

when life makes you play a whole new game...

# the football Whisperer

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# THE FOOTBALL WHISPERER

By MEL A ROWE

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**The following is written in Australian English.**

# Prologue

*The MCG (Melbourne Cricket Ground), Australia.*

No matter what, Ward wasn't going to let Sheldon win—not today. His palms curled into fists as Ward ignored Sheldon's side-smirk and focused on the prize.

Amid the deafening roar of over ninety thousand spectators, men battled like fighters in a modern-day Colosseum. The crowd's passion reverberated through Ward's body, energising him.

He shouldered into position amongst the mash of uniforms, getting elbowed by other players while striving for possession of their talisman, the *Sherrin*. Slick with sweat, Ward stole the red leather ball from another man's hands. He burst through the scuffle, bounced the ball against the manicured turf, and with an almighty boom of thunder that echoed from his boot to ball, it sailed through sombre skies.

Ward trailed its projection as players jostled for the best position. Open palms begged to receive the gift, but it was captured in a vice-like grip by his tall-timber teammate, Nick.

Ward pulled up his Saints' game-day socks, glancing at the rest of his teammates. He led the arrow-head wave of warring males back into position, as they regained their breaths ready to battle the Magpies as soon as the ball broke free.

Two teams. Eighteen men on-field, while four waited like chained fighting dogs ready to pounce from the bench, all bearing the battle-weight upon their shoulders. They would do this. For their teammates, for the club, for the fans, and for the dream of becoming Australia's finest.

Scents of rain and mashed grasses mixed with meat pies, beer, and wet wool, filtered down from the over-full stands. Thunder rolled like a wooden whiskey barrel across a stone floor, spilling rain in bucket loads that drenched cowering crowds. An icy wind whipped through the stadium, but nothing would disrupt the Grand Final replay.

The ball slippery. The ground an ice rink, and visibility was reduced. But the warriors remained and fought amongst the sweat, tears, and mud.

Again, there was the rush into the mud-pit to gain possession as they soldiered on, thrashing it out for the umpire's centre bounce of the ball. The ruck-men punched at the Sherrin that ricocheted higher and further along the field.

Ward leapt onto a team player's back for elevation as his stretched fingertips grazed the leathered jewel twirling in the rain.

Sheldon mirrored Ward's action, clambering over another player, vying for the ball.

Ward's human step ladder slipped in the sludge and the floor beneath Ward was gone. He pushed-off, gaining for leverage while still reaching for that ball. All that mattered was getting possession of that damned ball. Blinded by tunnel vision, he didn't see it coming...

Ward and Sheldon collided, spearing into each other mid-air. Head to head. Shoulder to shoulder. The pain blinded Ward as gravity pushed him crown first to earth.

And there his world stopped.

Knocked unconscious, his body twitched as if lying on a watery bed of electrified grass. Then he finally stilled beside Sheldon.

The ball bounced twice, then rolled to a stop in the puddle between the two players.

Nobody moved. A collective gasp came from the crowd. Everyone waited for a sign of life from either of the motionless men sprawled across the grass beneath the pouring rain...

Because it looked like they'd broken their necks.

# Chapter 1

‘Home sweet whatever.’ Hunched in pain, Ward shuffled through his front door like a ninety-year-old fart, with his parents following. His housemates were at practice, which is where Ward would rather be. Yet, being home was better than that crummy hospital room. Especially since he’d been forced to share with Sheldon because that’s how the *Spinal Care Unit* was set up—it was worse than torture. Not the bed, not the pain, but dealing with Sheldon!

Somehow, Sheldon’s war story got bigger every time he spoke to the constant parade of women fawning over him. Ward wanted a bucket to hurl in, if he could only lift his head to do it.

At least Ward’s teammates visited, even if they sat and gawked at Sheldon’s never-ending parade of women. How did the wanker do it? The only way the prick slept straight from all his lies was because he’d been strapped into a full body brace they were forced to surrender to.

Amazingly, they'd suffered the same injury. Both strapped in for safety, waiting for the swelling to reduce along the spine, with their own specialised nurse watching over them. Or Ward would've gotten out of bed and thumped Sheldon's big mouth shut.

