For Simon
Every day is a new Happy Ever After, with you x

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HOW TO WRITE A LOVE STORY

KATY CANNON



1.

"St Valentine was martyred – beaten, stoned and beheaded. Do you really think he's an appropriate symbol for true love?" Matias asked.
"Sounds about right to me, actually," Hope replied.

The Gardens at Dawn (2017), Juanita Cabrera

Love is the Frost family business.

I guess a lot of people have talents that run in the family. My friend Rohan, for instance. His parents are both music teachers, and he's going to be a musician (either playing trombone in a world-famous orchestra or lead guitar in a band, depending on whether he or

his parents win the battle for his future). I know people in school whose families have run a restaurant or shop forever, or who have fathers and mothers and aunts and grandparents who are all teachers.

But my family always likes to be a little bit different. We don't have a company to be handed down from father to daughter or mother to son. Instead, in my family, we handed down a talent for Love. Yes, with a capital L.

Sadly, this doesn't mean we all fall in love at first sight and never argue again. (Grandma Bea has been married four times, so clearly Forever Love is still a work in progress. And she's considered the Queen of Romance.) But it does mean that everything in our family tends to come back to Love.

When your whole family is obsessed with Love and Romance it sets some pretty high expectations, believe me.

Which is why I was choosing to ignore the whole concept for now – at least, in the real world. After all, the boys at school couldn't possibly compare to the heroes in Gran's books.

The only problem was, it's impossible to ignore Love on Valentine's Day. Fortunately, I had something else to distract me this February 14th.

St Stephen's School was festooned in scarlet hearts, pink bunting and red roses stuck in some truly random places. I rolled my eyes as I walked past the decorations, still focused on the phone in my hand as the browser struggled to open the webpage. Today was the release day for Gran's latest novel – the last in the incredibly romantic Aurora series – and there was a lot riding on it. The first reviews would be going up at any moment and I desperately needed to know what they said.

Except my phone didn't seem to be cooperating.

Sighing, I made my way through the crowded corridors, heading for the common room and the corner table where you could sometimes pick up better reception.

Everyone I swerved past appeared to be either looking for someone to give a card to, hiding from someone who had a card for them or being humiliated in the middle of the corridor by someone making a Valentine's Day fuss. I winced as I imagined being caught up in all that – avoiding deathly embarrassment was another good reason to skip out on the whole love idea for now. I had a feeling that any conversation between me and a guy I actually liked wouldn't go as smoothly as the carefully edited banter in Gran's books – or even the conversations I scripted in my head, when I tried to

imagine actually falling for someone one day.

So far, it hadn't happened and I was OK with that. I mean, St Stephen's was fine, as far as schools go. But it wasn't exactly full to the brim with potential romance heroes, if you know what I mean. Mostly because the oldest guys there were only eighteen (if you don't count the teachers – and I really, really didn't) and I guess that part of the appeal (for me, anyway) in a potential date was life experience. Things to talk about outside the usual school stuff – who's dating who, who said what about someone else, what the homework was last week.

I wanted someone more than just a schoolboy. And I was willing to wait for that.

Which meant I also got to avoid the humiliation-fest of Valentine's Day at St Stephen's.

Our school was pretty much like any other school, as far as I knew. There were the universally unflattering uniforms (including blazers with the school crest on them), canteen food that varied from 'disgusting but possibly healthy' to 'probably tasty but also likely to induce a heart attack', and all the usual groups and cliques, gathered in their corners of the upper school common room, or the canteen, or outside on the field. But we also had a lot of fun stuff going on

and the teachers encouraged us to run with whatever interested us. Unsurprisingly, this week, someone was very interested in love – if the quotes from sonnets that had been pasted up on the walls and the decorations everywhere were anything to go by. I even spotted a quote from one of Gran's books, printed out in swirly font and stuck to one of the doors, as I pushed it open and walked through to the English corridor – and almost into Justin, a guy in my form.

