

"A deliciously romantic story that readers are sure to love!"

COURTNEY WALSH, *New York Times* bestselling author



BECCA KINZER

Praise for Becca Kinzer

With two parallel and delightful slow-burn love stories, *First Love, Second Draft* is a deliciously romantic story of grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation that readers are sure to love!

COURTNEY WALSH, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Summer of Yes*

Full of charm, snappy dialogue and characters you root for, Kinzer's latest rom-com is a perfect read for the beach. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

RACHEL HAUCK, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Meet Me at the Starlight*, on *First Love, Second Draft*

What a witty and winsome read! Becca Kinzer has written a charmer in *First Love, Second Draft*. I loved the theme of second chances and the emotional journey of watching Gracie slowly open up and risk her heart. And the humor was a delightful bonus!

MELISSA TAGG, Christy Award-winning and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Wedding at Sea*

Becca Kinzer shines in her ability to write quirky characters and their zany escapades. *First Love, Second Draft* is the lighthearted beach read fans of Pepper Basham and Rebekah Millet will want to reach for this summer.

SARAH MONZON, award-winning author of *All's Fair in Love and Christmas*

This cute, quirky, and adorably sweet romance hit all the right notes of tender, funny, and downright charming.

PEPPER BASHAM, author of *Some Like It Scot*, on *Love in Tandem*

A sweet tale of misadventure and unexpected romance.

NICOLE DEESE, Christy Award–winning author of *The Voice We Find*,
on *Love in Tandem*

Love in Tandem was everything I hoped for. Becca Kinzer knows how to deliver characters I immediately care 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. *Love in Tandem* is one for the Top Ten lists.

TONI SHILOH, award-winning author of *A Run at Love*

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

MELISSA FERGUSON, author of *The Perfect Rom-Com*, on *Dear Henry*,
Love Edith

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

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Dear Henry*, *Love Edith*

FIRST LOVE, SECOND DRAFT



BECCA KINZER



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First Love, Second Draft is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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1

October 1 headlines:

MARINERS CONTINUE WILD RIDE INTO POSTSEASON PLAYOFFS

SEATTLE MANAGER SHAKES UP ROSTER, SHOCKS FANS

WIN BIG OR GO HOME: PARKER GOES HOME

“No comment.”—Noah Parker, Pitcher for the Seattle Mariners

2

Gracie loved Mona with every beat of her heart, but the occasional moment arose when she wanted nothing more than to smack her beloved sister in the face with a Bavarian cream pie.

Possibly cherry.

Actually, any pie would do so long as it got Mona to just. Back. Off. “Would you stop hovering? I’m fine.”

“You’re panting worse than a cocker spaniel in heat. You’re not fine.”

Gracie dropped her head back against the headrest. She hated it when her sister was right. Especially when her sister wasn’t right. A cocker spaniel in heat? Please. But she might be onto something about the *not fine* part.

“I just need a second to catch my breath.” And an even longer second to figure out how to maneuver into a standing position from the passenger’s seat of her sister’s car without splatting like a human-sized pie on the driveway.

A gentle breeze coaxed a handful of leaves from the giant maple tree next to Gracie’s driveway down onto the windshield of Mona’s red Nissan. Wouldn’t be long before Gracie’s entire five acres crinkled with red, gold, and brown.

Oh, how she’d loved cannonballing into a huge crunchy pile of leaves as a kid.

Now, on the other side of forty, Gracie didn't see any cannonballs left in her future. Especially not with a body currently suited for a woman twice her age.

"Well?" Mona's pointy-toed shoe tapped an impatient beat against the pebbled driveway. "Has it been a long enough second?"

"Just a half second more."

Mona huffed. Between her suit jacket, brown hair, and glasses, and her ever-present puckered-lip disapproval, she was the spitting image of Joan Cusack's uptight principal role in *School of Rock*. "You should've just gone to the rehab facility," she muttered.

"We've already gone over that."

"Well, maybe we should go over it again." Mona leaned down, the scent of rosemary punching Gracie in the nose. When her sister quit smoking two years ago, she'd exchanged her nicotine dependence for a fierce obsession with essential oils. Some days, depending on the scent, Gracie wished her sister had taken to covering her body in nicotine patches instead.

"Are you listening to me? I said at the very least, you should have moved into Dad's house until it sells. Friendly neighborhood. Middle of town. Shoot, even the dumpy little cabin you're trying to rent out next door would be a better option than your house. No stairs. One level."

