

A psychology professor, training for the Olympic weightlifting team, pushes his luck with steroids and coeds. Facing stroke recovery and misconduct charges, he finds, with the help of a young woman, that life offers more than Olympic gold.

MISTER LUCKY

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# **MISTER LUCKY**

**Roger Poppen**

## Chapter 1: You Got the Job

"Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

After perfunctory opening statements, President Jimmy Carter, in his slow, Georgia Piedmont accent, announced, "I have given notice that the United States will not attend the Moscow Olympics unless the Soviet Union forces are withdrawn from Afghanistan before February twentieth."

Robert Rochmann, watching the flickering image on the small television screen in his hospital room, clicked the remote control. "Well, that's that. The bastard. You know the Ruskies aren't going to leave in a month."

"It could be worse. You could've made the team." Bill Chappell, Rochmann's best friend, roommate, and all-around expert on the good things in life, could be counted on to put matters in perspective.

"Screw you," Rochmann said.

Chappell laughed. "Think about it. Suppose you hadn't torn your knee. You're doing your lifetime best lifts, maybe even looking at a national record at the Olympic trials this spring, and President Peanut pulls this. You'd be another Lee Harvey Oswald."

"Just shut the fuck up, will you!" But it was true. If Rochmann wanted to feel even worse, he could imagine rounding into peak condition only to have the Olympic rug jerked out from under him by this sanctimonious peanut farmer. He didn't want to think about it, but Chappell was relentless.

"This actually works to your advantage, you know, Rocko my boy. The '84 Olympics are going to be in Los Angeles, right? You know the Commies aren't going to turn the other cheek. They'll boycott us right back and," he shot his fist into the air in a triumphal salute, "it'll leave the medals available for mere mortals who weren't born in the Baltic."

"You don't know that."

"C'mon Rocky. You don't have to be Jeanne Dixon to know the Soviets aren't going to let this slide. Wouldn't it be great to actually

*ROGER POPPEN*

think about winning a medal instead of getting your ass kicked by a bunch of guys whose names look like a rack of Scrabble tiles?"

Rochmann had to smile despite his ill humor. "Bill, I can't even think about next week, much less 1984. I've dropped out of grad school twice now to train for Olympic trials. Maxed out my student loans. I don't know how I'm going to pay for this..." He waved his hand at the austere hospital room. "I might have to go out to Seattle and stay with my sister, get some shit job, I don't know, a waiter or something, 'til I pay off some debts."

"Yeah, you could take up bodybuilding. Be a cocktail waiter in a gay bar out there. Rake in the tips."

Rochmann glared at his tormenter but said nothing. The funny man seemed determined to have the last word.

Chappell poured some water from the metal pitcher on the bedside table into a paper cup, offered it to Rochmann, who shook his head, then drank it himself. "Rocko, look, I know you're bummed right now. But in the overall scheme of things, it's your lucky day. Arthroscopic surgery these days is miraculous; if you were a pro footballer you'd be in the game this Sunday."

"Football season's over."

"You know what I mean. We can start rehab right away. But take it slow, build up ligament and tendon strength. We know you can pile on muscle power when the time comes. I'll be starting my residency and will have access to any new anabolic steroid that comes down the pike. Who knows what we'll have in the next four years? Maybe we can even close the steroid gap with the Commies."

"Bill, you're not listening. It'll take all my stash to pay for this 'miracle surgery.' I'll need to get a job just to eat. Besides, I'm almost thirty; I think the old bod is saying it's had enough."

"Rocko. You're just a kid. Remember Schemansky. Forty years old, two back surgeries, and he takes bronze in Tokyo."

"Yeah, well, Schemansky was from the planet Krypton. Never be anyone like that again."

Chappell tapped his chest with his fist. "Ski had it here, Rock. And you do too. You want it, you can find a way to get it. You only took a leave of absence from grad school--they'll welcome you back

## *MISTER LUCKY*

with open arms. Do your dissertation; that's all you have left, right? Then get a cushy teaching job somewhere that'll leave time to train. You can always find more loans for tuition. I'll cover food and rent for a while. It'll work out fine."

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Two-and-a-half years after Carter's speech, the Soviets were bogged down in Afghanistan and the new actor-president's 'evil empire' rhetoric was bound to keep them in a surly mood. Los Angeles was certain to remain Commie-free.

