

"Tender, funny, and downright charming."

PEPPER BASHAM, author of *Authentically, Izzy*

LOVE IN TANDEM

BECCA KINZER



A NOVEL

PRAISE FOR BECCA KINZER

“This cute, quirky, and adorably sweet romance hit all the right notes of tender, funny, and downright charming. Add in hilarious family dynamics (I adore Zach’s mom) and you’re set for another excellent story by Becca.”

PEPPER BASHAM, author of *Authentically*, *Izzy* and *Positively*, *Penelope* on *Love in Tandem*

“A charming rom-com filled with unique twists and turns, *Love in Tandem* is sure to bring a smile to readers looking for a lighthearted romance. With unique characters and a fabulous opposites-attract dynamic, this is a sweet escape into an adventure in love, second chances, and holding on to what’s most important in life.”

REBEKAH MILLET, award-winning author of *Julia Monroe Begins Again*

“Sometimes the bumpiest rides lead to the most serendipitous of finish lines. A sweet tale of misadventure and unexpected romance.”

NICOLE DEESE, *Christy Award–winning author* on *Love in Tandem*

“*Love in Tandem* sparkles with summer fun. I enjoyed the premise, the characters, and the humor on every single page. It’s the perfect beach read.”

ANGELA RUTH STRONG, author of *Hero Debut*

“*Love in Tandem* was everything I hoped for. Becca Kinzer knows how to deliver characters I immediately care about and put them in a situation I had to know more about. Not to mention she delivers on humor, swoony heart-stopping moments, and a happily ever after

that still makes me grin long after reaching the end (and reading the author's note). *Love in Tandem* is one for the Top Ten lists."

TONI SHILOH, award-winning author of *In Search of a Prince*

"A charming rom-com. . . . This lighthearted jaunt checks all the boxes readers will expect."

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Dear Henry, Love Edith*

"A rom-com treat for readers to devour. Simultaneously a sweet romance with the perfect amount of heat and laugh-out-loud comedy with a surprising dose of depth, *Dear Henry, Love Edith* is a witty and heartfelt gift from the first word to the last."

BETHANY TURNER, author of *Plot Twist* and *The Do-Over*

"Rarely have I read a romance with such sparkling personality. Everything about Kinzer's vibrant voice and freshly told love story tugged at my heartstrings and widened my smile. Fans of Katherine Reay and Pepper Basham will be enchanted."

RACHEL McMILLAN, author of *The Mozart Code* and the Three Quarter Time series on *Dear Henry, Love Edith*

"A lovely debut by Kinzer that had me cheering for the unlikely, and yet so perfect, pair, Edith and Henry."

MELISSA FERGUSON, author of *Meet Me in the Margins* and *Famous for a Living* on *Dear Henry, Love Edith*

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Mom and Dad, this one's for you.

Love you always.



1

It's a terrible thing when a teacher survives an entire school year only to die the first minute of summer vacation.

"Whatcha doing, Miss Carter?"

"Don't move," Charlotte whispered to whichever first grader had spoken. Or maybe it was a second grader. Up until middle school, they all sounded the same. Like little mice helping Cinderella prepare for the ball.

"Are you playing statues?" the nameless child squeaked.

"Not exactly." Charlotte puckered her lips and blew a soft breath without moving a muscle. "There's a bee."

"Where?"

Hovering an inch away from Charlotte's face. What did the kid mean *where*?

"Oh. Now I see him. He's about to land on your nose. Are you trying to get him to land on your nose?"

Must be Nash. She glimpsed a mop of brown curls in her peripheral vision, and of all the O'Mally siblings, he was the most inquisitive. Or troublesome when one wasn't in the mood for inquisitive. "I'm trying to get him to fly away."

"Want me to help?"

Definitely Nash. And definitely *not*. Nash's attempts to "help" often led to blood, tears, and a trip to the nurse's office—or principal's, depending on the type of help involved. "I'm okay, Nash. Really. You can go."

The final bell had rung, and children everywhere bubbled across the schoolyard full of summer excitement. Teachers too. She couldn't be sure, but a conga line might have formed on the way to the bus stop with Ty Zemeckis, the principal, leading the way.