"You sound like a Realtor." Gracie batted her sister's rosemary scent away from her face.

"I *am* a Realtor."

"Well, stop talking like one, and talk like my sister."

"Fine. You're an idiot. Better?"

"Perfect. Now get out of the way." Gracie swiveled her feet to the driveway and bit back a cry. The crisp October air brought no relief to the fiery sparks igniting her pelvis whenever she moved the wrong way—which was *any* way since her little horse accident. A little horse accident she prayed nobody had captured on video.

Writhing on the pavement outside her small hometown's grocery store on Main Street wasn't exactly Gracie's preferred method for going viral and rebuilding her author platform.

Ignoring the sweat beginning to ooze down her temples, Gracie reached for the open door in an attempt to find leverage as she splinted her sore ribs with her other arm. “And just so you know, my *adorably charming cottage* isn’t even available right now. Matt found a renter while I was in the hospital. And before you start hammering me with a thousand questions, no, I don’t know who the renter is, and no, I don’t care who the renter is. He paid the deposit and that’s all I care about. Now not another word until you get me into the house.”

“And how am I supposed to get you anywhere when every time I touch you, you hiss at me like a feral cat?”

“You’re the one with the claws.”

Mona waved her red-painted talons. “You saying I lack a soft touch?”

“Yes, Wolverine. That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

A chime sounded. Mona whipped her phone out of her purse faster than a gunslinger at high noon. “What now?” she said in greeting as she hip-checked the car door right into Gracie’s shins.

“*Ow*. Nice soft touch.”

“Sorry.” Mona’s lips, as red as her nails, twisted toward the phone. “No, not sorry to *you*. I already told you the house wouldn’t be ready for viewing until next week.”

“Mona, before you badger that poor soul any further, can you at least help me stand so I’m not stranded in this seat?”

Her sister marched away, badgering the poor soul further and leaving Gracie stranded in her seat.

Terrific. Gracie closed her eyes and inhaled several tortured breaths as her sister paced back and forth, chastising the caller, then soon the entire male population—a common recurrence ever since Mona’s boyfriend left her high, dry, and pregnant twenty-three years ago.

At this rate, Gracie would either be completely healed or completely dead before she even made it out of the car.

Gracie dropped her head sideways onto the headrest. Maybe she

was being an idiot. Not about the rehab facility. Oh, no. Gracie knew about those places. They were the types of places a person enters and never leaves. Just ask her poor dad.

Last thing Gracie needed was to be surrounded by geriatrics watching *Wheel of Fortune*, all but forgotten by family who at first visited faithfully every day, then dropped their visits to three days a week, soon followed by weekends only, then eventually major holidays, weather permitting.

Just ask her poor dad.

Okay, maybe it wasn't as bad as all that. Up until her horse accident, Gracie had visited Buck every day. Still, the rehab facility had never been an option—not even when Gracie's orthopedic surgeon claimed it her best option for the next couple of days.

Gracie didn't need physical therapy sessions to get back on her feet. She needed a bestseller.

Gracie held her side, the memory of her conversation with her agent aching worse than her ribs. *Sales have been stagnant . . . Last book bombed . . . Need something new . . . Something fun . . . Get back to your earlier brand . . . Find that romantic zing . . . Make people laugh . . .*

Sure, sure, sure. Make people laugh. Find that romantic zing. Gracie could do that. She *would* do that. Soon as she figured out how to get out of this car without dying.

Her eyes drifted to the white two-story farmhouse with painted green shutters. A giant *Welcome Home* banner hung from the roof above the wraparound porch where it looked like people had already started dropping off casserole dishes.

As if she needed one entire casserole for herself, let alone twelve.

Another ache that had nothing to do with her bruised ribs squeezed her entire chest as she continued gazing at the home she used to share with her husband. The house that she could never bring herself to sell—even after he became her ex-husband.

Probably because she'd fallen in love with this property even faster than she'd fallen for her ex. *Noah, we have to get it. We have to. Just look at that view.* Gracie had motioned to the pink sunset fading over rows

of farmland as far as the eye could see from the front porch swing, before dragging him to the back of the house so she could amaze him with the tree line. *It's like our own secret forest back here. Look, there's even a little cabin.*

Thankfully there wasn't a lot of competition for a run-down house on a property in central Illinois located in the middle of nowhere. Her hometown of Alda sat the closest, and that was a good twenty-minute drive away. Their pitiful offer got accepted. Then when they went through their pitiful divorce years later, this was the only part of their marriage Gracie wanted to keep.

