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The Dare

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Published by Preface,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

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Published by Preface 2009
First published by Penguin Books Australia 2007
under the title *The Rouseabout*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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First published in Great Britain in 2009 by Preface Publishing
1 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9BT

An imprint of The Random House Group

www.rbooks.co.uk
www.prefacepublishing.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at www.randomhouse.co.uk

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84809 086 6

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Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Bookmarque Ltd,
Croydon CR0 4TD

One

Kate Webster hung upside down on the spindly Hills hoist in the backyard of her rented house in Orange. She felt her temples pulse with blood and the bite of the clothesline's metal bars behind her knees. Her long dark hair hung down and brushed the brittle, neglected lawn. From other, leafier gardens, the smell of suburban dinners drifted over the fence into her own barren yard. Swinging gently, Kate raised a tacky plastic sheep trophy to the dusky pink sky. Gold plastic glinted in the evening light.

'Whoo-hoo! Victory is sweet!' she hollered. With her other hand, she lifted a chunky brown stubbie from the ground and clanked it against the bottle of the bloke hanging beside her. He looked cute, Kate thought. Even upside down, with the first-place blue ribbon tied about his head in a big kewpie-doll bow. Christ, she thought, as drunkenness rushed to her head. Did I win him too? What *was* his name again?

Kate thought back over her day. She was *supposed* to have been working, dishing out sound, serious advice to farmers at the Orange Field Day in her shapeless navy polo shirt with the Department of Agriculture logo stamped above her right boob.

Even though it was her first field day, she'd engaged the

farmers straightaway. It wasn't just her pretty young face that drew them in. It was also her earthiness, the fact that she was recognisably one of them; the way she casually kicked the dirt with the toe of her unpolished boot as if inspecting the soil and root systems of pastures, her arms folded across her chest. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the men as she talked. Despite her greenness within the department, Kate realised she could do this job on her ear.

So, not long after lunch, she'd done a runner from the department's display and entered herself in a sheep-counting competition. When her turn came, she relished being in the dusty yards with the sheep, instantly judging the sheep's flight zone, summing up how toey they would be. When she had them sussed she swung the gate open a little way, and as the lead sheep darted past she began to flick her hand in the sheep's direction, counting. Just as she did back home on the farm. She quickly tallied the big-framed wethers, scanning them with intense dark eyes. Three. Six. Nine. The sheep rattled past, lifting dust with pointed seashell hooves. When Kate reached one hundred she hooked her index finger into the pocket of her faded jeans. At two hundred, she slipped another finger in. Her other hand hovered above the mob as they rushed through the gate. The tail enders bunched and bustled beneath the fug of dust but Kate instinctively stepped towards them to slow the rush and expertly resumed the steady flow.

Then she was back in the rhythm of the count: 294, 297, 300. Another finger in the pocket, then six final sheep galloped past. The last one baulked before she shut the gate. She turned towards the lanky judge and gave him her tally as the crowd offered up a scattered clap. They watched the strong, curvy girl with the face of a country beauty lob the fence. Then they turned their attention to the next competitor.

At the end of the competition, trophy and blue ribbon in hand, Kate had made a beeline for the makeshift bar that leaned

beneath a rusty corrugated-iron roof. She knew she should have headed back to the department's display to help her colleagues pack up. But surely one celebratory beer wouldn't hurt.

At the bar Kate washed the dust from her throat with a swig of ice-cold beer. The thinning crowd straggled past on their way home. Some had cattle canes, or freebies from the fencing companies, others had bags of brochures on pumps and the latest tractors. Tired mums pushed cranky kids in prams, while husbands trailed behind. The men glanced longingly at the bar. Kate turned her back on them and swigged again at her beer.

From the other end of the bar a young guy in a blue stock-and-station agent's shirt had nodded at her. He was wearing a big black cowboy hat, like Tim McGraw on the Country Music Channel. His jaw hadn't seen a razor for days and his already tanned skin was darkened even deeper with dust.

'Congratulations,' the stock agent said, a smile lifting one corner of his sly-dog mouth. 'Most blokes count in twos, but I noticed you can count in threes.'

'Yeah, well, I'm not "most blokes",' Kate said, sending him a cheeky smile that invited him to move over to her. He took up her sheep trophy and ran his fingers across the plastic ridges.