"Want me to shoo it away for you?" Nash persisted.

"Nope. No need to make it mad." Charlotte exhaled another breath, hoping to mimic a gentle breeze that would carry the bee far, far away.

"I got stung once. It wasn't that bad."

It was when you were deathly allergic to bees. Or possibly deathly allergic to bees. Ever since the terrible night Miranda Woods babysat for Charlotte years ago and showed her the terrible movie *My Girl*, which ended with a young boy's terrible death from bee stings, Charlotte had resolved to never find out.

Charlotte's eyes crossed as the bee flitted in front of her nose. She should have boycotted field day. Told Ty she'd pass out popsicles inside the cafeteria. Scrub toilets. Clean gum from beneath desks. Anything but referee three-legged races and kickball tournaments in a field full of flower-pollinating assassins.

Thankfully this slayer must have grown bored buzzing around her head. It flew off, leaving Charlotte to live another day. *Whew.*

She spun for the brick school building, ready to pack up her meager belongings, maybe do a little conga dance of her own, then rush over to

Mucho Mucho Queso. She couldn't wait to see the look of surprise on her parents' faces when she handed them a check for two thousand—

Smack!

Charlotte's head flung back, and pain exploded in her nose. A gush of warm fluid sprayed from each nostril.

"Did I scare off the bee, Miss Carter?" Nash—of course it was Nash—chased after the basketball he'd thrown. He lifted it from the crater-size pothole it'd bounced into, then pointed at Charlotte's face. "Uh-oh."

Yeah, uh-oh. She pinched the bridge of her nose while Nash's face crumpled into tears and the ball dropped from his hands. A few tears leaked from Charlotte as well. Mercy, that hurt.

"I—I'm sorry," he whimpered. "Do I have to go to the principal's office?"

And drag this day out any longer? Heck no. "Lucky for you, Nash, the principal's office is closed. Have a great summer," she said in a voice that now sounded like Kermit the Frog with a head cold.

Nash cried harder. "I k-killed you."

Looked like this day was going to drag out a little longer. "No, buddy. I promise. This wasn't your fault." And honestly, it wasn't. Things like this always happened when Charlotte spent more than fifteen minutes in the wild. And a schoolyard full of crazed children and lethal flying insects most definitely qualified as the wild.

"Shh. There, there." She patted his back. Or at least that was the intent. Unable to see with her head tipped back, she groped the air until she found his hair and settled for petting him like a puppy. "I get nosebleeds all the time."

If *all the time* meant *first time ever*. And in situations involving sobbing children on the last day of school, it did. "It's probably nasal allergies. I used nasal spray the other day. Probably made my nasal passages dry. All that nasal constriction."

She didn't know why she was rambling to a nine-year-old, let alone using the word *nasal* on repeat, but if it dried his tears and distracted from the sensation that fire sparklers were lit inside her nose, she'd go with it.

"Hey, did you know there's a musician named Kenny G who can breathe in through his nasal passages as he blows air out his mouth at the same time?"

"Circ-circ-circular breathing. You told us about that in music class."

"I did?" She risked looking down.

Nash nodded.

"And you remembered?"

Nash nodded again, a half-smile breaking through his freckled face.

Well, how about that? Maybe she'd taught these kids a thing or two after all, despite the music department's abysmal resources and her part-time hours. Just think what she could teach them next year when she had actual instruments. An actual classroom. Actual support.

Part of her still couldn't believe the school board had relented, agreeing to forego reconstruction on the middle school's decrepit parking lot to provide a full-time music teaching position that included a band program. The hours she'd poured into applying for grants had paid off. Between the school board's decision and the promised grant money for all new instruments, Charlotte's dream of a thriving music program was finally taking root.

Take that, Benjamin Bryant.

Charlotte shook her head. Stop. After two years, she doubted her ex-fiancé gave her more than a passing thought. Besides, her desire for a successful music program had nothing to do with him.

Okay, ninety-four percent nothing to do with him. Six percent might still be a little hung up on proving Ben's decision to call off their wedding had been a mistake. His decision to give up on her had been a mistake.