Robert Rochmann, Ph.D., was in upstate New York, making his way around an outdoor buffet table at the reception for new faculty at Westerville State University. This ritual allowed the administration bigwigs to get together and look over the newbies, reminisce about the good old days, and offer sage advice.

Rochmann was uncomfortable at such affairs, people standing around talking about Reaganomics or liberation theology or the New York Rangers--as if he gave a damn. Besides, he had to cut his workout short in order to get there on time. It probably was only the first of many compromises, but after a year of penury, teaching part-time at a community college, this position paying a living wage was too good to pass up. Schemansky may have won medals in four Olympics but he had to work at some crummy jobs. Rochmann would settle for one Olympics and a good job with health benefits. Besides, there was loads of free food in front of him and he couldn't let it go to waste.

After his third trip to the buffet, Rochmann stood at the corner of the patio with the one person he'd met earlier, Susan Koenig, the other new assistant professor in the Psychology Department. She was going on and on about her research. Maybe she saw him as a competitor and wanted to impress him, or maybe she felt as uncomfortable as he did and reacted by talking about what she knew best--her dissertation. Rochmann felt like saying, hey, you got the job, this isn't an interview. Instead, he just nodded randomly and munched the tiny sandwiches piled on his paper plate. A cloying

*ROGER POPPEN*

lemon scent hung in the air and he looked around for citronella candles so they could move away from them. It must be Susan's perfume he concluded; at least they were safe from mosquitoes.

His neck muscles tightened from tilting his head up to look Susan in the eye, or what could be seen of her eyes peering from behind thick lenses. She was a couple inches taller than him. Everyone was a couple of inches taller, or five or ten. Susan was maybe late-twenties, but her face foretold middle-age. She did have pretty lips, full, nicely shaped, but way too much lipstick, garish red, like the Soviet flag flapping in the breeze. He dropped his gaze to her breasts that heaved as she talked. Her white satin blouse was one of those big-shouldered, billowy things that camouflaged what lay beneath.

One of the things he missed most about parting company with Bill Chappell was the women. Tall, voluble, good-looking, Chappell's picture appeared in the dictionary under 'babe magnet.' And his girlfriends always had a friend for his pal, Rocky. Rochmann could hold his own after he met someone--women often were intrigued by his compact, muscular body--but he never had mastered that first hurdle. His year teaching at the community college had been lacking in more than just money.

His eyes continued downward. Susan's blouse was tucked in bunches at her waist, giving her a bulky appearance. She probably had a flabby butt and thighs under that long skirt. Probably never exercised, just sat at her desk, mailing out questionnaires.

"Do you ever do any kind of athletics?" he asked.

"What?" Her eyebrows shot up and the Soviet flag stopped in mid-wave.

"Athletics? Athletes," he said, suddenly aware of how strange this question sounded in the middle of her description of statistical significance.

"Why?" There was a wary look on her face.

Why indeed? He had to come up with something. "I think I read about a study that employed a survey similar to yours with female athletes."

She looked interested. "Oh really. Who did it?"



*MISTER LUCKY*

"I can't recall; it's not my area. It might have been in a review article in *Psych Bulletin*." He scrunched his face as though trying to recall the details.

"*Psych Bulletin*? Recently? I must have missed it. I'd love to know the reference if you come across it," she said with a note of respect.

"Of course," he said.

"Are you Robert Rochmann?" asked a low and breathy voice behind him.

He turned and looked straight into a pair of violet eyes, a color that should appear unnatural but fit somehow with the rest of the face. The woman's thick, black brows arched quizzically, producing slight creases in her forehead. It was a face of an older woman from which a younger beauty looked out. Most striking was her hair, white hair that rippled and cascaded down to her shoulders. She looked like an Eighteenth-Century French courtesan whose powdered wig had exploded, curls jutting out like sprung clockworks.

"Robert Rochmann?" she repeated.

"Uh, yes," he said. He turned toward her but made no follow-up inquiry of her name, no introduction to Susan, no question of how she knew his name. He just stood gawking at this extraordinary sight.

"I'm Nina Feiffer," she said, her smile broadening. She clasped his forearm and tugged gently, spilling the two olives that remained on his plate. She said to Susan, over his shoulder, "Do you mind if I steal him for a few minutes?" Susan just blinked behind her thick glasses, mouth open, and said nothing while Rochmann was led off by the arm, shuffling to avoid tripping on the woman's heels.

