

***Hot and Bothered***  
***S1 E12***

*[Spoke Media]*

*[Not Sorry Productions]*

VANESSA: Hi, I'm Vanessa Zoltan and welcome to hot and bothered. Hi Julia.

JULIA: Hi Vanessa.

*[music in]*

VANESSA: This week's Reddit question is about secrets, which makes me feel smug cause you don't have any secrets from me.

JULIA: I do actually. I cut your hair in the middle of the night and that's why your hair isn't growing as long as you want it to. It's cause I'm always just out there trimming while you sleep.

VANESSA: You said that it is growing. It just doesn't look like it's growing because it's so curly.

JULIA: Secrets out.

*[music out]*

VANESSA: Well, I have a secret to. I pulled out your tooth in your sleep. That's why your tooth is missing.

JULIA: I like how this implies that every night we're together doing mischievous tasks to hurt the other person.

VANESSA: I'm fine with that.

JULIA: Good.

VANESSA: What should we call this week's episode?

JULIA: It's eyeballs.

VANESSA: I know that you shouldn't pick favorite Reddit questions like you shouldn't pick favorite children, but this is my favorite child by like a long shot.

JULIA: Yeah, it's, it's the perfect question.

VANESSA: It really is. Do you want to start reading?

JULIA: Sure. "The 22 year old man I've been dating has a locked drawer and won't tell me, 21 year old woman, what's inside. I'm a recent college graduate and I've been seeing this guy who I went to school with for the last couple of months. Everything has been fine. No noticeable red flags, no pressure. We really like each other. I stay at his house often due to some tension with roommates in my apartment. This week I stayed over and he was showing me where to get the clothes I wear. I stayed longer than anticipated so I was wearing some of his clothes while we were chilling in the house and I tried to open one of his drawers but it was locked. I asked him about it and he said not to worry. I inquired further and he said it has nothing to do with me and that if he tells me what's in the drawer, our relationship will change forever. While this exchange happened, he never got upset or raise his voice. He was just matter of fact."

VANESSA: "It worries me because everything is going so well and I'm scared. He's maybe not telling me everything I should know. I know it's still very early. I've things that I haven't told him about myself just because I feel like we aren't there yet. So could that reasoning be applied to this too? It's just worrying because it's a locked drawer in his room and honestly my mind is racing with what it could potentially be and that is an actual physical object. I'm also scared because what if it's something that I can't get past and by the time he tells me there's so much more to lose, I just don't know what to do. Should I let it go and let him tell me when he's ready? I'm just really conflicted and confused and it's made me quite anxious. Any insight is appreciated."

*[music in]*

JULIA: I love it even more now. In this re-reading, when she mentions that it's an actual physical object, this is opened up the possibility for me about what if it's not an actual physical object and what if it's a ghost?

*[music out]*

VANESSA: I suspect it's an actual physical object. The line that haunts me using your ghost language though, is when he says it has nothing to do with me. But if he tells me what's in it, our relationship will change forever. Like the only thing that this can be is super kinky porn and that he only wants that kinky porn to be part of his fantasy life. And he's afraid that if she sees it, she's gonna think that that's what he wants. Right? Like that's the reasonable thing.

JULIA: Yeah. I mean that's the reasonable thing, but that's not the fun thing to imagine.

VANESSA: So what do you think it is?

JULIA: Well, eyeballs, a ghost, human blood and he's a vampire. Like he keeps all of his fingernail cuttings every time he cuts his fingernails and he just keeps them in one drawer. That, yeah, that facial expression is exactly what I want you to feel when I say options. It could be drugs.

VANESSA: Oh, that's true.

JULIA: It could be money. A drawer full of money. And he's super rich.

VANESSA: And rich people keep drawers full of gas and that's how you know they're rich. It's just a drawer full of thousand dollar bills. And he's a thousandaire. It couldn't be that like this weird family I babysat for in the early aughts. It could be his refrigerated placenta in case he ever needs his own cells for some reason.

JULIA: You opened a drawer while you were babysitting and you found a placenta?

VANESSA: I was told not to open the freezer because the placenta was in there. The kid was nine, true story. Ooh. It could be like the remains of his dead cat.

