

Kate Ritchie

I WANT TO SPEND EVERY MINUTE with Mae

Children were always part of the plan for Kate Ritchie and husband Stuart Webb, but neither was prepared for the rush of emotion that engulfed Kate when she was pregnant. The 37-year-old former *Home And Away* star introduces mischievous Mae to **Juliet Rieden**.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
PETER BREW-BEVAN
STYLING BY **MATTIE CRONAN**



HAIR BY BRAD MILLINS, MAKE-UP BY LILLY MILKOVIC, KATE WEARS BILLY SUIT, MAE WEARS PRINTEBEBE PLAY SUIT AND SMOCK. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHEO

IT WAS DECEMBER 2013 when Kate Ritchie received the news that was going to change her life forever. She was at home on a warm Monday evening. Husband Stuart Webb was busy at work – the former St George Illawarra Dragons rugby league star quit the game in 2008 and now works as a chef – and Kate was starting to plan Christmas. “I was shocked,” says Kate. “It did catch me off guard. I was at home on my own and I just couldn’t believe it.” Kate was transfixed by the two blue lines on her pregnancy test and the feeling of euphoria that has barely left her since was just starting to kick in.

Having a family had always been on the cards for the couple. “Stuart’s the middle child of five boys. I am the eldest of four girls. So we’ve never denied the fact that we would be married and have children, and hopefully have many of them,” says Kate. “But we didn’t ever have a set plan.”

They had married in 2010 and every few months for more than three years another story in the gossip magazines

would point to a supposed “baby bump” and profess that Kate was pregnant. Yet Kate and Stuart just laughed it off. “I’ve never felt as though I had to rush into anything; I didn’t feel I had a ticking clock,” she explains.

Then, four months after her 35th birthday, Kate really was pregnant. “I never panicked about it or worried. There was no pressure for me,” she says. “So when I say ‘shocked’, it was more just a lovely surprise – oh, wow! This is it, this is the thing you hear about and watch on the big screen. This is an experience you know so much about, but you don’t really know anything about until it happens.”

She waited for Stuart to come home from work and prepared to deliver her news. “I wrapped up the pregnancy test in a little Christmas present. I said, ‘I’ve bought you an early Christmas present today.’ He’d come out of a long shift in the kitchen and I could see he was thinking, ‘I don’t really need to have Christmas presents at 12:30 in the morning’. But I said, ‘No, you really need this one.’

“He was ecstatic. He had been flying the baby flag for longer than I had. I always wanted it to happen, but Stuart has always been incredibly keen. Now, in hindsight, I think I appreciate much more what a blessing that is, to have someone who wants what you want in those circumstances. So we’re a good match.”

Throughout her pregnancy, Kate’s anticipation escalated. She couldn’t wait to meet Mae, but also wanted to preserve the delicious mystery of not knowing whether this baby was to be a boy or a girl until the very last moment. “I don’t think I would have been able to deal with the wrath of my mother if we had [discovered the gender] because she’s anti finding out the sex of the baby,” she says, laughing. “Thankfully, I feel that way, too, in that I wanted it to be a surprise, as did Stuart. I think that’s part of that excitement. I loved the not knowing. I loved lying in bed at night and just being filled with that excitement.” Secretly, though, Kate confesses she always had an inkling her baby was a girl. >



THIS PAGE: KATE WEARS BURBERRY TRENCH COAT MAE WEARS ZARA SHIRT AND PRINTE BEBE BLOOMERS, RABBIT COURTESY OF THE RSPCA, TO FIND RSPCA ANIMALS AVAILABLE FOR ADOPTION, HEAD TO YOUR LOCAL RSPCA SHELTER OR VISIT ADOPTAPET.COM.AU. OPPOSITE: KATE WEARS ELLERY DRESS MAE WEARS PRINTE BEBE SMOCK AND BLOOMERS, AND SEED SANDALS.

PICTURE CREDITS TO GO HERE PLEASE



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We are sitting in a busy cafe in Sydney's eastern suburbs and as Kate dials back through her pregnancy to the moment she first met Mae, she's holding back the tears. "I miss having Mae inside me," she says. "I don't think there's anything like that."

Yet if she felt overcome with emotion throughout her pregnancy, it was nothing like the gush that engulfed her afterwards and is still very much with her, 17 months later. "I think I was a very emotional new mother," Kate confesses. "I think the excitement and anticipation was, of course, emotional. But those emotions I didn't feel I could control came once Mae arrived."

Kate's world had changed and as she sat up nursing her newborn, she started to jot down notes, feelings and messages for Mae. Those maternal yearnings evolved into a children's book, *I Just Couldn't Wait To Meet You*, illustrated by Hannah Sommerville, due out April 1 (Random House Australia).

"I thought it would be a letter to Mae that I would include in her baby book," says Kate. "It started out as a series of little notes that I wrote when I was on maternity leave; up late at night with her or throughout the early hours of the morning. I suppose it just came from needing to put down feelings I had that I had never experienced before of this incredible anticipation. I described it as that feeling I had as a child waiting for Santa to arrive; the wonder of it and not being able to explain the excitement, but being overwhelmed by it. It certainly wasn't erratic or out of control, but I felt so incredibly happy, in complete awe."

Kate is well aware that, like all parents, she is prone to rose-tinted bias where her own child is concerned, and like all new mums she's knee-deep in joy-producing hormones that can make her a tad over-effusive. "I was in bed last night scrolling through some very early photos and videos – I have thousands – and we have always thought Mae is perfect, but goodness, she was a scrawny little joey-like baby," Kate admits with a long chuckle. "But, yes, I think she's divine. I think she's perfect, but I suppose there are a lot of hormones telling me to think that as well."