I smiled sympathetically at him as I spotted the crumpled card in his hand. He stood still, watching Jana, a girl from the year above us walking away from him, her fishtail plait swinging. Then he turned to me and shrugged philosophically. "It was a long shot," he said.

"Always worth taking a chance on love," I replied. Although he was right – it was a very long shot. I liked Justin, but I didn't think his interests (designing an app that would automatically scan and identify bugs and minibeasts, last time we spoke) necessarily corresponded with Jana's (being the star of the girl's hockey team). Not to mention the fact that Jana had been dating her boyfriend Ian for six months now.

"Yeah?" He raised his eyebrows. "So when are you going to give it a try?"

I laughed. “Maybe next year.”

“Are you sure? I heard we’re getting a new boy in our year…”

The key word there was ‘boy’. “I wouldn’t hold your breath,” I said as I carried on walking.

My views on love weren’t exactly secret. It was a well-known fact at St Stephen’s that I didn’t date – much to my grandmother’s disappointment. For a while there’d been a rumour that my father was scarily strict and wouldn’t let me go out with boys. Then my dad came in to do a talk on career’s day about being a maths professor, and demonstrated probability – his area of speciality – by playing rock, paper, scissors (and getting embarrassingly competitive about it). After that, it was blindingly obvious to everyone that the ‘scary dad’ story was just that – a story. Which was a shame, actually. It was a great excuse.

The upper school common room was packed but I managed to grab some seats near the window between the music students (all clustered around a single phone to listen to a recording of someone playing a guitar though the tinny speakers) and half of the boys rugby team who were laughing at cards they’d received – mostly from girls in the lower school. I rolled my eyes and looked down at my phone, trying to load the

webpage again. Still nothing.

“Checking for love notes?” Rohan fell into the chair next to me, his own red envelope in his hand.

Anja, our other best friend, laughed as she took the seat on my other side. “More likely avoiding the gaze of anyone trying to hand her one.” She glanced up at the rugby boys as they all fell about laughing at a particularly unfortunate rhyme for ‘Roses are red, in a vase made of glass.’ Hard to believe she’d actually dated one of them for a few weeks last year. What had she been thinking?

“Neither, actually.” I stuck my phone back in my bag. “Looking for reviews of Gran’s latest book but I can’t get any reception.”

“Of course! It’s out today, right?” Anja looked concerned. “Is she worried about it?”

“Why would she be worried?” Rohan asked. “I can tell you now what they’ll all say. Same thing Mum always says when she finishes reading one of them.” He put on a high voice that sounded nothing like his mum. “‘Oh, that Beatrix Frost does know how to tell a story. If only your dad was more like one of her heroes…’”

I laughed, despite myself. The truth was, Gran was worried – I could tell, even if she’d never admit it.

"She's bought three hats in the last week," I told Anja, who understood about nervous compulsive shopping.

Anja pulled a face. "That's not good. It's not even like your gran needs any more hats." No one needed as many hats as my gran already owned.

"But why is she worried?" Rohan asked, looking totally bemused. "She's, like, famous. How bad can it be?" As if fame solved everything.

I tried for a nonchalant shrug, not wanting them to see my own nerves. Trying to explain why I was even more worried than Gran about this particular book would be even harder than trying to explain Gran's penchant for hats to Rohan.

"This is the book she was writing when she got sick." Just saying the words made me mentally flashback to that awful day, walking beside her as the paramedics helped her into the ambulance, telling her not to worry about the stack of handwritten notes clutched in her fingers. "She almost didn't get to finish it. I guess she feels this one matters more because of that, somehow."

Ever since I could read and write, Gran had included me in her work. When I was twelve, Mum and Dad separated (told you that love was still a work in progress for my family) and while they were apart, Dad and I moved in with Gran (then a year later when Mum

came back we sort of, well, stayed). That was when I read my first Beatrix Frost book – the first in the Aurora series, as it happened – and I'd been hooked ever since. Gran agreed to let me help her soon after – typing up notes, compiling research, brainstorming ideas and eventually even reading her early drafts and giving her critiques. But in four years, I'd never seen her as nervous about a book as this one.