'Pretty rough conformation,' he said. 'You'd cull that one for sure.'

As he sat the trophy back on the bar and fingered the yellow tassels of her blue ribbon, Kate noticed how good his arms looked, strong and tanned, emerging from the casually rolled-up sleeves of his stockie's shirt. Pen and notebook in his shirt pocket. Mobile phone clipped to his plaited belt. A stock-standard stockie, Kate concluded. But a cute one.

'Another beer?' he asked.

'Sure,' said Kate. 'Who's counting?'

* * *

God, she thought now, as she looked at his black hat lying on the lawn beneath the Hills hoist. What *was* his name again? Was it Andrew? Mark? She shut her eyes and blood pumped behind them. She'd been upside down too long. When she opened her eyes again she was met with the vision of the stockie's flat, smooth stomach, which revealed itself as his shirt tails drooped towards the crackling dry lawn. Hair on his stomach trailed invitingly towards the silver buckle of his leather belt. He'll do, Kate thought, ramming her own shirt into her jeans so she didn't expose her soft, milky white tummy to him. She swigged on her beer again.

'I am Count Kate and I love to count! Ye-ah-ah-ah!' she sang out. '*Sesame Street*,' she explained. 'One of my regular shows. Love it.'

'You also like paddling pools and trikes, by the looks,' he said, nodding towards the cluster of colourful toys scattered around the yard.

'They belong to my dog, Sheila,' Kate said. 'She's spoilt rotten.'

At the sound of her name, Sheila emerged from her kennel on the back step to lick at Kate's upside-down face.

'And I love you too,' Kate said.

'Your kelpie obviously likes to give you tonguers,' said the stockie flirtily, his face turning slowly redder in the glow of the sinking sun.

'Tonguers and beer. That's what she likes.' Kate tried to prise the dog's liver-coloured lips apart and pour beer into her mouth. But the old dog was wise to the drunken version of Kate. She sighed and padded off to her mat, her long claws clicking on concrete.

'Not up for a beer, eh? More for me then!' Kate said, angling the beer to her upturned mouth. She felt the cool liquid fizz out her nostrils. Laughter spluttered from her lips, together with froth, beer and spit.

'Gawd! I hate bat-skolling,' she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her arm.

'You're a crazy girl. But I like it.'

The stockie swung nearer her so the Hills hoist shuddered. As he pressed his stubble-fringed lips to her mouth, Kate couldn't stop laughing. The whole clothesline shook. Suddenly, like a twig, it snapped. Kate's shoulder slammed the solid earth. The stockie fell with her, hitting the dust.

'Ow! I think I broke my bum bone,' he groaned.

Kate lay on her back next to him looking up at the evening sky beyond the garish orange tiles of the roof. She shook with laughter and wondered if she would wet herself. As she snorted with hilarity, the stockie rolled over to her, swiping the blue ribbon from his head before gathering her up. He kissed her hungrily with an open mouth, like he was eating a meat pie. His hands grappled under her shirt for her breasts, and he pressed his fingers on her as if he was fat-scoring the backs of prime lambs. As his hand slid across Kate's midriff, she pulled it away and moved it to her bum. She'd much rather he touch her there. They kissed like that on the suburban lawn in Orange, New South Wales.

Kate felt detached, as if she was watching it happen from outside herself, knowing she shouldn't. But as the stockie persisted and she tasted his beer and sweat, she felt the heat rise between her legs. She wanted to feel someone's skin against hers. Anyone's, really. A man to make her forget. This bloke would do. She pressed hard against him and plunged her hand into the stale warmth of his jeans.

But then the phone started to ring inside. It rang and rang. Kate knew who it was. She pulled back from him guiltily.

'I have to get that. I have to go,' she said.

Kate resisted waking. The pain of her hangover sliced through her scalp. Her guts rumbled and knotted like twisted sheets. She rolled over to blink at the dawn light invading the room through a crack in the blind. She pulled the pillow over her head but she knew there was no escaping it. She could still hear Nell in the next room.

'Mummy! Mummy! Muuuum!'

Nell's voice quavered as her calls turned into cries. Kate rolled onto her back, looked at the fly-spotted ceiling and groaned. The stockie from the field day was still in her bed.

'Oi,' she said, prodding him in the gut so that he grunted. Through clenched teeth she said, 'You have to go. You have to get out of here. I don't want my daughter to see you.'