JULIA: Why would that change the relationship forever?

VANESSA: Maybe she thinks he's a dog person. If it turned out that I thought I was dating a dog person and I was dating and cat person, I don't know. I think that would maybe change things for me.

JULIA: I think even if I knew I was dating a cat person and I found their cats remains just free floating in a drawer, that would also change the relationship for me.

VANESSA: Exactly. Exactly.

JULIA: Yeah, I think the options are really endless here about what it could be, and I think that the freaky thing is what you pointed out earlier, that he knows that it will change the relationship and he doesn't want to tell her with the hopes that she will be too deep in if and when she finds out where they won't break up over it.

VANESSA: So that's the question, right? I would break up with somebody over this.

JULIA: Yeah, I mean at this point it's not only a secret, it's a lie.

VANESSA: Say more about that.

JULIA: If you feel that something about yourself is unable to be shared, that you won't tell your partner in hopes that they never find out, you're lying about yourself to a degree, and he doesn't, like she says, want to ever tell her. It's not like you're lying for now cause it's a little bit too personal and like one day you expect to tell them and it's a temporary situation in which you're not ready to do that. It's like this is something that I forever will not tell you and you will never know.

VANESSA: And if you knew, our relationship would completely change, right? Like I can imagine being like, I don't ever want to tell you about this like one bad memory I have from my childhood or like I don't want to tell you about my fantasy life. Right? Like I think that people in relationships are entitled to secrets. I don't think that people are entitled to secrets that they are sure would completely change the dynamic of their relationship.

JULIA: Yeah. I think, I think that's exactly true, and I think part of the question that I find really interesting is that he doesn't really know, especially so early on in the relationship what would change the relationship. He doesn't have a sense necessarily of what her deal breakers are. And so it's kind of presumptuous to say, I know that this would change it and that's why my mind goes to such extreme places, cause it's like what is so extreme that you believe that if anyone you are dating found out about this, that the relationship would be totally transformed.

VANESSA: Right, and that is actually a romance novel trope, right? Like there's something so beautiful and so romantic about revealing the worst things about yourself to somebody and them just like not caring, being like I love you unconditionally, and that includes any metaphorical drawer that you have. I mean I remember the moment I was really scared to tell my partner that I have chronic depression, and when I told him he was like "cool, want pancakes?". And I was like, Oh right. It just was a complete non-issue to him. And it had been something for weeks. I was like, when is too soon to tell him when is the right time? And he like could not have cared less. And yeah, it was, it was completely freeing. And I feel like he does not remember that moment at all cause he was like, you also have eyes, like who cares? And so yeah, I think that part of what's troubling here is the like this could be eyeballs, but it's also what he saying is like, there is part of myself that I will never ever reveal to you and that I profoundly believe is unlovable or unforgivable.

VANESSA: Yeah, and it's also that she's not getting the opportunity to even consider forgiving him for it. He's taking away all agency for her to make informed decisions about their relationship, and that's really a scary idea, especially because that could be happening in any kind of way and it just doesn't exist in a locked drawer and so don't know about it.

JULIA: Right.

VANESSA: That could be there in your romantic relationship and it just never manifests.

JULIA: So I think that the place in romance where we see this like version of a locked drawer being revealed and working out beautifully is in paranormal romances, right? Where somebody is like, I can't tell you about my true identity. I can't tell you, Oh, I'm an alien. And then the, you know, other person is like, you're an alien? Awesome. Can I become an alien too? Right? And that the secret actually becomes something hot rather than being a barrier. But that the problem with thinking about this in terms of paranormal romance is that I don't read a lot of paranormal romance and so I feel like we should talk to somebody who does.

JULIA: Yes.

*[music in]*

JULIA: Do you happen to know a local advice columnist who reads paranormal romance?

VANESSA: I do, and she's brilliant, and charming, and delightful.

JULIA: And her name is Meredith Goldstein.

VANESSA: Correct.

*[music out]*

MEREDITH: My name is Meredith Goldstein. I am the Love Advice columnist for the Boston Globe and author of the memoir *Can't Help Myself: Lessons and Confessions of a Modern Advice Columnist*. I've also written the young adult novel *Chemistry Lessons*, which I believe is a romance. And the novel *The Singles*, but also *Love Letters* has a podcast which takes on big questions about love. This season is about how people meet and we have some incredible stories.

