



Crazy Thing Called Love (Crooked Creek Ranch)

By Molly O'Keefe

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NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY NPR

In this poignant and deeply sensual new contemporary romance—perfect for readers of Susan Elizabeth Phillips and Rachel Gibson—Molly O'Keefe proves that lost loves don't have to stay lost forever.

Dallas TV morning show host Madelyn Cornish is poised, perfect, and unflappable, from her glossy smile to her sleek professionalism. No one knows that her iron will guards a shattered heart and memories of a man she's determined to lock out. Until that man shows up at a morning meeting like a bad dream: Billy Wilkins, sexy hockey superstar in a tailspin—still skating, still fighting, and still her ex-husband.

Now the producers want this poster child for bad behavior to undergo an on-air makeover, and Billy, who has nothing to lose, agrees to the project. It's his only chance to get near Maddy again, and to fight for the right things this time around. He believes in the fire in Maddy's whiskey eyes and the passion that ignites the air between them. This bad-boy heartbreaker wants a last shot to be redeemed by the only thing that matters: Maddy's love.

“Irresistible and satisfying . . . addictive and sexy romance at its best.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Susan Mallery

“Molly O’Keefe is a unique, not-to-be-missed voice in romantic fiction.”—*New York Times* bestselling author Susan Andersen

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Molly O’Keefe published her first Harlequin romance at age twenty-five and hasn’t looked back. She loves exploring each character’s road toward happily ever after. She’s won two *Romantic Times* Reviewers’ Choice awards and the RITA for Best Novella in 2010. Originally from a small town outside of Chicago, she now lives in Toronto, Canada, with her husband, two kids, and the largest heap of dirty laundry in North America.

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O’Keefe / CRAZY THING CALLED LOVE

chapter

1

Fourteen years later

Billy Wilkins sat on the bench, bone dry. He might as well have been wearing slippers. A freaking robe. All he could do was sit there and watch as the second-rate team he’d been traded to blew their shot at the play-offs.

If the coaches weren’t going to play him, all of it was totally useless—the skates, the pads, the stick in his hand—worthless. Just like him.

“Pull Leserd!” he shouted over the screaming in the Bendor Arena. “He’s done. That’s the fourth goal he’s let in in five minutes.”

But Coach Hornsby wasn’t listening. He never listened to what Billy yelled during the games. Hornsby wouldn’t even look at him, much less reply.

But that was Coach Hornsby. Stubborn, righteous, and probably deaf.

Billy waved off the water bottle one of the trainers offered him. No need to hydrate. He hadn’t even broken a sweat tonight.

And what was worse, worse than the dry pads, the clear visor, the body he’d recuperated back into prime shape only to have it sit unused on the bench, was that he didn’t care. He didn’t care that the coach didn’t

listen to him. Didn't care that the kid in the net was totally overwhelmed and the Mavericks' rally to get into the play-offs was going to die a pitiful death right here. Right now.

"If you stopped being an asshole, he might listen to you," said Jan Fforde, their injured starting goalie, his consonants blunted by his Swedish accent.

"Not much chance of that." Whether Billy was talking about being an asshole or their coach listening to him, he wasn't sure. Being an asshole was his way of life: it was why hockey teams had been paying his way for over sixteen years. The sport needed assholes and Billy was the best. Used to be anyway.

Until he landed in Dallas, with a coach who preached respect and integrity.

Someone should tell Hornsby that respect and integrity didn't win games. Didn't turn momentum. A good fight did that. Let Billy get out there and drop gloves with that big Renegade center, Churov, and then the game would turn around. The crowd that was booing them would cheer.

The Renegades, who were beating the Mavericks on their own ice, would have blood on their faces and they'd know their opponents had gone down swinging.

The Mavericks' first line, O'Neill, Blake, and Grotosky, surged back into Renegade ice, skating their hearts out. Blake wound up and hammered a slap shot that ricocheted off the post. A mob in front of the goal scrambled for the puck and everyone on the bench stood up screaming. A goal right now would tie the game and they'd have a shot in overtime.

"Come on!" Billy whispered, willing his fight into those young guys out there with the fast legs and the strong arms and barely managed talent. "Come—"

The buzzer silenced the crowd for a moment and then the few Boston Renegades fans in the arena roared.

The Mavericks were out.

Disheartened, silent, the team skated back toward the bench, knocking fists, defeat riding their young shoulders. This team had fought longer and harder than anyone had expected, keeping the play-off dream alive for a community that barely cared. Despite losing tonight, they'd fought like demons.

Hornsby was silent and Billy could think of a thousand better coaches. His grandma for one. And she was dead.

"Good effort, guys," Billy said, slapping shoulders. His teammates grunted, unsmiling.

