

Sample Chapter



NO MORE LADY WRESTLERS

"YOU GOTTA PICTURE THIS. Opening scene. Car pulls up outside impressive office building. Top car—Roller or Merc. Smart businessman—you know—grey edges, pinstripe, alligator briefcase—gets out and heads toward building."

I pictured it, the mental image coming the way they always did in those days, Cinemascope ratio, Technicolor, Dolby sound. The car I made a Mercedes, the pinstripes blue, but the briefcase was plain leather, for I was only a bit of a Greenie back then—just enough to spare wild animals though not cattle. The businessman walked away from camera, across the wide fake marble forecourt of a thrusting glass-and-steel tower.

"Cut to close-up in telephone box. Hand with black leather glove, dials a number..."

My mind made the cut, just as instructed, except that I made the glove brown because black was too much of a cliché.

"Cut back to back to businessman. Hurrying. Then...beep, beep, beep. His telephone pager."

The businessman has the pager on his belt. When it beeps, he pauses and reaches for the response switch.

"He presses the response button and..."

Pull the focus back into the telephone box. The gloved hand puts the telephone back in the cradle and, immediately... "...BLAM!!!...Up he goes. One exploded businessman! What a bewdy!"

The speaker was Stephen Leighton, who was a friend of mine, more or less—generally less—and he would have been a splendid entrepreneur had he not been so bad at it. What I mean by this fairly nonsensical statement is that Steve Leighton possessed all the necessary attributes in abundance; tall and very good-looking, a pleasant confident air about him and with his baby-blue eyes and winning smile, you just couldn't help but believe him. Trouble was the sort of things he tried to get you to believe. At that moment, I had fallen off my barstool in the Albion Hotel, in an uncontrollable fit of laughter at his latest offering.

"It's not meant to be a comedy!" Steve muttered in disgust.

"Can't be taken seriously either," I gurgled.

But there was one thing to be said for Steve Leighton—he was persistent.

"Look, it'll work. Think of the images. Important men, beep, beep and up they go, all over the city. In the board room, in the dunny. Fantastic! I thought you'd love it."

"Oh, I do. I do!"

“So, what we want you to do is write a screenplay...”

Just when I had managed to pick myself off the floor and regained some sort of control, he doubled me up again. Finally he had to grab me by the collarbones and try to shake solemnity into me.

“Hey, man. Come on. This is big. Real big!”

Steve knew and used all the up-market jargon, called famous people he’d never met by their first names, and even had a reasonable pedigree—a father who had built a nice little empire from scratch in the window display and film set business. So he did have a few connections in the old school tie brigade—you needed to bear that in mind even though they probably had as little respect for him as I did.

I was one of those freaked-out Vietnam veterans you hear so much about, turned pacifist and anti-war protester, and by 1980, when all this happened, a fossil left over from the Age of Hippies, complete with middle-aged spread, beard and long hair. I even had a shaggy dog, named Jasper, who followed me everywhere and was a bit of a local legend for the faithful way he waited outside every pub and pool hall in Carlton. Experience had abandoned me to a set of anti-materialist values that made it almost impossible for me to make a decent living. When my peers—the vibrant student radicals—had successfully sold out, worked for the multinationals and mortgaged themselves into suburban oblivion, I was left behind, one of the few who truly believed.

The only way open was to become a writer, although certainly not a successful one, and I eked out an existence of sorts writing scenarios for people who wished to exploit the 10BA system, a legal tax avoidance scheme instituted by the government to try and finance Australia’s fledgling film industry, and which was ripe to be thoroughly rorted.

“And who, may I ask, is this ‘we’?” I inquired skeptically, upright, back on my stool, a serious expression thrust up front.

“Can’t tell you.”

“Why on earth not?”

“Too dangerous for you to know.”

“Naturally. Go on.”

“So, a screenplay. Well, just a short treatment first. How someone starts putting bombs in these things.”