Thankfully, he no longer had to deal with that side-smirking-snob at home.

Ward shucked off his shoes, tugged off his jacket, then attempted to toss it onto the coat hook. Instead, it dropped to the floor. Ward leaned over but straightened again as the chunky brace pinched his neck. He tugged at his restrictive, hot and itchy neck brace, poking a finger down the side to let some air in.

'I'll get it.' Brian dropped Ward's bag to the side and scooped up the jacket. 'Where does this go?'

'Anywhere, Dad.' Ward didn't care, focusing on his most sacred spot in the world—his chair.

'Here we are, dear.' Shirley placed a pillow on the nearest of the three leather recliners in the lounge room.

'Not my chair, Mum.' Ward limped to the middle reclining chair and prepared himself to sit. Back turned, hands gripped the armrests, and as if bearing weights, his bum found the seat... slowly. There was no plonking with the TV's remote control in hand. No flicking the handle to put his feet up in one

swift well-practised move. Nope, now it was slow and steady to avoid a whole new world of hurt.

But he was home. Front and centre of the TV, in his favourite chair, and allowed his spine to curve into the cool leather. *Now this was living.*

‘Forgot you’ve got your own chairs,’ said Shirley, tucking the pillow behind him.

‘Every man should have a favourite chair.’ Brian dropped into the spare seat on the left. Flicked the handle back and crossed his loafers at the ankles on the footrest and began to rock. ‘Reckon one like this would do me.’

‘I should get you one and call it a Father’s Day gift for the next ten years.’ Ward struggled to shift his simple feather pillow into position.

‘And I’ll have a beer fridge for Christmas.’ Brian patted the small bar fridge identical to the other two sitting beside each recliner.

‘We’re not having a beer fridge in the lounge room.’ Shirley turned to her son. ‘Now, are you sure you don’t want to come home, dear?’

‘I’m fine, Mum. I’m not in any pain.’ If Ward didn’t move fast, he’d avoid the literal pain in the neck. But what bothered him most was the damned constant tingling ache in his fingers and toes. It was like growing pains in the body, with a droning



dentist-drill in his head that didn't switch off, no matter how many drugs they gave him.

'What did the surgeon say?' Shirley's hands wrung together so tight her knuckles went white.

'Um...' Ward didn't want to worry his mother who'd aged overnight. There was grey in her auburn hair. Her lips pressed into a line that accentuated ex-smoker's lines around her mouth, while concerned creases deepened around her hazel eyes. 'I'll be okay, Mum. Promise.' He had to believe it.

*'Helloooooo, everyone.'* Tina burst through the open door, her many layers of clothing rustled as her jewellery jangled.

'Who left the door open?' Ward wanted to run but couldn't. Not when he'd just sat down and didn't know how long it'd take to get up again.

'Hi, Mum.' Tina kissed Shirley's cheek. 'Hey, Dad.' Her smile disappeared as she looked down her nose. 'Ward.'

Ward looked up at his older sister who was wearing the entire rainbow of colours in layers and lace. Her wrists were wrapped in assorted beads, with bells on her anklets. Reeking of Dragon's Blood, or Unicorn Turds, or whatever incense she'd rolled in. Tina, his new-age cosmic-loving sister didn't suit the decor. She clashed with the dark tones of timber and leather. She even clashed with the Saint's team colours on the giant flag pinned to the wall. Tina was just too bright for this room.

Worse, her latest boyfriend, What's-his-name, strolled in behind her. Was Ward still suffering memory loss from the unremembered fall to not remember What's-his-name? Not that it mattered, his sister's men never stuck around long enough to remember their names. What's-his-name was short, with big hands that looked like they had some strength in the grip.

Tina stood in front of her brother cradling a casserole dish. 'I brought you some stew.'

'Beef?' Ward silently prayed.

'You did take a whack to the head. It's my famous mung-bean and tofu stew, of course.'