Charlotte squeezed Nash's shoulder as she gently probed her nose

and did a little sniff test. The bleeding had stopped. “Who knows? Maybe you’ll learn how to circular breathe someday. Have you thought about which instrument you’ll choose next school year?”

Nash grinned without a trace of tears. “The trumpet. Or maybe the trombone. Something I can blow real hard in. Then maybe I can help you blow away all the bees.”

Charlotte laughed, even though it made her nose throb. “I like how you think, Nash,” she shouted as he ran to catch up with his two older brothers, who were waving at him to hurry up.

Charlotte hustled into the school building before anything else thwarted her first moments of summer freedom. Locker doors slammed and shoes squeaked amongst the chatter of giddiness. Charlotte turned a blind eye to the gaggle of girls running to exit the building. Any other day, she’d have told them to slow down. Today, it was all she could do not to crack a whip and yell “Hee-yah!”

Slipping into the classroom she shared with the school nurse, the volunteer librarian, and, whenever he was bored, the school custodian, she pulled the door shut and leaned against it with a long sigh. Then a smile. A giggle. Oh, what the heck—she started to dance.

Somewhere after the fourth or fifth *cha-cha* around the folding table that served as her desk, a throat cleared from the doorway.

Charlotte gasped and spun. “Ty. I mean, Mr. Zemeckis. I mean—” Considering at one time he’d been friends with her older brother and used to torment her with wet willies and wedgies, it was weird knowing how to address him as her principal.

She slugged his upper arm. “You sneaky punk, I didn’t hear you come in.” School was out for the summer. She’d call him whatever she wanted.

“Ow.” He rubbed his skinny arm with mock pain. “Well, maybe if you weren’t so busy butchering the lyrics to a Gloria Estefan song. *Come chickabonka, baby, something ’bout a conga?*”

“I’m fairly certain that’s how it goes.”

The corners of Ty’s eyes crinkled behind his glasses. “I suppose you

can sing whatever you want on the last day of school.” His smile dimmed as he took in the blood spatters on her shirt. “What happened there?”

“Nash.”

“Don’t tell me any more. I’m off duty until August.”

Charlotte waited for the humor to return to his eyes. It didn’t. Instead he spent the next several seconds tugging on his ear as he glanced around the box-shaped classroom to where a plastic human skeleton missing two ribs hung next to a narrow bookshelf crammed with tattered books. Then he pulled out one of the student’s chairs so he could fold his lanky frame into the seat and spend another eternity rubbing his forehead.

She heaved a deep sigh. “Look, I know what this is about, and I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Ty’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “How did you hear?”

“Ben’s mom told me. We ran into each other at the farmers market a few weeks ago. I got so flustered trying to prove I wasn’t flustered at the news, I bought fifty-three dollars’ worth of fresh spinach, which made me all the more flustered because I hate spinach and she knows I hate spinach, so somehow in all the flusterment I concocted an imaginary friend who loves spinach, whom I may have suggested wasn’t imaginary but rather special and perhaps male.”

Behind his glasses, Ty’s wide eyes blinked like a befuddled owl’s. “What are you talking about?”

Now it was Charlotte’s turn to blink and ponder. “Ben’s wedding this weekend. What are *you* talking about?”

Ty gripped the back of his neck with a groan. “Now I feel even worse. I totally forgot this weekend was Ben’s wedding. Why would he get married this weekend? Isn’t this practically the same weekend two years ago that you were supposed to—”

“Hey, remember that moment forty seconds ago when I said I didn’t want to talk about it?”

“Right. Sorry. I just really wish I had better news to give you right now.”

If it wasn't about Ben's wedding, what sort of bad news could it possibly— *Oh no*. Charlotte sucked in a breath and palmed her stomach. "Please don't tell me this is about Will." Her brother had been released from prison over a year ago. If he'd gotten arrested again . . .

"This isn't about Will," Ty said, standing with a grimace. "It's about the music program. We lost the grant."