VANESSA: So since you are a love advice columnist, I'm just going to jump right in and read you this love advice question.

MEREDITH: Okay.

VANESSA: The 22 year old man I've been dating has a locked drawer and won't tell me, 21 year old female...

*[music fade]*

VANESSA: ...and confused. And it's made me quite anxious. Any insight is appreciated." Can I just ask you first, what do you think is in the drawer?

MEREDITH: I think it's a gun.

VANESSA: Oh, that's so interesting. Okay. I think it's like really kinky porn.

MEREDITH: Huh? Maybe I didn't go that kinky route because I'm like, sometimes I forget that people are ashamed of such things. Right? Where I'm like, well, clearly if it was seven vibrators, you would just say that.

VANESSA: Right. But if it's like some sort of like spanking, like BDSM porn, I can imagine if I was really into that and had it in a locked drawer, I'd be like, Oh no, my new girlfriend is going to think that I want to do that to her.

MEREDITH: Perhaps, and it's interesting. I do wonder if he really used the words that that the letter writer uses. Right? Like our relationship will change forever. It almost sounds like a test. Like, will you be able to accept that I need privacy with this drawer and move on? You know, you could just say like, Oh, it's just important paperwork. It's my passport. I don't want to lose it. Or just nothing to worry about. Not that I promote or endorse lying, but there's so many ways to diffuse concern about that and to say like, I can't tell you, but if you knew you really freak out. It's so odd.

VANESSA: Yeah. Right. I'm trying to think of if it was something I was ashamed of, I would probably say like, oh, it's just some private stuff.

MEREDITH: It's private stuff. Right. It's like not that big of a deal, but like it will change our relationship forever. Yeah. No it's, it's odd. It's odd and the mystery and yeah.

VANESSA: Do you have advice for her?

MEREDITH: I mean I think that she needs to ask more questions about like, is this something you intend to tell me later? Do you understand that by framing it this way, you've given me anxiety about it, that perhaps the thing that would change our relationship forever, which change for the worst and I should know it. I mean I think further discussion is fine and I think, you know, the letter writer needs to say like, I want to respect your privacy. I want you to have a private life. So it's just when you frame it that way, you know, your imagination is so much worse than probably what it is.

VANESSA: Yeah.

MEREDITH: I will tell a story and I, maybe it's relevant or not, but the condo next to mine caught on fire a few years ago and everybody, I mean it was a big fire in it and it stretched through a few buildings, including mine and no one was hurt. But when the fire department shows up, I mean it was like a four alarm fire kind of thing. I noticed that everyone, including myself, because suddenly fire department people are in your house, insurance adjusters are in your house. Everybody had secret drawers and everybody was hilariously like, um, um, give me one

minute, because they were clearing out sex toys, drugs. You know, it was like, Oh, I gotta find my weed. Right? It was like, I gotta find my, and um, and I understood it right. Like suddenly they're like 10 men I don't know in my house, and I was like, everyone freeze, don't touch anything, don't open anything. And we all looked like criminals with things to hide and some of us probably were, but, um, most of it I think was sex toy drawers.

VANESSA: So I'm curious as to why you think that this question is so tantalizing and I think that what it is for me is there are certain things like I've been with my partner for years and we are mingling our finances like we're in a serious committed relationship. And so I'm trying to figure out if there is anything at this point that he could reveal to me that I'd be like 'relationship over' and there are right. Like if he was secretly married that it would be impressive at this point.

MEREDITH: Right.

VANESSA: But like I think we are allowed certain private things.