In the Public Bar of the Albion Hotel, where crims and cops met like old friends, where radical student groups gathered to plot the overthrow of decadent Western Society, where a smoke never meant Benson and Hedges and coke certainly didn’t come in bottles or cans, Steve Leighton dared to produce his pocket pager and had the temerity to place it openly on the bar. This was when they were relatively new, and called ‘beepers’.

“Then,” Steve enthused regardless, “all they do is dial the precoded number from a phone box miles away and wham-o—another assassination! It’ll be a ripper!”

I groaned. It really was time to take a more serious view of the matter, or else there would be no end to it.

“Look, Steve. It’s a gem, I love it, but it won’t work as a movie. And I don’t write that sort of garbage anyway.”

“Has to be a movie. And anyway, you won’t actually have to write the screenplay. There’s an angle.”

“Always a bloody angle...” I murmured.

Steve now leaned closer as if drawing me into a great conspiracy and the really silly thing about it was that he was doing exactly that.

"Listen. Some of the biggest electrical companies in the world are locked into the beeper market. All we do is leak your treatment and they'll pay us a fucking fortune not to make the movie. Bulk profits! Easy!"

I allowed a dramatic pause.

"Steve. There's a law against this sort of activity. It's called blackmail or extortion, or some such bloody thing."

"But they'd never do us to the fuzz. The bad publicity would kill 'em. It'll work."

"It might, but I won't. Steve, you don't get to be as impoverished as I am by being dishonest, you know. I have principles. And this is way over the top..."

And it was just then that—timed to perfection by the Sound Effects Department—Steve's pager went off—beep, beep, beep, and, completely unheeding of his own reality, Steve simply seized it and looked around for the nearest telephone as he switched it off. In my mind, I exploded him on the spot.

"Boom!" I roared.

For the second time in a matter of minutes, I laughed so much that I fell off my bar stool, but Steve Leighton, who had shed his sense of humour because he wanted so badly to be taken seriously, could only look back shaking his head in puzzlement as he advanced upon the red phone on the wall.

I suppose that I should have been more grateful, for the incident provided me with one of those small comforts that you need to help you grope your way through life. Thereafter, whenever I was in the presence of someone whose mobile phone started beeping, my mind immediately detonated them on the spot—it made me one of the few people in the world able to smile at such moments.

That was Steve—a man of moments. When his father died, the mother and elder brother took over the business and squeezed him into no more than a Sales Rep role. Miffed, he branched out on his own, forming a partnership with a trendy American and together they staged a couple of Rock Festivals and it was all just beginning to look good when the Yank decamped with the funds. Steve swallowed his pride and retreated back into the family business where he worked hard and well to pay off his debts. Now he had bought a new three-piece suit, a bargain-basement BMW, linked up with some film producer money, and was ready to launch himself back into the fray.

Undeterred by my lukewarm reception to "Beep", it only took him two weeks to come up with the next proposal. With a breathless excitement, he arrived one night on the doorstep of the cracking gothic terrace house in Park Street that Jasper and I and Jasper's fleas, shared with a rather grumpy bloke named Hayden. Steve pressed into my hand a glossy paperback book with a garish purple cover that a woman had written about her life in prose as tortured as her existence.

"You'll really love this one," Steve insisted.

With morbid fascination I skimmed my way through it in a single night and hated and disbelieved every word of it.

It was about a Lady Wrestler. True story apparently. She came from Hungary where, so the story went, female wrestling was a serious and respected sport. You could win gold medals for it. Forced to flee the Soviet invasion in the fifties, she came to Australia to establish this cultural paragon in the various nightclubs of St Kilda. The story was supposedly about her struggle to bring respectability to the arena, except that it wasn't. It was rather more about her three marriages to men all considerable younger than herself,

each of whom seemed to become bored with her at just those times when she ran into financial difficulties. Yet she loved them all, with their fine young bodies and tight bottoms.

Steve was on the telephone for the verdict next morning.

"How was it?"

"It's always pleasant for a creative spirit to have it reaffirmed that he is not the worst writer in the world, Steve."

"Yeah, all right, so she ain't no PhD.lit. What about the story? Isn't it the greatest!"

"My astonishment is immeasurable."

"Do you want to meet her?" he enthused.