Maybe because despite all the heartache, despite the bad ending, she'd dreamed up some of her best story ideas within the walls of that farmhouse. Stories bursting with zing.

More importantly, sales.

"Lord, please bring back the zing." Gracie was running out of time. And money. Even with someone renting the dumpy little cabin she'd transitioned into an adorably charming cottage, she was going to need more cash flow. Soon.

Really, what she needed more than anything right now was the second half of her advance—something she'd only receive if her editor accepted her full manuscript that was due two weeks from today.

Which meant Gracie should probably come up with a better ending for her rom-com story that was more *happily-ever-after-ish*, less *everybody-dead-on-the-stage-Shakespeare-tragedy-ish*.

"Oh, and God?" Gracie squinted toward the sky. "While I've got your attention, can you also get me through the front door without wetting my pants?" At the moment that request felt like a prayer of more miraculous proportions than the zing.

Holy hyssop. Did the front porch always have so many stairs? Didn't seem so when she could bound up and down them without any thought.

Today it was going to take thought. Lots of thought.

And now that she was giving it some thought, Noah really should have gotten around to fixing the porch step railing before she kicked

him out of the house five years ago. She'd probably topple right off into the hydrangea bush the moment she put any weight on it.

"Ready to do this?" Mona dropped her phone into her purse with one hand, backhanding a leaf from her shoulder with the other.

If Gracie weren't so terrified about whether she was *ready to do this*, she'd tease her sister for going all Chuck Norris on a defenseless leaf.

The fact that Gracie didn't, must not have escaped Mona's notice. Her pencil-thin brows dipped in concern. "This is too much for you, isn't it? I knew it would be. We don't even have a walker. There's no way you're going to make it into the house. That's it. You leave me no other option . . ." Mona sighed and dug out her phone.

"Put that phone away. You are *not* calling the boys at the firehouse." For as long as Gracie could remember, probably ever since her sister heard firefighters were rumored to rescue kittens from trees, Mona believed all of life's difficulties could be handled by calling "the boys at the firehouse."

One of these days her sister really needed to acknowledge that firefighters weren't all boys. But that was a battle for another day. "Mona, I mean it. Put that phone away."

"Why? Wombat can toss you over his shoulder and carry you inside like *that*." Mona snapped her fingers.

Gracie whimpered. The thought of her bruised ribs coming into contact with anything, especially Wombat's beefy shoulder, tested her bladder control. "The last thing I need is a bunch of people showing up thinking they need to help me. Next thing you know, they'll be popping in and out of the house all week. I can't have that. Not when I need to be completely focused on finishing my story. *Alone*."

"Uh-huh, and how are you going to do anything *alone* when you can't put any weight on your right leg? Or was it your left leg?" Mona began rummaging through Gracie's white patient belongings bag. "What did we do with your discharge instructions?"

"I'm weight-bearing as tolerated on both legs."

"Which would be great if you could actually tolerate any weight.

Here we go.” Mona dug out a stack of papers, ran her finger down a page, frowned, and flipped to the next page. “So far it just keeps talking about how pain medicine can cause constipation.”

Well, hurrah. One thing Gracie didn’t have to worry about then, since she didn’t plan on taking a single pill. Pain medicine had always made her nauseous. The only reason she’d asked Mona to swing through Alda to pick up her prescription on their way home from the hospital was to delay getting out of the car for a few extra minutes.

Sure, Gracie was anxious to get into the house, but that didn’t mean she was anxious to experience the pain of getting into the house. But she’d certainly delayed long enough. Pain or no pain, it was time to finish her story. And she’d finish it on her own two feet.

Okay, her own two feet plus her sister’s two feet. But no more feet than that. “I’m ready. Let’s do this.”

No sooner had the words left Gracie’s mouth than the loud rumble of a vehicle approached from behind, drawing Mona’s attention a brief second before she dropped her gaze back to the discharge papers. “Who’s that?” Gracie asked.

Mona didn’t answer. Gravel crunched and popped beneath tires as the vehicle drew closer on the long driveway leading up to Gracie’s house. Too heavy to be a car. Sounded more like a tank. Or a . . .

No.

Gracie glared at her sister, who was still pretending to be enthralled by the discharge papers. “Mona, that giant truck I hear better be a FedEx delivery because I specifically told you *not* to call the boys at the firehouse.”