'Daughter?' he murmured into the pillow. '*Daughter*? You said you had a *dog*, not a daughter.'

Just then, her housemate Tabby began thudding on the door.

'Kate. For God's sake . . . get up! Nell needs you and I'm not doing the rounds this morning!'

Kate didn't need X-ray vision to know that Tabby was standing there outside her bedroom door. She'd be wrapped in her glowing white bathrobe, her blonde hair swept back in a neat ponytail, her face made up and ready for work.

Kate also knew that Nell would be trying to drag furniture over to the door in her room so she could reach the handle and get out. She'd have big fat tears on her red cherub cheeks. Her pull-up night nappy would be sodden with wee and she'd have morning hair. Sticky-up hair, soft-as-fairy hair, Kate thought. A cocktail of love and guilt swamped her. She glanced at the man beside her. The dark hair on his outspread arms suddenly looked coarse and ugly. She wished he would go.

'Hell,' said Kate, jumping, as her clock radio blasted out Lee Kernaghan.

'*There ain't nothing like a country crowd, little bit crazy and a little bit loud. We've got our own way of turning things upside down . . .*' sang Lee.

With a jolt, the song's lyric reminded Kate of the night before and a sudden vision of the Hills hoist looking like a broken TV antenna with its snapped limb and slack wires made her cringe. Then Kate remembered the call from her

aunt Maureen. Her stern voice cutting through Kate's alcohol-addled brain, demanding to know where the hell was she? And why hadn't she come to pick up Nellie? Then, Kate remembered, an hour or so after the call, Maureen had turned up. Her lips were thin with fury as she deposited a ruffled, sleepy Nellie on the doorstep, while Kate tried hard to seem sober and pretended there wasn't a naked stranger passed out in her bed.

Kate pulled back the doona and groaned as she hauled on her grubby dressing-gown. She tossed her hair up into a purple band that had long ago lost its elasticity. Then she threw the bloke's clothes onto his dozing body and shoved his hat over his head.

'Bugger off now please, Tim McGraw,' she said, before stepping painfully on the plastic sheep trophy lying on the floor.

'Ouch!' she said, hopping from the room.

Steam rose from Kate's coffee cup and swirled in a beam of sunlight. Kate slouched with her head in her hands as Nell sat beside her, banging her legs rhythmically against her chair. Nell held up her Vegemite toast and made plane noises before cramming the soggy slice into her mouth.

'Mummy sick! Mummy sick. Bleaaarrrck,' she said, sticking out her brown-smeared tongue. Kate gave her a weak smile.

'Just eat your breakfast, stirrer.'

Nellie grinned so hard that chewed toast tumbled from her mouth and plopped onto the tiled floor. Behind the sliding glass door, through cloudy pupils, Sheila eyed the crumbs, drooling. Kate sighed. She hadn't fed the poor dog last night and she was out of dog food again. Tabby strode in, snatching up her keys from the kitchen bench.

'Shall I cook again tonight?' she said. 'I've got netball though, so dinner won't be until 7.30.'

'Sure,' said Kate queasily.

Tabby glanced at the clock, picked up her sleek black briefcase and arched an eyebrow at Kate.

'You'll be late for work,' Tabby said. She headed out the door to her sweet-smelling banker's car, where Kate pictured her sliding her tiny, neat bottom onto the clean upholstery. Kate jumped at the slam of the car door. It said it all. She swallowed down a wave of nausea as she gulped her coffee.

'I want a drink too, Mummy! Drink! Drink!' said Nell, holding out her grubby little hands.

'All right.' Kate sighed, pushing herself up from the table. 'A "please" would be nice.'

Sheila whined at the door and gave two quick scratches on the glass. Kate let out a noise of frustration and flung the door open. She threw a piece of cold toast, margarine congealing in dobs on the crusts, and Sheila caught it with a crocodile snap.

'I'll take you for a walk tonight,' she said, slamming the door.

'Must be hard keeping a working dog in town,' said a voice from the doorway. Kate turned to see the Hills-hoist man standing in his boxer shorts. She leapt across the cool kitchen lino and pushed him out of Nell's view.

'Shower's that way,' she said, pointing down the hall. Behind the grimy glass, Sheila began to bark loudly, her hackles raised.

'Siddown, Sheila!' growled Kate.