"Certainly not!"

He brought her around the following night.

I occupied the front downstairs room of the house while the rest of the tragically dilapidated building was filled with the trappings of Hayden's business—building film sets and props and editing equipment for his shoe-string movie enterprises. I was entirely confined to that front room, where there was just enough space to fit my littered desk, eternally unmade bed, the tattered old armchair that belonged to Jasper and cluttered bookshelves—there was no wardrobe, the clothes belonged on the floor. Shelley, who, only when it was completely unavoidable, spent nights there from time to time, remarked on how it was incredible that a person with so few possessions could make them appear as such an abominable mess. She also commented that the reason I smoked a pipe was to cover up the other more awful smells in the room. Sexual gratification demanded toleration of such criticisms.

You entered the house through the creaking gate, past a garden patch where every known noxious weed fought out a mighty struggle for domination, through a heavy door lined with cracks and peeling paint, into the hallway that was forever dim and where great shards of plaster had cracked off the walls. Since the door to my room was placed at the immediate right, my visitors rarely ventured any further into the house, but if they had they would have passed Hayden's room and then entered a grim sitting room where no one ever sat except Hayden, hunched gloomily watching television as indeed he was doing that night. Further on was a kitchen where no one ever cooked—it reminded you how the sculleries in medieval citadels must have looked—and a concrete bathroom reminiscent of army shower blocks. The dungeon-like atmosphere struggled on upstairs where the rooms were entirely given over to Hayden's film editing and set building facilities. On the landing of the stairs, a mad robot that had once tried to take over the world in a short student film and a bloodied effigy of a witch that had been hung and butchered in a play at La Mama, engaged in a surreal embrace and gazed gloweringly down upon the visitor.

"Eet izz a verry interezting place," this visitor remarked with a shiver as Steve Leighton steered her in.

She was a spectacular sight herself. A female wharfie complete with bulging muscles, bottle blonde hair ballooning above a face lined, pitted and scarred with her ruined life on which inch-thick make-up made little impression. Her low-cut dress in vivid pink revealed giant breasts adorned with tattoos as were her arms about which she loosely draped a fox fur stole. Her perfume easily won the battle for pollutive dominance against her Black Russians and my Dr Pat. Her heavily accented voice, sounding rather like a bulldozer trying to start on a cold morning, menaced every sensibility to which I might have clung.

I stole a chair from the kitchen for her to sit on—Steve had to sit on the bed—and we got down to business.

"You muzz underztand zat in my country vooman vestling iz a very rezpected zport. They have international competition. They give gold medal, juzz like Olympic Game. Zo you muzz imagine my sooprize when Zovietz invade and I flee to thizz country vere my profezzion enjoyz no zuch recognizement."

It was hard to imagine anything surprising her. I glanced sideways at Steve but he was too busy looking pleased with himself.

"Zo I try to change eet. In the nightclub, vee try to educate you people about our fine zport. I find many fine girl who fight like tiger. Iz very zucezzful. I have zuch hard time, but zuch good time. Iz all there, in my book."

It was. It was. But somehow it didn't have the same credibility without the accent.

"Yes, I found it most interesting," I lied out of pure cowardice.

"It'll be great," Steve said breathlessly, "Got everything. They'll flock to see the movie in droves."

"If you don't mind, I'd like a word with my...er...manager, in private," I said, getting out of my chair and bringing the book along with me. Jasper looked up frantically from his chair; he'd been sleeping with one eye firmly on this abominable intruder, but now he knew he was going to need both.

"Of courzz, of courzz," she said with a wave, and then, when the shaggy cushion in the armchair showed animation, cried. "Vait, vait! Ze dog. Doe zee bite?"

In the act of propelling Steve out into the hall, I paused.

"Only if you try to steal my books," I joked.

I carefully closed the door behind me and then, at the foot of the stairs, it was me who savaged Steve Leighton.

"Have you read this, Steve?"

"I looked it over... Terrific story. Really original."

"That it is. Especially the way it portrays St Kilda's nightclub owners and pimps and criminal figures as such a bunch of universally nice, decent chaps, and the lady wrestlers are depicted as such upright pillars of morality."