MEREDITH: I agree. And you know, people ask me a lot about what are the themes I see most in letters. Right? And I always say that when I started the column, it was snooping, it was just people breaking into each other's emails and texts and Facebook accounts to get information about a partner to check on cheating. Now that's not the case. And I was thinking, are people snooping less after 10 years? And my thought is that social media has changed this because in 2009 it was possible for us not to know things and we would want to find them out. And there was a way to find out a technological hacking way to find out, well now there's very little we don't know in life. We can see what our partners ate for breakfast. We can track them through the day. I mean literally somebody could tell where I am based on the location of my phone, you know, most of my friends know what I'm doing on any given night because I have posted about it in some way. Right? And even when I don't, it's not hard to figure out. So I think that having one question in the world, like what's in that drawer is actually so foreign to us. Right? Like the idea that we wouldn't know something. But I think that that's an unfortunate side effect of technology. Right? And I think there's, there are many reasons for people to have secrets and not, you know, horrible secrets that shouldn't be unleashed. Right? But just like their own private lives. So I think part of the issue with this letter is the framing of it, of like you can't know and it would freak you out. You know, like that's different than just, you're not going to get to know that.

VANESSA: Do you think that there are certain pieces of information that we do owe each other that are like morally wrong to keep secret from each other?

MEREDITH: I do think so. I mean, I, and I think it varies by person, right? I mean, if, you know, your partner really wants to know if you have been married in the past or have children, right? Like answer them truthfully or answer them by saying, I'm not going to tell you. Right? That's a truthful answer to, I'm not comfortable with that conversation and they can decide whether to continue at that point. But, um, but I don't think we owe our partners a detailed diary of every

move we've made for 20 years. You know? And especially when you couple up, when you're older, when you're not like 21 or 23, there's a lot more life that you might not even remember you had. Right? So I think that some secrets are fine and being forthright about the fact that you're gonna have some secrets is okay. You know, I think it's a part of life and partnership doesn't have to mean the sharing of everything.

VANESSA: So I would love to use this as an opportunity to transition to talking a little bit about paranormal romance because I think that, so I am not a paranormal romance reader yet, but I think that part of the appeal of that I would imagine is that there are exciting secrets, right? It's the, you open the drawer and he secretly a billionaire, right? You open the drawer and secretly he's an alien who like has access to this whole other plane. But am I projecting my own?

MEREDITH: No, I mean, I think, I mean one of the great things about romance novels is that it sort of is that answer to the question of is that all there is? Right? Like, Oh no, that's not all there is. My life is this. But it could be that. And along with finding love, I'm finding a totally different lifestyle that is, you know, really elegant or just amazing and all these ways. And for me that narrative of money doesn't interest me that much. What does interest me is the idea that there is some sort of like secret world, secret realm. You can fall into some sort of Narnia closet. You know, those are the, that's the, that's my billionaire world. That's my, that's my play world, that this has existed the whole time and I am gaining entry into it. So for me that's the escapism. It's like literal escapism sometimes where you're in another realm or where there are fantasy creatures here.

VANESSA: You shared with me early when we met the paranormal romance novels are your like favorite genre. I'm a Regency girl. You're a paranormal girl. Like how did you find that genre for yourself?

MEREDITH: Okay, well, I'm going to say the thing that probably everybody knows I'm gonna say, you know? Vampire books and I will say *Twilight* or it's gateway drug, right? And I loved it. And what I loved was that so many of the stories took place around where I lived or in New York or in these, you know, regular places, but the, that there were these secret societies existing around us and you know, that a woman could be thrown into this world she doesn't know or perhaps find out that she was a part of this world without knowing. And I think, you know, also not to bring it down, but my mom was very sick with cancer and I knew I was probably going to lose her and we both got into these paranormal books. I mean she was doing more of the YA set, but I think it was pretty on the nose about the fact that we were reading about eternal life and you know, men who could swoop in and cure us. Right? I mean it was pretty obvious what we were doing, but we had so much fun.

VANESSA: I just love the idea of, of romance novels as a form of self care. And I can imagine, especially in times of grief, I think it's just such a healthy form of self care, right? You're telling yourself a different story where there's one with happy endings.

MEREDITH: Absolutely. And I mean I connected to Buffy as a show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* where you know that's a television show, but it's sort of like, okay, we're telling you about demons but actually we're telling you about high school. And I get a lot out of that too. It was escapism with like just a small dose of reality. And I think, you know, I mean I'm shifting gears here, but with paranormal romance, I know there's a conversation that's happened about consent and how it's a really great example of consent talk, right? Because you have to talk about, well what does it mean if you become a vampire? If I turn you into a ghoul, what does it mean? And there are often these like very honest and candid conversations about what will the rest of your life be like if we make certain decisions or I don't want to make this decision without you. Right? I would not take that decision away from you. And I love that it's like a model in some cases, and not in every book, but in a lot of, for talking about a whole host of like normal, everyday things.