"What?" Ty may as well have hurled another basketball at her face. "No," she breathed out, leaning against her desk table for support. It slid half a foot away from her.

Ty grabbed the edge before it scooped any further. "I'm sorry. This isn't how I wanted the last day of school to end for you."

"I don't understand." Charlotte lowered the folding table onto its side, needing something to do other than pound the tile floor in a tantrum. She kicked one of the metal legs. "How did we lose the grant? I thought everything had been approved."

"So did I, and I suppose there's a tiny chance it might turn out okay, but I got an email a few days ago warning me the foundation who offered the grant money is under investigation." He took over with the table legs when it became clear Charlotte cared more about kicking than folding. "And unfortunately, the head of the school board has already been in contact, saying if the grant isn't coming through, they don't see the point in pouring money into a full-time music program when we have so many other pressing needs."

"Like what?"

Ty propped the folded table against the wall with a pained smile. "Where do I even begin? A better library for starters."

Phhhht. As if students need books to learn."

Ty's lips tugged in a grin. But Charlotte wasn't trying to be funny. "Our town already has a library. What our town doesn't have is a band. Studies show that children who—"

Ty lifted his palms. "I know what the studies show, Professor Harold Hill, and I'm on your side. I want a thriving music program as much

as you. But our town doesn't have the funds to support one right now. Especially at the grade school level."

"Which is why I applied for the grant."

"Which is why I'm talking to you now, so we can develop a backup plan."

Charlotte tossed the battered music theory textbook she'd been using the past couple of years into a cardboard box along with a ukulele, two drumsticks, a brown plastic recorder, and the toy harmonica she'd confiscated from Nash the first day of school. She swung her guitar case over her shoulder, picked up the box, and forced herself to take a deep breath. This wasn't Ty's fault. The least she could do was hear him out. "What sort of backup plan?"

He stood in the doorway. "Did you happen to read the front-page article in the newspaper yesterday?"

"Our town still has a newspaper?"

"I'll take that as a no." Gripping the doorframe, he leaned forward and lowered his voice as if the walls had ears. "A. P. Hopkins is dying."

"Uh-huh." Hardly a shocking revelation. Seemed about every seven years, the recluse millionaire claimed to be dying.

"No, I think he's for real this time," Ty said, obviously sensing her skepticism. "If you'd read the article, you'd understand. There was a whole different feel to it. Like he was truly saying goodbye and wanting to go out with a final hurrah. And you'll never guess what his final hurrah is."

"A town music program?" Hope fluttered in her chest.

"A new twenty-mile bike path."

Hope splattered at her feet. "How's that supposed to help anything?"

Charlotte didn't mean to sound insensitive. Certainly, she would miss A. P. Hopkins. Not that she'd ever met him. Not that anyone had ever really met him. But how could she not miss the crazy philanthropist who offered sporadic donations and kept life interesting in her otherwise ho-hum, small Illinois town?

Just once though, she wished he'd invest his money in something that wasn't geared toward athletics. Something the town actually needed. *Something like a stinking music program.*

"Listen." Ty grabbed the box from her arms and set it on the ground as if he were afraid whatever he said next might tempt her to throw the box at him. "The bike path isn't the exciting part."

And now he was using the same tone parents used when telling their kids about an "exciting" trip to the dentist's office.

"The exciting part is . . ." He nudged the box further away with his foot. "Well, you know how every time he offers a big donation, he includes some sort of challenge to go with it just for fun? Like the treasure hunt he sponsored when he paid to remodel the high school football stadium years ago? Remember? The winner got ten grand."

"Of course I remember. Sophia nearly dug up our parents' entire backyard, convinced the funny shaped tree in his clue was our tree because of the giant knot that always reminded her of our great-uncle Benny's nose."

"Exactly. Well, the treasure part. I'm not familiar with your great-uncle Benny's nose."

"Let's just say she wasn't wrong. So what's the special challenge this time?" *Wait.* She clasped her hands together as if in prayer. "Oh, please tell me it's another pie-eating contest, like when he put in the sand volleyball courts. I came so close to winning that one, and I was only eight at the time. You know how much pie I could put down now that my job's on the line?"