The pneumonia that had struck her down could have been fatal, the doctors said later. It was touch and go for a while as it was. A horrible reminder that Gran wasn't getting any younger. She'd never say it, and I hated to even think it, but at a certain point, every book could be her last.

And this book … well, this one mattered more than the others to me, too. For all sorts of reasons.

In the lull in the conversation, I listened to the song playing on the phone at the next table come to an end, before someone cued up another one.

"I heard he can play piano and guitar and sing," one of the music kids said.

"Yeah, but I bet they autotuned him for TV," another replied. "He won't get that here at St Stephen's."

My ears pricked up for a moment. Was this the new boy Justin had mentioned? Not that I cared, of course.

I wasn't interested in boys.

I turned my attention back to my friends.

"Never mind Gran." I pointed to the card in Rohan's hand. "Who is that for?"

"Miss Viola Edwards," Rohan said with a grin. "The new teaching assistant in Year 8."

I rolled my eyes. Miss Edwards was tall, slim, gorgeous – and wore a huge engagement ring on her left hand. Rohan had even less chance than Justin. "Good luck with that."

Rohan shrugged. "I figure it can't be worse than last Valentine's, right?"

"Very true." Last year, Rohan managed to break up with his girlfriend the day before Valentine's, only to discover (too late) that she'd bought him tickets to his favourite band the following month. Worse still, they actually got back together again for a few more months, but she'd already sold the tickets by then. Anja said it served him right for having such rubbish timing. Either way, he'd been single ever since they broke up again in the summer holidays.

If Gran were to write the romantic adventures of my friends, it could put readers off romance for life.

"Tilly?" Lola, a girl I sat next to in history, approached me from the door of the common room. She had three

red envelopes in her hand, and was flanked by a few of the other girls in our year – her usual entourage. (Lola was nice enough, I supposed, but I always got the impression that she only spoke to me because my gran was famous.) "The librarian was looking for you again. Just a heads up in case you wanted to make a run for it."

I grabbed my bag and got to my feet. "Thanks, Lola. But it's fine. I was actually headed there next anyway."

Lola rolled her eyes. Few of my classmates understood why I'd chosen to spend my Free Choice afternoon working in the school library, instead of taking up a sport or joining the drama club, or choir, or whatever. I'd pointed out that, given my heritage, it was basically inevitable. (I didn't mention the fact that I'm tone deaf and loathe our school PE kit. I preferred to seem quirky than a bit rubbish.)

As it turned out, though, I'd made a good choice. Rachel Maskelyne, our school librarian, loved all kind of books – not just the ones we were supposed to read for class or for self-improvement – and she was on the committee for the prestigious local Westerbury Literary Festival, so she organized all kinds of events for us, too. So while I did spend *some* of my time re-shelving books and such, actually I got to do a lot

more fun stuff, too – like assisting with the lower school Book Club, and helping set up for any author events in the school hall. Of course, there were always going to be people who came in just to read out the raunchy bits of one of Gran's books to try and embarrass me – it was basically a right of passage for the Year Nines at one point. But I'd learned to laugh it off back in Year Seven. I was proud of my gran and I didn't care who knew it.

"I'll see you guys later," I told Anja and Rohan, and headed for the library and its superior internet connection.



I said hi to half a dozen more people as I made my way through the school, and pulled a face at a particularly ostentatious display of public affection (Jana and Ian, putting on a show for the crowds that involved the reading of a very bad poem he'd stolen from some website. I didn't mind the romance as much as the bad poetry choice). It was a relief to push through the heavy library doors to a place where the only romance was fictional, and every love interest – despite their flaws – was perfect for their true love in the end.

"Tilly!" Rachel looked delighted to see me, which

could be good or bad – either she had some really dull job she wanted to palm off on me or something exciting was happening. Oh well, too late to run now. I shut the library door behind me and hoped for the latter.