Blake, their captain, finally led the team onto center ice to shake hands. Billy stood at the end, the only guy besides Fforde who hadn't seen ice time. Who hadn't felt the sweat and blood and heaving lungs of play. For a second the grief nearly took out his knees. It was a sucker punch that his career was going to end this way.

As he shook hands with the Renegades, who were about to go into the first round of the play-offs and get slaughtered by the defending champions, not a single one of them looked him in the face. It was salt in the wound.

Billy Wilkins, second-round draft pick sixteen years ago, was a non-fucking-issue.

Might as well be dead.

Bullshit, he thought, and his temper roared through him in a brush fire, burning lesser emotions into dust. Everything about this was bullshit.

Churov, the freakish Russian giant, was the last guy in line. As he skated past, barely touching Billy's outstretched hand, Billy—a good foot shorter and thirty pounds lighter, but blessed with a temper that leveled every playing field—coldcocked him. Snapped the big man's head back so hard Billy could see his third-world dental work.

For a moment, Churov wobbled in his skates, and Billy braced himself to be crushed, but then the big man went down on the ice with a thud.

The arena roared.

Victory was sweet but short-lived. Grisom, the hardworking Renegade captain, landed a right hook across Billy's face. Billy swung back, feeling the satisfying pop of nose cartilage under his fist. Someone wrapped him up, using his kidney as a punching bag. But out of the corner of his eye he saw that the Mavericks were skating back from the dressing rooms, dropping gloves and sticks, throwing off helmets, all their defeat melting into raw bloodlust.

Billy smiled before someone punched the back of his head and bells started to ring in his skull.

What he'd done to Churov was dirty. A cheap shot after the game was over, just the sort of thing that made the sports journalists go crazy. No doubt Billy would get suspended. That pussy Hornsby would probably send him to counseling or some shit.

But he didn't care about what was going to happen when this fight was over. Because for guys like Billy Wilkins, there would always be another fight.

An hour later, after the mob scene with the press in the locker room, he sat in front of Hornsby's desk, showered and changed, with Kleenex shoved up his nose to stop the blood from dripping on the collar of his shirt.

Billy arranged the ice packs on his knuckles while the coach paced the hardwood floor behind him.

Coming up in the rep leagues, Junior A's, and then the minors, half of Billy's coaches had been not just old-school hockey, but old-school Eastern Bloc hockey. Giant men with forests of hair in their ears, who kept bottles of vodka in their desks and would have bought Billy a steak dinner after the fight he'd just caused. And a hooker.

His first coach in the NHL, Georges St. Bleu, a French-Canadian force of nature, would have told the press that he was embarrassed and that steps would be taken to reprimand Billy. But behind the locker room door, he would have shaken Billy's hand, applauded him for knowing how to return pride to his defeated team.

But over the last fifteen years the league had changed. The last five especially. Concussions had changed the game. All this talk of taking the fighting out of the sport? These were not friendly times for guys like Billy.

Outside the big window to his left he could see the departing crowd. The few hundred stalwart hockey fans

left in Dallas stood on the sidewalk, hailing cabs, storing away their play-off excitement until next year.

Suckers, he thought. This team wouldn't get any closer to the cup next year, or the year after. Front office called it "rebuilding." Billy called it "being a shitty team."

"What were you thinking?" Hornsby asked. Billy would have rolled his eyes if they didn't hurt so bad. "You're suspended. You know that, right? You'll be out at least the first four games of next season. Maybe more. Barry wants to trade you."

"How is that any different from the end of this season?" Billy asked past his fat, cracked lip. Barry, the GM, had wanted to trade him practically since the moment he'd arrived. Billy had no idea why the hell they had brought him here in the first place.

Hornsby stopped pacing and the silence changed, got all loaded, like Billy had fallen into Hornsby's trap. Billy pressed one of his ice packs up to his lip, wishing he'd kept his mouth shut.

"You don't like sitting on the bench?" Hornsby asked questions like he was a six foot four, slightly balding Oprah.

"I don't like watching my team lose."

"And you think you would have stopped that?"

"Yes."

"By what? Fighting?"

"Maybe."

Hornsby sat down behind his desk, a sleek metal and glass table he kept annoyingly clean. Desks were supposed to be cluttered, covered in coffee cups and scouting reports. Hornsby clearly didn't read the NHL coach handbook.

"You know why I wanted you here?" Hornsby asked, adjusting his glasses up over the bump of his broken nose. Billy didn't like the guy, but he'd never have been able to trust him if it weren't for that nose. Men who'd never broken their noses shouldn't lead men who barely had cartilage left in their faces. It was a rule.

But then the guy went and ruined that broken nose with turtlenecks. Tonight it was a black one under a gray coat. Made him look like a sissy.

"Do you know why I worked so hard to convince Barry that an aging enforcer with more penalty minutes than shots on net needed to be a part of the team?"

"I have no idea, man," Billy said, twisting the toilet paper higher into his nose.