VANESSA: Yeah. What is it actually going to do to us if you have a kid?

MEREDITH: Yeah. It's like, you know, and, and what does it mean to accept someone's decision? I mean, *Twilight* deals with this and sort of an, you know, a questionable way, but she says, I'm ready to be a vampire, right? And he says, no, you're not. You are a young person. Um, I want you to experience the following things before you do that. And she says, this is my agency, right? it's my choice. And you know, that's one that I can criticize different parts of, but these conversations are still had, you know, they're still experienced and you read about them. So I've seen them work much better in different books, but it's like a necessary part of the narrative.

VANESSA: And it's so interesting, right? Because like what greater intimacy is there than sharing a like secret identity, a secret species with someone, right? Like you and I are both vampires and have to keep that secret from the world, right? There's such intimacy to like we are both ghouls in a world that like doesn't even know that there are ghouls.

MEREDITH: Right? And, and you know, when I think about *Twilight* and so many other paranormal books, one of the themes is always community, right? Where you are brought into a world and because that world exists and perhaps that world is secret or small, you are given entrance into this network of people. And usually those bonds are very, very strong. So every book that I have really loved, as soon as this main character enters this community, there's a family that's always this great part of the narrative, you know, of. Now I'm in the secret group and we're all gonna watch TV together.

VANESSA: Yeah. And I think that that is part of like the locked drawer problem, right? It's not just what's in this drawer, it's like a feeling of rejection to be confronted with a secret. As much as I believe that couples should be able to have secrets from each other, whenever I find out something about my partner that I'm like, Oh, I didn't know that about you. There's almost like a sadness or jealousy of like, Oh, there's like a whole thing I didn't know. It has this like family aspect of like you want to be so intimate with someone that you have no secrets, right? Naw,

but you're in love. You are your own species and like you're part of your own gang where everything is okay. And so this locked drawers, like a confrontation of the fact that you won't really know each other.

MEREDITH: It's true. It's totally true. And you know, it also suggests in these paranormal books, no matter how hard you try to spin any of these things, negative, right? Oh well it turns out he's a zombie and I didn't know, or you know, a dragon. It's always a positive thing, right? And it's also, it allows someone to think, Oh, that secret, I've been keeping that so scary to me. Maybe it's something that someone else would find completely irresistible. You know, those sort of confession scenes in paranormal romance when it's a nonhuman person confessing to a human, I am not like you, you know, it always feels like a metaphor for so many different things. Right? It's a, it's like, you know, a coming out of sorts. But yeah.

VANESSA: So I think of paranormal as a place that you go to confront scary things. It's a place that you go to confront death or the unknown and then romance novels to me or where I go to like feel like I'm in a warm bath where I know everything will end up well. So how, how do you think that like magic of the two together works?

MEREDITH: That's interesting. I think it's a, I think it is quite the marriage of both of those things, right? Like dating is scary. Loving someone who's scary. Might be scarier if they're a dragon. So it's about, I think, you know, accepting someone's differences, deciding whether you want to be a part of their world, learning your own bravery and courage in a situation, right? I mean, even if the main character, even if the person we're following is the supernatural character, how do they navigate a relationship? It sort of just playing all of that out. I think. I love that there are no boundaries with it. And if you want to say that the man in question in this book can float, give you the best sex of your life, uh, also get you insurance. Right? Like a vampire can do a lot of things.

VANESSA: Yeah.

MEREDITH: Depending on the vampire.

VANESSA: I mean they don't sleep so they have all that time.

MEREDITH: Do not sleep. And in some books they eat and some books they don't. The most hilarious thing is when a brighter of vampire novels or of anything with the undead tries to explain the biological mechanics of how it's working. right? It's not something you really need to do in a non-paranormal book, but in a paranormal romance, you've gotta be like, here's how it works. Or you just ignore it all together. But I love it when they've try.

