss first kiss. Fine!

Julia: I mean, starting with the sex scene before the kiss is very advanced. We should stick to some of the more tried and true character and plot arcs here. So, first kiss! Everything that's important about it or most things that are important about it comes from the reader reaction. You want the reader to feel like her heart is pounding just a little bit harder like [gasp] "are they gonna kiss?" I mean, think about moments when you've read a book or you're watching a romantic movie and it's like, the will they won't they, right before they kiss, and you kind of catch your breath, and you're really wrapped up in it, that's what you want, I think.

Vanessa: Well here's something that I'm curious about. Do you think that anything can be said for writing about a bad first kiss?

Julia: Yes, and as a matter of fact, the book I'm working on right now has a bad first kiss.

Vanessa: Yeah, I sort of love reading about a bad first kiss.

Julia: That's true, basically you want the reader to really feel like they're in the moment, they're not an observer, they are there, they are inhabiting one of those people and feeling all the feels, and maybe those feels are something amazing, and maybe it's that, you know, cringing because I am so mortified, that was the

worst kiss ever and I never want to see this person again. But you really want to get the reader in the moment.

Vanessa: So to me it sounds like one recommendation might be, read this scene, more important than any other scene, to a friend. It's not a sex scene where it's like, embarrassing to read to a friend, but if what you're really trying to gauge is a reader's response, like, ask a friend to read it!

Julia: Yes, but you may need to let that friend read everything you've done so far because they may not get the feels without being somewhat invested in the character, so you probably can't just give them a scene out of nowhere.

Vanessa: That is a very girly thing to say, that a kiss is only good with context.

Julia: But it's true, and that's actually something about romance novels that I think a lot of people don't understand, is they're trying to figure out, okay, what's the difference between a romance novel and erotica, or whatever. In a romance novel, the scenes of intimacy, whether they are a kiss, or intercourse, or anything in between, they move something along. Like if you took them out of the book, the book would fall apart in many respects because every one of these scenes is doing something to either move the plot along, or to do something with characterization, to make sure your characters know each other better.

Vanessa: I think that that's a great thing to think about, so it's like, everything about a first kiss is emblematic of something else in your relationship, right, so where are you when you first kiss? Are you in public or in private? Like what is the context of the kiss? I actually think that that's a great thing to think about.

Julia: Absolutely, absolutely.

Vanessa: Okay everybody, go write your first kisses, and I swear, I can't wait to read them even though I keep forgetting about it as a scene. It's, I do, I really want to read everyone's sex scenes. Don't judge me. That's what I'm here for.

Vanessa: Before we go, I want to call the woman who did quite a bit of babysitting so Suzanne had the opportunity to fall in love with her son.

Vanessa: Hi Mom!

Mom: Hi honey!

Vanessa: So, I have some questions for you about love at first sight. Did you love dad at first sight?

Mom: No.

Vanessa: [laughs] But you and dad got engaged after only knowing each other for five weeks!

Mom: But it wasn't because of love at first sight. We were lucky that we grew together, there's no question.

Vanessa: Do you believe that like, romantic partner love at first sight is real? Do you think it can happen?

Mom: [sigh] I think you can look at somebody and be charmed by them and intrigued by them and to want to love them. I'm not sure, just by looking at somebody you can love them.

Vanessa: Yeah, I wonder where I got my skepticism from, then.

Mom: Am I to blame for that too?

Vanessa: I'm not blaming you! I'm giving you credit!

Mom: Got it, okay.

Vanessa: So your grandson, this episode is with Suzanne, you know Suzanne.

Mom: Yes, yes I do.

Vanessa: And she had a child who is your grandson, correct.

Mom: Confirmed.

Vanessa: Great. Did you love him at first sight?

Mom: There's an emotional attachment and I think part of it is you want to love them? I mean it grows all the time.

Vanessa: What's he up to these days? Walking around?

Mom: He runs around, explores everything. There was a new video this morning where he was asked "where is the moon?" and he went to the window and showed that the moon was outside and in the sky. He's amazingly smart, speaking as an objective person.

Vanessa: Yeah, he's a cute kid. Thanks for letting us torture you again, mom!

Mom: Any time. My pleasure.

Vanessa: Okay, I'll call you later to talk for real.

Mom: Okay, love you honey.

Vanessa: Love you too. Bye.

Mom: Goodbye sweetie.

Vanessa: If you want to read Suzanne's story, or if you want to share your writing assignments, go to our website hotandbotheredrompod.com. Come support us on Patreon where you can get extended interviews from our amazing experts, and get romance book reviews from me. We really appreciate your support on Patreon; it's how we can make this show work. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram @therompod, and leave us a review on iTunes. Our Romance Teacher is the great Julia Quinn. We are a co-production of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media. This episode of Hot & Bothered was executive produced and co-written by me, Vanessa Zoltan and Ariana Nedelman. Our Production Team is: Chelsea Ursin, Julia Argy, Brigid Goggin, Norah Murphy, Janielle Kastner, Caroline Hamilton, Jenna Hannum, Will Short, and Alexander Mark. Our music is from Firstcom and by Nick Bohl. And a special thanks this week to Sasha Gilbury Clifton, and my mom.