Ty pointed his finger at her. "Yes. See? That's what I'm talking about. That's the fire we need. The eye of the tiger."

"Before you go into one of your Sylvester Stallone impressions, would you please just tell me what the challenge is? Is it pie?"

"Probably not pie. To be honest, Hopkins didn't offer many details. He just said the challenge would be something physical and require a lot of time outdoors." He gave her two thumbs up. "Right up your alley though, eh?"

Charlotte stared at him for a beat, then scooped up the box. He flinched as if she were going to fling it at his head. Which she probably would if she thought she could afford to lose any more instruments. “Skydiving into snake-infested jungles so some recluse lunatic who probably isn’t even dying can get a laugh watching me torture myself like I’m in one of those dreadful *Saw* movies is not up my alley.”

“That’s what you got from the words *physical* and *time outdoors*?”

“Out of my way.” Charlotte elbowed him in the gut on her way past. If she wasn’t in a hurry to meet her parents for half-price margaritas, she’d kick him in the shins for getting her hopes up.

“Wait,” he called after her. “Don’t you even want to hear what the prize is?”

Charlotte clipped down the hallway, tossing her words over her shoulder. “Why does it matter if I’m not going to do it? Besides, you know I hate competitions. Unless it involves pie. Maybe cheesecake,” she added under her breath.

“Twenty-five thousand dollars.”

Her feet stuttered. Paused. Slowly turned. “How much did you say?”

He dug his hands into his pockets, leaning forward with that secretive tone again. “You heard me. And you wouldn’t be competing with anyone. Hopkins said this time he’s only choosing one couple to participate. All they have to do is complete the challenge on time, and he’ll give them a prize of twenty-five thousand dollars. He said it should be enough to cover the cost of a nice wedding.”

“Hold on. Back up. Wedding? *Couple*?”

Ty cleared his throat. “Yeah, so apparently the whole point of this challenge—other than winning oodles of money—is to put some couple through better or worse and see how it affects their relationship. On a side note, you haven’t started dating anybody recently, have you? Because that would certainly make this backup plan a lot more feasible. If Krista and I weren’t leaving for vacation next week, I’d try entering us.”

Charlotte adjusted the box, half-wondering if she could hit him from

this distance with the recorder. What was wrong with him? Nothing about this challenge should make anyone think of Charlotte Carter. *Nothing.*

“Look, Ty, I know you mean well—” truly the only reason she wasn’t throwing the recorder at him right now— “but I’m sure I can figure out ways to raise money for the music program that don’t involve dismembered limbs or death. Or being in a relationship.”

She resumed her march for the exit. “I’ll stick to the usual fundraisers, thank you. Maybe this year we can even do one of those kiss-the-pig contests. Which shade of lipstick do you prefer?”

“I’d buy tickets for that,” Mrs. Scott shouted from her second-grade classroom.

“Charlotte—” Ty’s voice snagged her a few steps from the door. “I don’t think fundraisers are going to keep you afloat this time. I think . . . I think you need to start considering other options.”

The weight of her box doubled. Other options? In a town the size of a guitar pick, how many options did he think she had when it came to teaching music and staying close to her family? There *weren’t* other options. Especially for a single gal nowhere close to being one half of a couple.

She adjusted her grip on the box. Bailey Springs, Illinois, might not seem like much to outsiders—or insiders if she was being honest. But Bailey Springs was her home. Her life. Her future. Why would she have this burning desire to get a music program running in this town if she wasn’t meant to see it through? Somehow, someway, she would make it happen. *Take that, Benjamin Bryant.*

Forcing a smile, she pressed her back against the door. “I get your concern, but I’m sure it’s going to be okay.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because sometimes you don’t need a giant budget. Sometimes you just need a little faith.” She shoved through the door and spun before Ty saw her smile falter. Before he saw that after years of struggling to catch a

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break in her hometown, her faith was beginning to develop more cracks and potholes than the school parking lot.

Especially when the voice of doubt grew louder in her ear. A voice that sounded an awful lot like Benjamin Bryant. *Take that, Charlotte Carter.*