Clockwise from above: As Sally Fletcher; with Stuart at their wedding; Kate with radio co-hosts Tim Blackwell (left) and Marty Sheargold.

For Kate, who is used to being seen by everyone through the prism of her 20-year stint as Sally Fletcher on hit TV soap *Home And Away*, the bond with Mae holds an especially poignant innocence. "In my life, I've met so many people as a result of being on television since a young age and I don't remember what my life was like before that. Everybody thinks they know you in some way or has a preconceived idea of who you are."

"I know Mae is only a baby, but there's part of me that loves that she only knows me as her mummy. I get really emotional thinking about that because she loves me, just because I'm her mummy. There's something really pure and unaffected."

Kate also has a fresh attitude to her body and the constant need for someone in her line of work to look a certain way. Although she says she's never felt overly body-conscious, the rigours of being in the nation's living rooms for much of her life have left a mark.

"From the age of eight, I was on the show. I didn't even go through puberty privately and I often joke that puberty wasn't kind to me," she says. "Let's be honest, we just have to flick on *Home And Away* circa 1993 and I'll be the first to say it – 'I was no Brooke Shields and that's okay!' But I think when you're in that moment, it's hard."

"For example, when Sally first wore a bra, she came down the stairs of the Summer Bay house and announced to the household, 'Hasn't anyone noticed I'm wearing a bra?'"



"Now let's think about how traumatic it was ... I'd only been wearing a bra for about three months. I had to go to work and announce it in front of not only the nation, but a room of grown men, women and teenagers. It was horrific."

"I feel as though everyone's had something to say about that at some point throughout my career, whether it was kind or not. So there is an element of me being self-conscious about myself."

"Mind you, I think it's funny now. I can go to the supermarket and I have women my age telling me, 'I remember I was getting my first bra when you were getting your first bra.' So there's a lovely connection."

"But since having Mae, I just don't care about those things anymore and I think it's probably only at this point, 17 months down the track, that I feel like I'm [physically] back to normal. I feel really good that I've allowed my body to do it in its own time because it needs to heal in so many ways. I think I care about my body a little bit more, rather than caring too much about what everybody else thinks about my body."

Today, at 37 years old, Kate gets a very different reaction when she's in ▶

OPPOSITE: KATE WEARS VALENTINO DRESS FROM DAVID JONES. PICTURES SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION. COPYRIGHT 2015 LIFE PORTRAITS.



supermarkets with Mae. “I think I might be a measure of time for people,” she says, laughing. “I can see in their faces, they think, ‘Oh my goodness, if Sally Fletcher is 37, how old does that make me?’”

Sally Fletcher may be history, but Kate still has a high profile and is weekly fodder for the gossip magazines, which recently have latched on to a supposed bitter falling-out between Kate and her fellow *Home And Away* colleague, Bec Hewitt. Is there any truth to the rumour?

“It’s absolutely untrue,” says Kate with a wry smile. “We often laugh about it and the nice thing about reading those articles of ‘Bec and me at war’ is that we’re sharing the burden a little bit, because poor Bec and Lleyton do cop it.

“We didn’t make it down to the tennis this year. We would have liked to, but it’s been a busy start to the year with Stuart going back to work. But we did see them a lot over the Christmas period and the last time I left Bec’s house, which was early January, it was wonderful because I left with an enormous bag of [Bec’s daughter] Mia’s hand-me-downs and let me tell you, they are lovely hand-me-downs.”

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Kate is now fully back at work as a Sydney radio host and says she hopes to return to acting soon. After her maternity leave, husband Stuart took time out to be at home with Mae and loved it. Typically, Mae’s first words were “Dad, Dad, Dad”, but Kate is cool about it. “I think it’s really healthy. Stuart and Mae have their own little relationship without me interfering. I think it’s been really nice for them to have that time,” she says.

Now Stuart’s back at work full-time also, Kate says both of them are missing Mae. Yet juggling her world is made easier by a very supportive family and a nanny who helps out.

When she arrives at *The Weekly’s* photo shoot, Mae is carried in in Grandma’s (Kate’s mum, Heather) arms, a little sleepy from her morning

drive to our location. She’s a thoroughly independent toddler, happily exploring the house we are shooting in and as she tries on outfits, reveals her love of hats. “She wears a hat everywhere, sometimes she wears three hats,” says Kate, who is a doting mother, hugging and kissing Mae.

“She’s lovely,” says Kate of her daughter. “She’s so happy and she has the most mischievous, infectious laugh. She’s so loving and over the last six weeks she’s actually started to speak a little more. She’s certainly not stringing sentences together, but she’s saying words. She’s turning into a little person.”

Kate is clearly lapping up motherhood. “I love it. I really do. My only fear is that I will become a complete hermit and never want to leave the house because I adore being with her. I want to spend every minute with her and talk to her.”

Would Kate be happy for Mae to follow in her footsteps and become a child actor? Kate pauses to think. “I don’t think I missed out on anything. In fact, I think I had a beautiful family at home and then I had a whole other family at work.

“And I think I’ve turned out okay. I’m relatively balanced and a happy individual. A lot of that comes down to my mum and dad being so happy for me and protective as much as they needed to be, but also trusting that I would be okay without them and knowing that sharing me with this other family didn’t mean they were losing me; they were just allowing me a most wonderful experience.”

Even as we go to press, there are more rumours circling that Kate is again pregnant. She tells me categorically that she’s not (today), but the couple do want to grow their family with siblings for Mae. “I think I may have left it a little too late to be having lots, but yes, I think I would like to fill the car,” she says.

“We will definitely have more children. I’m not sure how soon that will be. We’ve settled nicely into our life, but I’m also aware that I don’t want to leave that too long either. It’ll be a nice few years on the horizon.” ■