"Lola said you were looking for me?" I pulled my phone from my bag and checked my signal. Still rubbish – and it didn't seem to want to connect to the library Wi-Fi for some reason. *Why* hadn't I brought my laptop with me today? I'd have to try to commandeer one of the library computers at lunch if I couldn't get a signal before then. I shoved my phone into my blazer pocket.

"Yes! I imagined you were probably off collecting Valentine's cards from your adoring masses, but—"

An amused snort from across the room cut Rachel off. Oh good. Drew was there.

Drew Farrow, ever since he started at St Stephen's at the beginning of the school year, had been hanging out in the library pretty much full-time – although I had no idea why. He rarely checked out any books, preferring to sit for hours staring at his laptop (in the spot with the best Wi-Fi, of course). But he obviously did read, even if our opinions on literature were very different. We only had one class together – English

literature – but that was plenty. For our teachers as well as us, I was sure. Usually, the lesson tended to spiral into an argument between Drew and me about whatever book we were currently studying. We were both people with opinions, our teacher Mr Emerson always said. (And he said it like it was a bad thing.)

For all he talked in class, I wasn't sure I'd ever actually seen Drew speak to another student outside of it. But I supposed he had to – when I wasn't around – because he always seemed to know everything that was going on around the place.

Like now.

"Oh, Rachel. You can't imagine that Tilly Frost would date the mere mortals at this school?" Drew shook his head, a gesture he somehow managed to make look mocking. What can I say? I suppose the guy had to have at least *one* talent. "She's far too good for the likes of us. In fact, I believe she's actually sworn an oath of singledom in front of witnesses until she can meet a real man. Isn't that right, Frost?"

I stared at him. Drew and I might clash over books but he'd never attacked me personally before. Not like this, anyway. Either I'd unknowingly done something to offend him or the guy was having a *seriously* bad day for some reason.

"Who on earth have you been talking to, Farrow?" Another thing that annoyed me about Drew (I was keeping a mental list) was the way he always called me by my surname. Like he didn't want anyone to forget whose granddaughter I was – not that they were likely to. I'd started doing the same to him except now I was worried he actually liked it.

Drew laughed. "Haven't you heard? Apparently it's practically a Valentine's tradition around here now – waiting to see if Tilly Frost will finally crack and say yes to a date. I think there's a betting pool. It's not as big a deal as our new boy, though. All I've heard from anyone all morning is that there's a new superstar student in town, and that you don't date schoolboys. You claiming it's all lies, Frost?"

"I can't say either way on the new guy, but I'm certain I've never sworn an 'oath of singledom'. Whatever that is." Because I hadn't sworn an *oath*, exactly. Certainly not with witnesses. Still, I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks. Drew knew how to get to me.

Rachel tilted her head to look at me. "Tilly, sweetheart, I hate to break it to you but the adult men outside this school aren't actually all that much more mature than the boys in it. Trust me."

"I don't have rules against dating," I protested,

although I don't think either of them believed me at this point. Especially since I was lying about that part. "It's just that I'm too busy living my life to waste time obsessing over some boy." Especially one who wouldn't live up to my – admittedly high – expectations.

"Very sensible," Rachel said. "And I was hoping you could use some of that time you're saving to do me a favour…?"

I knew it. I was grateful for the change of subject, though. "Depends on the favour."

"Do you think you could run the lower school Book Club yourself tomorrow afternoon?" She screwed her face up so she looked properly desperate. "It's just that I've got a meeting about the Literary Festival tomorrow evening and there's a million things I need to do to be ready for it. Including writing a request for a very special author visit … naming no names but trust me, if it comes off you'll be thrilled."

"Thrilled?" I raised my eyebrows.

"Delighted. Amazed. Enraptured." Rachel leaned across the library counter, adding more excitement to her voice with every word.

"Those are strong words," I pointed out. "How can you be so sure I'll love whoever this author is?"

"Because I've listened to you rave about her books

often enough." She looked across at Drew. "Actually, I have a feeling you'll be pretty pleased, too."