'Ugh.' He hated that mud and his sister's many odd vegetarian diet-of-the-day-dishes. Ward wanted meat, where veggies were only there to decorate the plate. His fruit and veg requirements for the day got blended into one drink. Simple. Not tofu and mung-bean-muck that smelt like peppered baked dirt.

But they weren't allowed to tell Tina that. So he looked to his mum for help.

'Thank you, Tina, that's so thoughtful. I'll put it in the kitchen for the boys to eat later.' Shirley took the dish away.

'You remember Ron, don't you, Dad? The jockey.' Tina pointed to her boyfriend who was looking around the room.

Ward tried to suppress the smirk, he knew his dad didn't remember Ron either. *Did Ron shop in the kids' section for clothes?*

‘Err...’ Brian’s leather chair squelched as he shifted forward to shake hands with the small man. ‘How’s the world of racing, Ron?’

Ron nodded. ‘Good.’

‘Oh honey, tell them or I will. I’m not shy.’ Tina put her arm around her boyfriend’s shoulders as Ward and his dad rolled eyes at each other.

*Tina shy? Nope—never.* Tina was the relative who embarrassed you in public. As her brother, Ward always walked twenty paces behind her to not be associated with his hippy-magic-mung-bean-loving-nightmare of a sister.

‘Ron’s going into his first race this weekend.’ Tina wrapped her arm tighter around Ron, stroking his brown hair like the doll she used to drag down the corridor as a kid.

‘Horse race?’ asked Shirley, returning from the kitchen.

‘Yeah, race twelve. Can’t wait,’ said Ron.

‘It’s so great, isn’t it? Ron’s off his drug charges and he’s now free to ride again. I’m so proud of you, honey.’ Tina kissed Ron’s cheek, then sighed and smiled at him.

Ron cleared his throat and tugged at his shirt’s collar. ‘So, ah, what did the Doc say about your neck, Ward?’

‘Yeah, what did they say? *How come you’re still wearing a neck brace at home?*’

Ward winced as his sister’s chalk-board-grating voice echoed with the ache squirrelling down his spine. He didn’t

want to answer Tina's questions. He didn't even want her in his house.

Tina's skirts rustled as she turned towards Shirley. 'Mum, what did the doctors say?'

'Well, the surgeon told your brother to rest up for a week and then he goes back for more tests.'

'*Surgeon? Noooooo, you can't let 'em cut you up?*' Tina's voice bounced off the walls forcing the TV screen to shudder.

'Mum didn't say that.' Trust his sister to bark out what he didn't want to hear, and no doubt most of the suburb had heard her too.

'*I heard surgeon.*' Tina slapped palms on her generous hips, generous from the layers of clothing twenty gypsies could wear. 'You know anaesthetic gives you cancer. And they reckon you lose ten years off your life when you're put under, that's *if* you wake up again. And then you'll suffer from arthritis. And then—'

'*Shut up.* I don't need to hear that!' Why was she here tormenting him?

Tina stepped back as if slapped in the face, with mouth moving but silent.

'Your brother doesn't need to hear that, dear. Not when he's just gotten out of hospital,' said Shirley.

At least the hospital had saved him from his sister for a little while. Too scared she'd catch some tropical limb-

dropping-disease from walking inside the main doors. Which, thankfully, kept her voice from echoing down the corridors that'd trigger an entire maternity ward of babies to scream.

'But *Muuuuuum*,' whined Tina.

'I know you care, dear, but they're waiting to see if your brother's body will sort itself out.'

'No doubt, with enough chemical drugs to rot your insides.' Tina pointed to the pile of pill bottles on the bar fridge next to her brother. 'What are you? Footy Neanderthals with your housemates in matching reclining chairs, worshipping the idols on the big screen. Don't you know what a coffee table is, instead of using your matching bar fridge tops to show off all your pills? You Footballers are a breed of your own, living together, dressing the same, eating the same—'

'They're vitamins, Club supplied and Coach approved.' Ward hadn't unpacked his pill packets from the hospital yet.

Brian picked up one of the pill bottles and checked out the label. 'Multi-vitamins, huh?'

'All part of our health and training regime.' The club had a team of dietician's, physicians, physios, and almost everything else but a neuro-surgeon.