"Poetic license, mate. Think of this woman, battling for respectability in the midst of the bleak underbelly of the society..."

"There's nothing poetic about this pile of slaughtered prose. And nor is there the slightest suggestion here that someone might have been exploiting someone. No one will believe it."

"No one has to believe it. They just have to go and see it. All those near naked women, the criminal world seeking to take over...Think about the posters alone..."

"I won't do it, Steve."

"Come on. Be a bit broad-minded. Show a bit of originality."

"Steve, Hollywood has been perpetrating the myth that whores and slime-bags are good-hearted souls and romantic figures since Mae West wiggled for her first snigger. The world has grown up a bit since then."

"Which only proves the formula works."

"Steve. It's not on. A no-no. Include me out."

There was a pause while that sank in, and then Steve grinned broadly, in a way that chilled me right to the marrow.

"Alright. Fair enough. If that's how you feel, who am I to argue? So now, why don't you go in there and tell her how her life story of which she's so proud offends your arty-farty sensibilities. But bear in mind that she's a five times world champion in the ring."

I had him by the throat at this stage.

"If I get out of this with any of my arms and legs unbroken, mate, you can bet you won't," I snarled.

But the trouble with being a bully is that there's always a bigger bully around someplace—possibly quite nearby. We returned to the so-called conference.

"Of courzz, uzuually I leev theez matter to my manager, but today he iz not vell. Not proper vork for a lady I theenk, but zumtime there are theeng vee muzz do, yar?"

I could only eye Steve bleakly.

"Okay, zo. I theenk no more than thirtee thouzun iz fair, no?"

On the bed, Steve turned noticeably pale, whereas I had to try and laugh it off.

"Oh no, far too much. A first draft script will cost you only five thousand dollars."

She stared. Steve buried his face in his hands. Only then did I realize the misunderstanding, when it was far too late.

"Cozz me? You vant me to pay you? But vot of the right to my book..."

"I'm a writer, not a producer. Producers pay for rights. Writers get paid to write..."

Even I had trouble following that, and she certainly couldn't have. Her face turned very red and her make-up began to crack like the pavement in an earthquake, and indeed the room seemed to shake as she began to rise out of her chair.

"I no pay you! You pay me! You try to rob me!"

Her fist came down on the desktop and everything on it bounced six inches in the air. So did I and my chair, and Jasper, who went hurtling under the bed as he always did in thunderstorms.

"You lure rezpectable vooman like me to thizz awful place to try to take advantage..."

Steve was off the bed, braver than I would have expected, trying to placate her.

"Hey, hey. Just a little misunderstanding..."

She grabbed him and threw him across the room, over the bed against the bookshelves and he went down in an avalanche of dislodged books.

I was trying to get out of my chair, probably to jump out the window and flee, but she upended the desk on top of me and it pinned me to the floor. Overhead, her breasts swung mightily with rage—perhaps she would have been worth the admission fee after all.

"I make you zorry! I make you never forget!"

In the sitting room, the ruckus penetrated Hayden's absorption in 'Get Smart', and he hauled himself out of his chair, opened the door to the hall and bellowed.

"What the hell's going on out there!"

In response, she let fly with the Complete Works of William Shakespeare but Hayden got the door closed again before The Bard crunched on the other side. He locked the door and presumably returned to the latest doings of Kaos.

Meanwhile at the sharp end, Jasper regarded the litter of books and humans from his haven under the bed, and a million years of canine responsibility for the wellbeing of humankind overwhelmed him. Out he stalked, his impressive fangs up front and his deepest growl rumbling in his throat, and that did the job all right. Man's best friend was never more convincing as he sent our tormentor shrieking into the street.

"Mad dogz," she cried, "Buzztardz!" as her heels clacked away on the pavement. We weren't entirely sure that it was Jasper to whom she was referring.

Somehow we survived with only minor cuts and bruises, and I lived to tell the tale in the Albion Hotel next evening to my little group of closest friends, amongst whom Steve

Leighton was conspicuously absent. There was Hayden and Shelley, Judd and Sad Lisa, all in paroxysms of mirth.