Drew and I exchanged a look. In our entire history of knowing each other (which was, admittedly, only five and a half months) we'd never agreed on a single book. Of course, we'd mostly only talked (OK, argued) about the books we studied in class, and most of those authors had already been dead for a couple of hundred years, so the likelihood of any of them coming to visit Westerbury were slim. Still, I couldn't imagine anywhere our tastes might converge. On the few occasions I'd seen him actually *reading* in the library, or checking a book out, they were usually fantasy novels, or horror, or the really depressing sort of literary fiction. Not bad books but not my kind of thing.

I liked a book where you knew from the first page that everything would work out OK, even if you couldn't always see how when you were lost in it.

Frowning, I turned back to Rachel. "OK, I give up. Who?" Because there was only one author I could remember really going on about to her – my favourite author (after Gran, of course). And there was no chance it could possibly be—

"Juanita Cabrera," Rachel said with a smug grin.

I blinked at her, lost for words.

"Seriously?" Even Drew's eyes were wide with amazement. "You're trying to get Juanita Cabrera *here*? But she hardly ever even comes to the UK!"

"Not since she published *The Hanged Man*, and that was nearly ten years ago!" I said, causing Drew to turn those wide eyes on me. "What? It's on her website."

"*You're* a Cabrera fan?" he asked, obviously astonished.

"Why wouldn't I be? Let me guess – too highbrow for a *romance* reader, right?" I hated it when people made that sort of assumption – like stories about love and relationships weren't just as important as ones about magic and wars and stuff. (Actually, I thought they were *more* important. After all, we had to live with other people every day. Surely anything that helped us understand them better was a good idea.)

"You complain every time any book ends unhappily," Drew pointed out. "And Cabrera isn't exactly known for fluffy, feel-good stuff. Plus you hate fantasy."

"Cabrera isn't fantasy, she's more magical realism," I argued. "And she writes good characters, with realistic relationships and friendships. I like the communities she creates." And I'd almost forgiven her for not letting my two second favourite characters of all time – Henri

and Isabella – get their Happy Ever After in *Hallowed Ground*.

"Of course you like the characters – rather than the politics or the social message." Drew shook his head. "I should have known."

"I can't like both?" I asked, eyebrows raised. Actually, I *did* like both those things. "Not to mention her lyrical writing style, her imagination—"

"OK, OK," Rachel interrupted me. She gave me and Drew a pleading look. "Can we just accept that you're both fans?"

"I suppose," Drew grumbled, and I nodded my agreement.

"You're really going to try and get her here in Westerbury for the Literary Festival?" I asked. Juanita Cabrera had kind of a cult following, and big formal events weren't usually her style, as far as I could tell.

"Not for the festival itself," Rachel said. "But this year we're doing a series of smaller events in the three months running up to it, held in local venues around the area, and she happens to be over in the country while they're happening, so…"

I let out a tiny squeak of excitement and saw Drew roll his eyes. Like he wasn't just as excited as me.

"No promises!" Rachel reminded us. "But if you can

take over Book Club tomorrow, I'll see what I can do."

"In that case, definitely," I told her, grinning.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I realized I must have moved into a reception hot spot at last. Pulling it out, I checked the notification, my heart stuttering in my chest as I saw it was an email alert from the blog of one of the biggest romantic fiction reviewers.

Suddenly all thoughts of Juanita Cabrera flew from my brain and I focused completely on the slowly loading review on my phone screen. I read it through carefully, savouring every word, my smile growing with each line of glowing praise.

Until I reached the very end. Because it was then I realized that I was in a world of trouble, the moment Gran read this review.

2.

"A writer is someone who writes. It's as simple – and as impossibly difficult – as that."

Beatrix Frost, Author
In interview with the BBC, 2004

That evening I sat at the dinner table nervously nibbling on one last piece of garlic bread, flinching at every smile from my gran, who was sat at the head of the table. Every swipe of my dad's finger across the screen of his tablet made me wince. My twin brothers sat in their high chairs, smearing banana rice pudding