'You'd get all the proper nutrients your body needs by eating fruits and vegetables and drinking water instead of sports drinks that are full of sugar and salts,' said Tina in another one of her know-it-all tirades.

‘Mum?’ Ward looked to his mother for help, unable to kick his sister out because he couldn’t lift a leg if he tried.

How the hell was he going to kick a football again?

Ward’s heart rate spiked as if stabbed with shards of ice. He licked his lips and gasped for breath. *I’m okay. I’m okay.* Mentally repeating the mantra he’d replayed since the accident.

Inhaling deep through the nose, filling his diaphragm. He exhaled slowly through the mouth, trying to relax the fear gripping his entire body, as the arm-rest’s leather creaked beneath his grip.

Shirley stepped in between her adult-children. ‘Tina, we know you’re only looking out for your brother, but he’s got a large team of people behind him.’

‘So where are they now, huh?’ Tina waved at the team flag that was the only piece of art on the wall. It hung alongside the bookcase filled with trophies and medals instead of books.

‘The physio will be here after team practice.’ Where Ward wished he was instead of suffering this conversation.

‘What recovery programme have they got you doing?’ asked Ron, peeking over Tina’s bulky lace covered shoulder.

‘Daily physio and stretching exercises, hoping to manipulate the nerve back into place.’

‘And if it doesn’t?’ asked Ron.

Ward frowned and swallowed the lump. ‘I’ll go and see the specialist.’ Nope, he wasn’t saying surgeon. ‘Until then, I’ll do what I’m told by the professionals.’ He was well trained to follow orders, especially when it came to taking care of his body to play the game he lived for.

‘Is it a pinched nerve?’ asked Ron.

‘Yeah.’ It sucked he couldn’t nod.

‘You had that didn’t you, honey,’ said Tina, stroking Ron’s arm.

‘Uh-huh. I’d pinched a nerve in my shoulder from a fall during a practice race. Gave me a dead-arm for ages.’

‘Long way to fall,’ murmured Brian. ‘I mean, those racehorses are big.’

‘Those thoroughbreds are *huge*, Dad,’ said Tina with wide eyes.

Shirley asked, ‘How did you un-pinch your shoulder nerve, Ron?’

‘They had me doing the same as Ward. Rest up in hope the body worked itself out. Mind you, I didn’t have no physio visiting me at home. And...’

‘And what else, dear?’ Shirley asked.

‘Nah, you’ll think I’m nuts.’

Tina stroked Ron’s arm. ‘No, they won’t, honey.’

Ron rubbed his shoulder as if reliving the pain. ‘I tried physio to manipulate that sucker.’

‘Did it work?’ Ward asked. Anything was better than a risky operation.

‘No, and they’d scheduled me in for surgery.’

‘*Nooo...*’ Tina palm-slapped her mouth as the widescreen rattled behind her.

Ron reached out and stopped the TV shaking on the wall. ‘Loose connection?’

‘Voice-quake,’ mumbled Ward. He was about to complain about his sister, but his mum stopped him with one of her peace-keeper-looks.

‘Go on, Ron,’ said Shirley.

‘The day before I was scheduled for surgery, I was at the track to get my pay. And, well, they had this...’ Ron shoved his hands into his jeans’ pockets raising his shoulders to his ears. ‘That’s when I saw the horse whisperer.’

His dad stopped rocking in his chair. His sister didn’t shift her many layers. His mum rubbed her lips together. And for the first time since Ward had arrived home, it was silent. ‘The what-whisperer?’

‘Does she talk to animals?’ Shirley’s head tilted almost sideways. Ward was surprised at how much neck movement his mother possessed.

‘Like that movie we saw?’ Brian shook his head side to side, resuming his rocking-chair-ride.



‘Well, she isn’t, but she is.’ Ron rubbed the back of his neck and rolled his shoulder.

‘So, what is she, honey?’ Tina’s head nodded up and down, up and down.

Tugging at his itchy neck brace, Ward didn’t know what was worse, this stupid conversation, or that they were all showing off their full range of neck movement.