'Who's that, Mummy?' Nellie asked. When Kate ignored her question, Nellie thudded her juice on the table. Orange liquid splattered across the floor and up the wall.

'The plumber, Nell,' Kate said. 'It's the plumber. Come to fix the shower.' Nell rubbed her little hands through her hair and frowned.

'I need toilet, Mummy.'

'But the plumber's using the bathroom.'

'*Toilet*!' Kate watched Nell's cheeks turn pink and her jaw jut out.

'Oh, *Nell*!'

Leaning both elbows on the kitchen bench, Kate covered her face with her hands. God, she thought. How did life get so crazy?

Two

Kate flung a browning apple core from the twin-cab ute and hastily brushed yesterday's sandwich crumbs from Nell's booster seat. She stood back and watched her little girl clamber up and wait to be strapped in.

As Kate turned the engine over, she looked at Nell in the rear-vision mirror, noting her unbrushed hair and mismatching clothes. Vegemite already stained her shirt front. Kate sighed. What sort of a mother was she? It looked like Nell was coming home from day care, not going to it. She pulled out into the suburban street and memories of her journey from Tasmania to the mainland three years earlier swelled in her. Her unplanned journey to motherhood. It had been just weeks after the Rouseabout B&S Ball. She was on her way to agricultural college, travelling to the mainland for the first time in her scrappy little Subaru ute. There'd been no need for childseats and dual-cab utes back then.

On a dozey summer evening Kate had driven her ute into the open mouth of the ship's hull. On the wet gleaming deck, Kate had looked up to the cherry-red towers that belched diesel fumes into the crisp air. Two blasts of the horn, the glug and shudder of reverse-thrust engines and the town of Devonport slid away into the distance. People waving from the rocky groyne became tiny specks. She felt the pinch of

sadness that none of her family were there, waving. None of what was left of her family.

She recalled the 'too cool for school' way she'd slung herself onto the thick upholstered couches in the ship's bar and sipped at a Bundy, hating the aftertaste left by the town-water ice.

Here she was, a fresh-faced Tasmanian country girl, raised on the windswept east coast. A girl who wore Blundstone boots for work and cowgirl boots for play. A girl with an old kelpie curled up on a blanket in the ship's dog trailer, below in the hold. Parked near the dogs was 'Thelma', Kate's bomby old Subaru, its mottled paintwork covered with B&S stickers across the tailgate. It was all she'd needed then. A half-reliable ute with a tattered front seat for Sheila to sit on and a torn tarp to keep most of the rain off her bags in the back. And one functioning wiper that scraped haphazardly across the driver's windscreen.

Back then, she had been off on an adventure. She'd buried the memory of her mother's death, turned her back on her father and screamed at her father's new woman before she'd gone. She'd only paused momentarily to kiss her brother Will and hug her horse Matilda goodbye, and take one last look at the farm. Bronty. Her home.

Australia's mainland was hers to explore. There would be B&Ss and boys and wild, crazy nights with new friends. Along with that, she was hungry to learn. She would soak up all the agricultural knowledge they could give her at college, so she could grow to be like her mother – a woman with a vision for the future of farming.

Kate vowed to take over where Laney had left off, to make a deep and stubborn furrow in the agricultural industry – the industry that *should* be recognised by everyone as the heartbeat of the country. Kate swigged on her rum and cast her eyes about the ship's crowd. She heard her mother's voice in her head. 'It'll be your children, Kate, the farmers of the future, who will rescue all of these people. They don't know it, but

food is the most important thing. Farmers are the key to the future. And you can be part of it if you choose.'

That night on the ship there was only one thing that drowned out Laney's voice in Kate's head. It was a niggling suspicion, deep within her body, that she had made a huge mistake. She thought of the box that she'd tucked in the side pocket of her backpack. The pregnancy-test kit.

Kate had finished her drink, then shouldered her pack and gone out onto the deck to watch the mutton-birds skitter above the thick dark swell of Bass Strait. When her fingers were numbed from the icy wind, she pulled open the heavy door and made her way unsteadily along the rolling ship's corridor. Then she locked herself in a swaying toilet cubicle that held the faint stench of vomit and unpacked the kit to find out if what she feared was true.