"No more Lady Wrestlers!" they chorused.

Jasper, at his station outside the door, growled amen to that.



"There's this guy. Jack Clayton. An underwater cameraman. He was filming when this big shark bit his leg off. He kept right on filming and when they got him back on the boat, his mate took up the camera. You see him lying on the deck, leg off at the knee, bleeding all over..."

"Yes, I've seen the footage, Steve."

"He wants to make a movie."

"No more Lady Wrestlers."

"No, no. This is fair dinkum."

"Steve, if the film's already been made, no one needs a writer."

"No no. Jack wants to produce a different film. It's about a mate of his. Great story. Sunken treasure. Crooks and thieves. Sharks and lost galleons. And its all true."

"No more Lady Wrestlers."

"Look, there's this book. Jack's bought the rights. All paid up. Just read it, and then make up your mind."



Writers are notoriously slow learners, especially when it comes to learning from their own mistakes. The book was called, "*THE GOLDEN DRAGON*" by one Roy Barton. The cover complete with storm wracked galleon, pirates, treasure spilling from chest, diver battling sharks, the works. Frighteningly crass. I read it late into the night sitting up in bed in Shelley's pleasant, tidy flat, but I wasn't there entirely because my own quarters were still uninhabitable—we'd been a three nights a week arrangement for several years now.

When I remember Shelley, I have visions of bells and jolly green giants you can ride to the movies. She came from San Jose and, unlike Dione Warwick, wasn't interested in knowing the way back, and maybe it was because LA was a great big freeway that she fell in love with Melbourne's trams. She was anything but the blonde and busty California girl that the Beach Boys eulogized, and my permanent image is that of her meandering in the hallway, head down, hand to chin, face lost under her dark brown fringe, deep in thought, stretch jeans somehow baggy, the white T-shirt with Leuning's Innocent Bystander between the outline of her constantly prominent nipples—she didn't even bother to own a bra.

She got a degree in Silicon Chippery from UCLA and worked programming for a weapons company until she blew her security rating by bouncing a brick off the head of a LAPD cop at an Animal Liberation demo. She fled with her druggy boyfriend to New Zealand, got a job (I always suspected she sold military secrets to Greenpeace), bought a house in Christchurch, and then finally came alone to Melbourne for a week to check out a Hippie Festival. That was when she saw her first tram. She was floored. 'They have 'em in Frisco but they're just a gimmick. These are for real, baby,' she would gasp. She never went back, forgot her job, her house and the boyfriend, became a connie, then a driver and within a year of that initial infatuation, had wheedled her way into the Tramways Planning

Department. In the time she worked there, the Tramways added the Bundoora and Burwood Highway extensions to the network, the only new tramlines to be built in the city for fifty years and although there was probably no connection at all, you couldn't help thinking that it only happened because Shelley was there.

She picked me up at the Dan O'Connell one night—I never figured out why she needed a lame duck writer—maybe she had a long term plan to liberate Jasper. In any case, we'd lasted three years which was pretty good for both of us, and by then I'd almost managed to condition myself into accepting an accent that constantly made you think you were living in a movie.

"That sure is one weird-looking book you got there," she declared, "How'sit gowan?"

"Awful. Almost unreadable," I answered.

"Then why not give up and go to sleep. Or something..."

What she meant was 'Or something'. I could tease her a little.

"What I can make out seems interesting. This guy..." I had to check the cover for the name. "This guy Roy Barton. He really did discover a treasure ship, and everyone ripped him off and persecuted him. Academics, politicians, scientists, cops, lawyers, his mates, his wife, the bloody lot."

"Sure sounds like a persecution complex to me."

"Yeah, well. There are newspaper stories quoted here, and named and dated. And court transcripts, also dated. I can check."

Shelley went back down under the covers, and employed what she found down there as a puppet. "Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!" In parrot, of course. She was winning, but then, she was meant to.

"No, really. This one seems all right."

"No more Lady Wrestlers."

The book fell on the floor.

"Well, maybe just one more..."