‘She’s a horse healer,’ replied Ron.

Tina’s eyes widened as did her mouthy smile. ‘Like with crystals, and ointments, and incense?’

‘I never saw any, and I thought it was hocus-pocus-crap too. But she heals horses through massage. I’ve seen it. She works with the stables’ vets as a legit master of something. Swear it.’

Shirley rubbed her lips together as if to formulate another one of her ever-tactful responses. Tina blinked trying to process impossible possibilities. And, as per usual, Brian screwed up his nose and said nothing. Would it be rude for Ward to ask his family to have this conversation of nonsense elsewhere?

‘How?’ asked Shirley.

‘I dunno? She just did.’ Ron rolled his whole shoulder and arm in the air.

*Show off.* ‘What did she do to fix your shoulder?’ Ward was already over this whole horse-healing-tangent.

‘Well, she was working on one of the horses when my mate asked if she worked on humans too.’

‘And did she?’ asked Tina.

‘Nah, she doesn’t touch people, only horses. Reckons they don’t talk back or complain. She’s cheeky.’ Ron chuckled as Tina frowned rubbing her lips like her mother.

‘She must’ve helped you,’ said Brian, mid-chair rock.

‘She did. She worked out from the way I was carrying myself that I’d a pinched nerve before I’d even explained it to her. Then she walks up, puts her hands under my jacket and fixed it. Just like that.’ Ron faced the family who looked at him unconvinced. ‘I dunno how to explain it. I felt this heat and then this vibration. Then she tugged on my upper arm and I felt it give. Before that, I’d had this constant tingling ache in my arm since I fell. Then it was gone. Just like that. Swear it.’

No one in Ward’s family moved or nodded. Not that Ward could, nor wanted to. He just didn’t believe any of this horse-nonsense.

‘Hey, as much as Tina tries to do her new-age-stuff, this woman did it like magic. It’s the truth.’

‘I believe you, honey,’ said Tina.

‘You would,’ mumbled Ward.

Tina scowled at her brother, and then in the blink of an eye, she smiled down at her boyfriend. ‘Ron, how much did she charge you?’

‘A carton of beer.’

‘What?’ Chorused father and son.

‘Yep, she told me to leave the carton on the counter as her fee. She even bet me another carton of beer that they’d cancel my surgery, which is what happened the next day. So yeah, it cost me two cartons of beer.’

‘Horse-shit.’ After being forced to share a room with Sheldon’s bull, now Ward had to suffer in his own home too. *Not gonna happen.*

Tina glared at her brother. ‘*Muumum.*’

Again, the TV shuddered on the wall.

Ron reached out and steadied it, then pointed at Ward. ‘I agree, I was just like you. But by that stage, I was willing to try anything. I couldn’t sleep because of that continuous dull ache in my arm. Couldn’t get comfortable. I’d tried everything everyone was telling me to do, then this woman, in not even five minutes flat, healed me in the corridor by the stables and walked away.’

‘Has this horse lady done this to anyone else?’ Brian asked while he shrugged at Ward arching his eyebrow.

‘It’s rare, she’d only done a few of the blokes down the track. She doesn’t advertise it because horses are her specialty. It’s why we call her the Horse Whisperer, coz we’ve seen ‘em cranky adrenalin-filled thoroughbreds bow down to her. She’s got this calming effect over ‘em when she massages them.’

‘So, it’s like a holistic massage? *That’s what you need, Ward.*’ Tina’s booming voice forced Ward and Brian to lean back into their seats. Again, Ron gripped the corner of the shuddering television, glancing at Tina, then back at the TV.

‘I’m not having some voodoo-whatever touching me.’ Ward had a trained medical team behind him, skilled in proven science.

‘She’d tell you the same,’ said Ron, chuckling.

Shirley asked, ‘Ron, can you find out what this lady does, please?’

Ward glared at the mother he loved. ‘Not happening, Mum. I’ll only do what the Club tells me to do.’ Not having some old hag covered in horsehair, touching him with hands as hard as hoofs, and chipped yellow nails strong enough to pick off a horseshoe straight from the hoof.

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