She remembered the asphyxiating feeling of the ship's toilet cubicle and the roll and slam of the hull on the unrelenting swell. Her shaking hands had ripped at the foil packet and taken out the plastic stick. When she saw two blue lines screaming 'positive', her whole world had rolled too. She was pregnant. Alone and pregnant, wishing like hell she'd never gone to the Rouseabout B&S ball and done what she had done.

Early the next morning, when the impatient queue of cars, caravans and trucks clattered out from the ship's belly and into Melbourne's crowded centre, Kate had pulled over at a phonebox on the Esplanade that ran parallel to the brown, newly combed beach. Her mind scrambled in panic. She'd automatically dialled her father's number, hoping to reach Will. Instead, her stepmother Annabelle had answered.

'Is Will there?' Kate said.

'He's out and about.'

'Oh. Is Dad there?'

'I'll put him on.' Kate heard the phone clunk down. 'Henry!' she heard Annabelle call. A moment later, her father's voice.

'You're on the other side then?'

'Yes.' Kate struggled to hold back her tears. She couldn't say any more.

'Kate? What's going on?' Her father's voice sounded annoyed. Kate imagined his cooling coffee sitting beside his congealing porridge.

She blurted it out. 'I'm pregnant.'

There was silence. For a long time, she could hear the clicks over the optic fibres that lay beneath the seabed. A painful silence stretched across the water from Melbourne to Tasmania, right to her father's ear. Kate was sure he hadn't said it out loud, but in her head he shouted, 'Silly girl! I knew you'd do something like this to me! Stupid bloody girl!'

When he at last did speak he quietly said, 'What are you going to do?'

'I don't know.' She desperately wanted him to say come home. But instead, across the coldness of the line, with a southerly wind at her back, Kate heard his words.

'Better keep on going to your Auntie Maureen's. She can sort you out better than I can.'

Kate knew deep down he didn't mean it that way. Like a slap of rejection. But it was what she had been looking for from him back then, wasn't it? That last severance between father and daughter.

She slammed the phone back in its cradle and ran to her ute. Holding Sheila's head in her lap, Kate bunkered down in her ute between Port Phillip Bay and the steep cliff of the city's skyscrapers, not knowing what to do. Wishing like hell she had her mother with her, here on this earth.

For an hour she sat stroking Sheila's silky ears and thinking of the tiny cluster of cells dividing inside her. She could book herself into a clinic. Have a termination and then be on her way to college. Life would go on as normal. But then, she thought of her mother. She thought of the seeds in the attic at home on Bronty that Laney used to cup in the palm of her hand and move about with her fingertips.

'The life in these seeds,' Laney would say, looking wide-eyed at her children, 'is a miracle beyond comprehension.'

The seeds had been collected by Henry's mother and his grandmother and great-grandmother before that. Each generation of women had carefully catalogued and stored them in beautifully crafted wooden drawers beneath the sloping roof of the attic. Seeds from healthy vegetables that had been grown and collected since settlement. Seeds deposited carefully in browning paper envelopes decorated with tiny trails of hungry silverfish that mingled with the swirl of three generations of Webster women's handwriting. There were tiny black pinpricks or smoother round orbs, all kinds of shapes and sizes of seed from Bronty's extensive colonial garden.

One day, when Kate was about ten years old, her mother told her a story as she gazed at the tiny black seeds, some no bigger than fly spots.

'Your gran so desperately wanted a brother or sister for your dad,' Laney said. 'But babies sometimes don't come when we plan them. Life's all about healthy seeds, and having healthy soil to grow them in. And babies are the same – you can't have a baby without a healthy seed and a healthy womb. That's why you've got no uncles or aunts. God only gave your gran one healthy and precious seed, and that seed was your dad. And look what a bloody good tree he's grown into.'

Kate remembered her mother in the Bronty vegetable garden, stooping to point out the curl and twitch of a runner-bean vine that had clambered its way over Kate and Will's lopsided scarecrow. How she encouraged her children to crunch their white teeth through snowpeas and gorge themselves on strawberries until Will's already pink shining cheeks broke out in hives.

Kate knew in her heart what her mother would say about the baby. She would tell Kate to let this seed grow, and make a life, in case there were no more seeds within her. This might be the only one.

She sat up straight, resolved. She put her hand on her flat tummy, feeling as if part of her mother was now embedded in this baby. Kate fired up the engine of her old ute and drove on to New South Wales.