Mona flung her hands, losing half of the discharge papers in the process. “Well, what else was I supposed to do? They insisted. You know how much those boys love you. And besides, we need the help. It’s been thirty-two minutes, and you haven’t even made it out of the car.”

“It’s been twenty-eight minutes, and I’m practically inside the house.”

“Stop being so stubborn.” Mona’s phone began ringing.

“I’ll stop being stubborn when I’m not on a deadline. Don’t you

dare reach for your phone. You are not taking that call until you tell them to leave. Did you hear me? I said you are *not*—”

“Mona speaking.” Mona side-stepped Gracie’s reach, answering with her professional Realtor voice, a voice that didn’t betray the slightest hint her younger sister was currently hissing out ways she planned to murder her with pie.

“Hey, Miss Gracie.” Wombat sauntered over, interrupting her pie tirade. He was wearing his volunteer fireman T-shirt, which Gracie was pretty sure he’d ordered online in bulk, along with tactical pants and red suspenders. It was his ensemble whether he was working as a tow truck driver, volunteering as a firefighter, shopping for groceries, or sitting in a pew at church. Should he ever get married, Gracie imagined he’d forego a tuxedo for his current attire.

He stooped down to gather her discharge papers. “Glad you’re home. We hung the banner earlier, then figured we’d swing back by to see if you needed extra help with”—his eyes dropped to the papers—“constipation?”

Gracie snatched the papers and tossed them behind her. “I don’t need help.”

“She does. Can you get her into the house?” Mona spoke over Gracie, then pressed her phone back to her ear. “*Not you*. I told you the house wasn’t ready. Now, you listen here, you little . . .” Mona marched off, leaving Gracie alone.

Well, *alone* not counting the four firefighters she used to babysit every summer when they were toddlers, and now fed at least once a month at the fire station, currently crowding around her, cracking their backs and rotating their necks.

“So how do you want to do this?” Wombat asked the other three. “I’ll grab one thigh. You grab the other. You steady the head. Sound good?”

No. Being discussed like a turkey at Thanksgiving dinner did not sound good. Especially since Leo, the one she’d always had to hide the scissors from as a toddler, had an axe propped over his shoulder.

“Listen. You guys are so sweet. I mean it. You’re the best. But

I'm good. Really. In fact, why don't you take a few of those casserole dishes with you? Maybe drop one off at the cottage for my new renter while you're at it? That would be the biggest help to me, because I'm telling you, I'm fine. See?" Gracie gripped the handle on the open car door and rose to a standing position.

Or at least tried to. Her rear end barely cleared the seat before a scream erupted from her lips.

All four men jumped a foot back. Leo swung the axe in front of himself like a weapon.

Okay, *fine* might've been a slight exaggeration.

Footsteps rushed to the car, kicking up pebbles and dirt before skidding to a stop in front of Gracie. "Wombat, hey. What's going on here?"

Oh thank goodness. Matt. Her kindhearted nephew. The one person on the planet who could hopefully bring a little sanity to this situation.

"Mom," he said to Mona. "You were supposed to call me once you left the hospital."

Mona lowered the phone and whisper-shouted to Matt. "I called Aimee."

"Why would you call Aimee?"

"She's your fiancée."

"How many times do I have to tell you, she's not my—" He clamped his jaw shut with a growl.

Gracie kind of wanted to do the same. "Matt, will you please help me stand? I promise I'll be fine if someone will just help me stand."

Matt gripped her elbows and lifted her to a standing position.

Holy hyssop! Gracie clamped her mouth shut, afraid of what words might escape past her lips, none of them holy. Felt like a fifteen-pound bowling ball was sitting inside her pelvis.

After several awful seconds, the pressure began to disappear. The sweat drizzling down her forehead and into her eyes, however . . .

"See?" she gritted out between her teeth. "Perfectly fine."

"Oh boy. You look . . ." Matt scratched behind his ear, smart

enough not to finish that sentence. “I don’t know, Aunt Gracie, maybe we do need the extra hands to get you inside.”

“That’s why Mona is here,” Gracie said in between pants that even she had to admit sounded an awful lot like a cocker spaniel in heat.

“Not anymore.” Mona rushed to the driver’s side door. “Sorry, Sis. That lunatic is demanding to see the house in Litchfield today. I need to drive over there before he climbs in through a window or something.”

“Mona, no.” Her sister wasn’t leaving. Not with Gracie standing here. Outside. With half the Alda volunteer fire department.