"I wanted a leader. Some experience on a young team."

"Yeah, well, put me on the ice and I'll lead the shit out of these guys."

“No, Billy. You’ll fight. You’ll shoot your mouth off, you’ll piss everyone off.”

“Sometimes that’s what a team needs.”

“Sure. Sometimes. But what I need all the time is someone who uses their brain, someone who’ll show these kids how to play their way out of a 3–1 deficit.”

Blood trickled down the back of Billy’s throat and he coughed it up, leaned forward, and spit it into the garbage can beside his feet. He’d learned at an early age how to walk the very fine line between rude and insulting, between disgusting someone and getting the crap kicked out of you. And spitting blood into Hornsby’s fancy garbage can rode that line pretty hard.

He looked right into Hornsby’s eyes so the guy could make no fucking mistake and said, “I’m not that guy.”

“You used to be.”

Billy laughed and wondered when. Because he’d missed it, entirely.

“I’ve watched you, Billy. And you know, you used to play like a high scorer with thug tendencies—somehow that balance changed over the years.”

Oh Jesus. This Oprah shit had to stop. “You want me to pay a fine or something for starting that fight? Do some community crap?”

“I want you to grow up and be the player I need.”

“I’ve got one year left on my contract, Hornsby. Keep me on the bench next year, let Barry trade me, do whatever you want, but I am who I am. Nothing’s changing that now.”

“That’s too bad, Billy.” Hornsby folded his hands over his lean stomach. “Most players wouldn’t want to go out that way.”

Billy’s temper snarled and spat and the urge to tip that desk right over was a tough one to control, especially since he wasn’t used to trying to control anything. “We done?”

Hornsby sighed. “Yep.”

Billy stood, turned, his kidneys throbbing, his eye swollen, and walked out of the office. The concrete hallways under and around the arena were still full of staff. Most of Hornsby’s minions shook their heads as they passed him, like they were so disappointed in him they could barely stand it.

Billy smiled real wide at each of them.

Mike Blake stepped out of the PT room, his eye swollen shut and already going black. Even with the eye, he was still a good-looking kid. Farm-raised somewhere in the hinterlands of Canada, Blake had the blond hair and blue eyes that women were interested in, and a cocky smile that sealed the deal.

Blake never went home alone.

“Hey, man,” Blake said, stopping in the doorway to button his shirt. He had to tilt his head sideways to see the buttons out of that busted-up eye. “How’s the nose?”

“Fine.” Billy yanked the Kleenex out of his nostrils, balling it in his fist. “How about the eye?”

“Doc said I need to have it checked out when the swelling goes down.”

“Ah, shit, man, that’s not right.”

Blake laughed. “I’ll live. That fight was the best part of the whole damn season. Hornsby give you a hard time?”

Billy shrugged.

“Look, we’re heading over to Crowbar tonight, it’d be—” Billy rejected the idea, shaking his head, before Blake could even get it out. “Come on, man, the guys—”

“Don’t need another fight.” And that’s what he felt like right now, the anxiety spinning his guts into a ball that wanted to put fist to face one more time.

“I don’t know about that. You should come.”

“Thanks, Blake. But I’m just gonna head home.” He honestly wished the kid would stop asking him to go out with the guys. He was so tired of refusing; it made him feel old. In fact, the only thing that would make him feel older would be actually going to the damn clubs.

“You know, if you weren’t living like a monk—”

Oh God, last thing he needed was a conversation about his sex life with the team slut. “Good night, Blake,” he said, and made his way to the locker room to grab his stuff. Security had cleared out the press a while ago, but somehow he wasn’t surprised to find Dominick Murphy lingering around.

“Thought I smelled something bad,” Billy said, grabbing his stuff from the locker. The insult was a weak one, but he just didn’t have it in him to try and match wits with Dom.

The air was thick with the slightly nacho chip odor of sweaty hockey pads. The equipment manager had switched on the fans, but modern technology just hadn’t solved the problem of stinky gear.

“It’s your jock,” Dominick said, sitting on the bench in front of Fforde’s locker.

Billy’s lip curled despite his best intentions. It was hard not to like Dominick.

“I’ve given you my quote.”

“What did Hornsby say? Is he fining you?”

“He’s buying me a steak dinner.”

“Somehow I doubt it.”

Billy sighed and pulled his duffel bag up over his shoulder. His kidneys didn't like the twist of his spine but he managed to swallow a wince. Dominick watched him through thick glasses. His salt and pepper hair was looking a lot more salty these days, and his beer belly had a good thirty years' experience.

Dominick was freelance, a hired pen, usually for Sports Illustrated, sometimes Esquire and Rolling Stone. As far as sports journalists went, they didn't get any better than Dominick. He could make you look like a hero in less than ten words. Of course, he could publicly castrate you with just as few.

And for some reason, the guy liked Billy.