She dropped his arm and he walked beside her, wordless, still holding his empty plate. She smiled and greeted people in several conversational clumps; they smiled greetings in return. Rochmann nodded as if he knew them. She stopped when they had gone beyond the others, onto the green baize lawn next to a wall of closely trimmed hedges, like the bunker of a giant billiard table. A faint balsam fragrance swirled around her.

She said, with great cordiality, "I've been looking forward to meeting you, Robert."

*ROGER POPPEN*

He regained his voice. "Well, it's nice to meet you. Ms. Feiffer? Dr. Feiffer? Are you on the faculty?"

"Please, call me Nina. My husband is Dr. Feiffer, Marv Feiffer, Professor and Chairman of the Anthropology Department." She recited this as if giving name, rank and serial number. "I'm an artist," she continued with more verve. "That's why I wanted to meet you. I understand that you're a weightlifter. You certainly look solid." She stepped back and looked him up and down.

"Um, yes, I'm trying to get into competition shape. I've got a long ways to go." He wondered how she knew he was a weightlifter.

"You compete! That's fascinating! Do you know that fellow, what's his name, you know, sometimes they show weightlifters flexing their muscles on television? And he made that dreadful barbarian movie?"

Rochmann grimaced. "You must mean Arnie, Arnold Schwarzenegger. No, I'm not a physique--guy."

He almost said 'physique faggot,' an epithet used for his iron game cousins. If one thought about it, in the overall arc of the universe, hoisting two hundred kilos overhead was of no more intrinsic value than pumping up a twenty-inch bicep. But all that posing in front of a mirror, the dieting, the depilating, it was all just so girly.

He said, "I'm a weightlifter. I don't do the bodybuilding, posing stuff. That's something totally different."

"Really? What do you mean?" she asked. Her violet eyes fixed on his in a manner both unnerving and captivating.

"I do Olympic lifting. The kind they do in the Olympics, where you lift the weights overhead. I work for strength and speed, not size of muscles. Physique guys train completely different, pumping up each muscle for maximum bulk. All show and no go."

"But it must take a lot of muscle to lift those weights over your head," she said.

"Well, yes. But we don't do anything to build unnecessary bulk. Like biceps." He chuckled and flexed his arm in a mock pose. "You can always tell a weightlifter from a bodybuilder--no biceps. An

*MISTER LUCKY*

Olympic lifter looks like a tyrannosaurus rex, all legs and butt and little bitty arms."

"Frankly, I think some of those fellows you see on television are grotesque," she said, as if immediately converted to his point of view. "All brown and bulbous and shiny. Come to think of it, I think I have seen some Olympic lifting on television, too. They tend to be huge men, don't they, with barrel bellies, like sumo wrestlers? You don't look like that either." She looked at him cautiously, as if he might suddenly inflate.

"Yeah, when lifting's shown on TV, it's always the heavyweights. Vassily Alexyev weighs about 360. TV goes for the bizarre. We have all different weight classes, like boxing, from 56 kilos on up, though they never show us little guys. I'm in the 82-and-a-half kilo class, 181 pounds." He stopped, suddenly self-conscious, going on like this to a woman he'd just met. "I'm sorry, this must be really boring. What about you? You said you were an artist?"

"Oh no, it's not boring. I find it fascinating. I always like to learn new things." She laughed, shaking her white curls and flashing blue feather earrings that matched the eye of a peacock tail feather that was pinned to the breast of her coarse-knit black sweater. Full breasts. She stared over his shoulder for a moment, then spoke. "And, yes I'm an artist. Mostly painting. Some ceramics and sculpture when the muse and materials come together. Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

He probably knew as much about art as she knew about weightlifting, but at least he could emulate the same interest she had shown. "I don't think I've ever met a real artist," he said. "What kind do you do? I mean abstract, or pop art, or what?"

"Well, I call it 'emotional figurative.' It's not easy to explain. I'd like to show you my work and explain it in context. Could you come to my studio sometime, say, next Saturday, and I'll show you around?"

"Uh, I don't know," he replied. "I'm not an artist. I can't tell impressionism from expressionism."

"Or realism from surrealism," she said with a wide smile that revealed a slight gap between her front teeth. "Please come. I think

*ROGER POPPEN*

you'll find it interesting, as a psychologist and an athlete. And I'm sure you can help my work. What would be a good time for you? How about early afternoon?"

He could not refuse such directness. "Well, I work out around noon on Saturday. So it'd have to be later. Sometime around five?"

"Perfect!" she said, again with that melodic laugh. "Let me tell you how to get there."

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