*[music in]*

VANESSA: Yeah. No, I do too. Meredith, thank you so much.

MEREDITH: Thank you for having me.

VANESSA: Do not leave without giving me a list of the books that I have to read.

MEREDITH: I will absolutely do that. Bye.

VANESSA: So Julia, Meredith was so convincing on Twilight, do you want to tell everybody what you and I did?

*[music out]*

JULIA: We watched all five Twilight movies in seven days or something.

VANESSA: Yeah, definitely in less than a week.

JULIA: Do you feel changed?

VANESSA: I loved them? Question Mark. I loved them? I loved the fifth one. I loved the fifth one.

JULIA: When Bella climbs upon the rock hunting, it really changed you. I feel like that was the moment where you were changed into a vampire lover.

VANESSA: Yes. When Bella becomes a vampire is when I was like, this is absurd and so awesome and I really loved the idea and I think that this is an idea that Meredith planted in my head, but I did love the very, very end of like they get eternal life together. Like that is the real dream. She's like telling him how much she loves him and he's like telling me again and she says like we have, we've time. Like, I can do this forever cause we have forever. And like that is a really lovely thing about paranormal romance. I might get more into this but you've always loved Twilight.

JULIA: Yeah. I like, part of the reason I rewatched highlight recently is a friend had watched all of the movies and my friend has a really emotionally taxing and physically taxing job and he said to me at the end of the day, it's really all I can manage is to rewatch the Twilight movies. And so I do the same thing, though my job at Not Sorry Productions is much less taxing. And when I rewatched them before I felt that same kind of, oh this is a world in which there are struggles but things are okay like -

VANESSA: You sparkle.

JULIA: You sparkle. That's very refreshing content.

VANESSA: So Julia, after listening to Meredith and thinking about this more, do you have any new advice for this young woman?

JULIA: I do have new advice and I can't believe it didn't occur to me before because I've really been puzzling over this. She should break up with him and then take the drawer and then open it in her own home and just figure out what it was and then respond to us on Reddit and let the people know. What about you? Has your advice changed?

VANESSA: I still think that it's worth breaking up with him over. I really like Meredith's like have a direct conversation with him about it, but I would fall on ultimatum. I'd be like, you tell me or we're done. I'm like, what if it's really bleak? What if he's actually 90 and it's a photo of him as an SS officer?

JULIA: Is it Benjamin button's situation or he just has - Oh my God. Is he a vampire?

VANESSA: No, I think he's had a lot of plastic surgery and he's a former SS officer.

JULIA: Yeah. You would break up with them?

VANESSA: Yeah.

JULIA: I don't think he's an SS officer. I think he's Santa Claus. It's the naughty and nice list and his red velvet suit, the keys to the sleigh.

VANESSA: The reason he doesn't want to tell her she's on the naughty list and he's like, I don't want you to feel judged. Okay. Sold.

*[music in]*

VANESSA: Julia, where are you going now? Do you have the keys to the sleigh?

JULIA: Yeah, I'm going to hop in the sleigh and deliver gifts to all my paranormal friends out in this universe.

VANESSA: Oh my God. Can I come? That sounds so fun.

JULIA: Definitely. You're in charge of the werewolves.

VANESSA: I love big dogs. This has been Keys to the Sleigh, an episode of Hot and Bothered. Everybody go by every book Meredith Goldstein has ever written and subscribe to her podcast Love Letters, which is her love advice podcast and is so, so good. We are a co-production of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media.

JULIA: Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at @therompod and leave us a review on iTunes.

VANESSA: This episode and all episodes are executive produced by me, Vanessa Zoltan and Ariana Nedelman. Our Reddit question was chosen by the elegant and humble Julia Argy, and we are edited by the fabulous Chelsea Ursin. If you want to see our list of recommendations and Meredith's list of paranormal recommendations, go to [hotandbotheredrompod.com](http://hotandbotheredrompod.com). Our production team is Brigid Goggin, Janielle Kastner, Caroline Hamilton, Jenna Hannum, Will Short, and Jonathan Villalobos, and our music is from First Com. We will talk to you next week.