Maybe because they were both dinosaurs. And dinosaurs had to stick together.

"You want to get a drink?" Dom asked. "Tell me a little more about that fight?"

"I'd rather let the Renegades have another shot at my kidneys."

Dom smiled and heaved himself to his feet. That beer belly could pass for a pregnancy from the side. Truly a commitment to poor health.

"I'll take it easy on you, Billy."

Billy didn't think much about his feelings. Except anger, which he made a study of. He was a professor of rage. The rest he ignored, but tonight it was hard to pretend not to feel anything about the sad state of his life.

Which was the only reason he opened his mouth and asked: "Why you so interested in me? Lots of guys go out the way I am, injured and old, sitting on a bench. Why you want to buy me drinks?"

"Because the best fighter in the league gets traded to a coach who's leading the charge for change in the NHL. Hornsby has supported every anti-fighting rule that the league recommends."

"So?"

"So? What's he supposed to do with you?"

Hornsby was probably right now cleaning out his garbage can and wondering the same damn thing.

"Nothing," Billy said and it was so much the truth it depressed him. He waved good-bye to Dominick over his shoulder, relieved that Dom was gentleman enough to let him go without further hounding.

The season was over. No early morning training to keep him honest anymore. The off-season stretched in front of him, a spring and summer pleasantly empty. His boat down on Padre Island was gassed up and ready to go. Maybe he'd finally teach his buddy Luc how to fish. Tomorrow he'd think about that.

But tonight loomed ahead of him, endless with its darkness and recriminations. Regrets came out with the moon, looking for their pound of flesh.

"I need a drink," he muttered.

He thought about picking up a woman. Someone soft, with sweet-smelling skin. Someone who would

whisper all the right things. He tugged on his ear, his fingers brushing the thick ridge of scar tissue that curled from the corner of his lip halfway across his cheek.

There were women who liked the scar. Who had expectations of what sex would be like with a man like him. And usually he could go with that particular flow. But playing the marauder in bed wasn't something he wanted to do anymore.

Not since he'd seen Maddy.

The thought of her, the memory of her in that hallway three months ago, made him suck in a breath, like he'd taken a fist to the stomach. The shock on her face fading slowly to horror at the sight of him, just as he was fighting back a smile, the urge to run at her, throw his arms around her . . . ah, it gutted him every time he thought of it.

And he'd thought of it plenty over these past months.

She'd come out of nowhere like a lightning bolt illuminating how dark his life had become. And it was pitch black.

He'd run into her at the opening night party for the Crooked Creek Spa. Some friends of his owned the resort and Maddy had been there to do a story. Running into her had been an accident. An unexpected gift. He'd only been in Dallas for a few months at that point, and he hadn't even known she was in the city, let alone that she hosted a big-deal morning TV show.

She was famous, his Maddy. Accomplished and respected and more beautiful than he had words for.

And she had taken one look at his ugly mug and run away. Left him in that hallway, feeling the shame of the past like fire over his skin.

As a rule Billy didn't believe in fate, but having her come back into his life when it was at its very darkest, that seemed important. Like something he shouldn't ignore.

Something he didn't want to ignore.

So he'd watched her show every morning for a month. Studied her face on his big screen, marveling at the hard stamp of her beauty. Parts of the girl he'd known were missing—the wild curly hair, those full womanly hips that she'd despaired of and he'd adored with unholy love. She'd gotten her teeth fixed and changed her name.

He'd grown up with and been married to Madelyn Baumgarten.

But the sparkling intelligent whiskey eyes, the laugh that could turn away every black cloud, those long legs and strong arms he still remembered wrapped around him—those parts were there.

He'd tried to contact her through the studio, but she hadn't returned his messages, and after a while he stopped trying, and a little while later it had started to hurt to watch her. It stung until he'd decided to turn off the TV and pretend like he'd never seen her.

And his life . . . it just got darker. This was his worst season of hockey, his career was in the toilet, and he

was alone. Not the kind of alone he'd been for the last fourteen years, since she got into that elevator in Detroit, but alone.

Down to his gut alone.

Maddy was out there in the city somewhere. And the mere thought of her smothered the worst of his instincts. There weren't any more nameless women asking him to do terrible things to them. There hadn't been since he'd run into Maddy and been reminded that he used to be a better man. That he used to want to be better.

Punching open the door to the players' parking garage, he felt the wet heat of the Dallas spring night wrap around him like a slimy towel, and his white shirt immediately stuck to him. Fforde kept making fun of him for buying such cheap clothes. With his salary he could buy the kind of material that would never stick to him, no matter how hot it got. But he didn't give a shit about clothes.

What do you give a shit about? He could practically hear Hornsby's voice.

Nothing, he realized; hadn't for a long time. And if he was bored and slightly sickened by that fact—well, too bad.

He was Billy Wilkins and this was what he'd done with his life.

Users Review

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