No no no. This was not the plan. The plan was to get Gracie inside. Alone. With food. Water. A computer. And zero distractions until she had a manuscript bursting with zing. A manuscript with a much better ending than the one she emailed to her agent a few days ago, promising that everything was under control.

That promise would’ve carried a lot more weight if Gracie hadn’t fallen off a coin-operated horse and landed in the ER later that same afternoon. “Mona, you can’t leave me.”

“I’ll be back before you know it,” she shouted through an open window as her car peeled away.

Matt tugged Gracie away from the spraying gravel. He wasn’t holding her tight, but even the little bit of pressure hurt her ribs. Her back. Her pelvis. Her pride. Everything. A whimper slipped past her lips.

“Sorry,” Matt said.

“No, it’s not you. It’s . . .” She buried her face against Matt’s shoulder, unable to hold back the tears. Why couldn’t anything in her life be easy? Ever? Sakes alive, she couldn’t even climb on a toy horse without getting hurt.

Matt’s shoulders shifted uncomfortably, probably because he could feel her tears and snot seeping through the cotton fabric of his long-sleeved shirt. “Hey guys, appreciate the help, but I think we’re good here.”

Still crying, Gracie flapped her fingers toward the porch. “Don’t forget the casseroles,” she whimpered.

She didn't have to tell the poor boys twice. They'd probably rather deal with a blazing fire than a crying woman any day. The fire truck's heavy rumble soon disappeared.

At last, peace.

Until the front door to the cottage squeaked open and clapped shut. *Oh wonderful.* Just what she needed. To meet the new renter with a blotchy face covered in snot. On the bright side, maybe the sight would scare him off from ever bothering her again.

"Is that the nice guy you told me about?" Gracie tried lifting her head to get a good look at him.

Matt squished her face back against his shoulder.

Clutching the back of her head with one hand, he began patting her on the back as if he were burping a baby and had no idea how to do it. Which in a weird way brought her more comfort than anything else had so far. She really did love her one and only nephew.

"So listen, Aunt Gracie. About the renter . . ." Matt cleared his throat, slapping her back now as if she were choking. "I know you said you wouldn't need any help, but—"

Footsteps approached, crunching over dry leaves. The closer the steps came, the faster Matt talked.

"The doctor said you're going to need help. Especially the next few days. Maybe longer. What if you fell? You could lay there for hours, and nobody would know. You could die and nobody would know. You need someone close by. Someone to help take care of you. And let's face it—my mom's not a caregiver. We all know that. You need someone who can help you up the stairs. Fix you food. Give you a bath. And that's not me. I love you, but I'm not giving you a bath."

Gracie finally managed to tug her face away from Matt's shoulder long enough to gasp in a deep breath. "Considering you just about suffocated me, yeah, I'd say you're not exactly caregiver material either."

Lucky for her she didn't need a caregiver at all. Which she was about to point out to Matt when he said, "So you understand then."

The back of Gracie's neck tingled. "Understand what?"

“Why I did what I did.”

The tingles grew sharper as Gracie held her nephew’s gaze. “What did you do?”

When a throat cleared behind her, Matt didn’t have to answer. She knew. “You little Benedict Arnold.” The back of Gracie’s neck no longer tingled. It blazed.

If Gracie had a will, she’d write Matt out of it first thing tomorrow. She never did care for her one and only nephew. “Look me in the eye right now and tell me the nice guy you rented my cottage to is *not* my ex-husband.”

Matt looked everywhere. The house. The maple tree. The snot stain on his shirt. Everywhere but her eyes. “He’ll take care of you.”

She shook her head.

“He still loves you.”

She shook her head harder.

“He won’t mind helping you out with a sponge bath?”

There weren’t enough pies in the world to smack her nephew in the face with at this moment.

“Please, Aunt Gracie. Just give him a chance.”

“A chance,” she scoffed. “Are you crazy? Hey, where are you going? You can’t leave me. Matt, don’t you dare—”

Her evil nephew dared, backing out of her reach. Gracie didn’t have time to stumble after him before two arms circled her from behind. When her knees buckled, she didn’t know if it was because of the pain in her right hip shooting down to her groin or the much-too-familiar voice speaking next to her ear.

“Don’t worry, babe, I’ve got you.”

Gracie squeezed her eyes shut. This couldn’t be happening. It didn’t make sense. Somebody call back the boys from the firehouse. What was Noah doing here?

And how on earth was she already back in his arms?

Gracie glared at the sky, grinding her teeth as she grumbled, “This is not what I meant when I asked you to bring back the zing.”