

Ransome's Crossing

KAYE DACUS



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS

EUGENE, OREGON

Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

The author is represented by MacGregor Literary.

Cover by Left Coast Design, Portland, Oregon

Cover photos © Richard Jenkins; iStockphoto

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

RANSOME'S CROSSING

Copyright © 2010 by Kaye Dacus

Published by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dacus, Kaye, 1971-

Ransome's crossing / Kaye Dacus.

p. cm.—(The Ransome trilogy ; bk. 2)

ISBN 978-0-7369-2754-3 (pbk.)

1. Ship captains—Fiction. 2. Single women—Fiction. 3. Married people—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3604.A25R355 2010

813'.6—dc22

2009052333

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, digital, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 / DP-SK / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Chapter One

Portsmouth, England
August 17, 1814

Ned Cochrane, first lieutenant, HMS *Alexandra*, stepped out of the jolly boat onto the stone dock and glanced around at the early morning bustle of the dockyard crew. Only nine days remained to fill the crew roster and fit out the ship with the supplies needed for the first leg of a transatlantic voyage. With yesterday lost in celebrating Captain—no, *Commodore* Ransome’s wedding—and since the commodore’s attention would be necessarily split between distractions on land and his duties to his ship, Ned would shoulder the burden of preparing the ship and crew.

“Sir, look out! Lieutenant Cochrane!”

Ned spun—and fell back just in time to save himself from being swept off the quay by a net full of barrels swinging at the end of a crane. His hat wasn’t so fortunate.

The cargo swayed menacingly overhead. Ned scrambled backward, out of harm’s way. Once clear, he leapt to his feet. “You, there! Watch what you’re about. Secure that crane,” he yelled at the negligent dock crew.

“Are you all right, sir?”

The voice—an odd timbre in the chorus of tenor, baritone, and bass tones usually heard in the dockyard—matched the one which had called the warning. He turned.

A young man, not really more than a boy in a worn, ill-fitting

midshipman's uniform, stood holding Ned's dripping hat. Sure enough, the lad's right sleeve was wet to the shoulder.

"Nothing injured but my pride." Ned took his hat and studied the midshipman. The boy's tall, round hat concealed most of his dark hair, but...Ned squinted against the bright glare of the sun off the water and surrounding gray stone. "Do I know you, lad?"

The boy touched the brim of the shabby hat. "Charles Lott, sir. We spoke last week. You said there might be a place for me aboard your ship."

"Ah, yes." Ned now recalled meeting the midshipman, who'd answered Ned's questions when the boy had first approached him about a position aboard *Alexandra* last week, even the question Ned had missed the first time he'd stood for his lieutenantcy examination. "I'm sorry, but we have filled the positions on *Alexandra*."

Shocked disappointment filled the boy's elfin face.

"However, I have recommended you to the captain of *Audacious*." Ned struggled to keep the smile from his face.

"*Audacious*? Captain Yates, then?"

Ned sighed. He liked Commodore Ransome's friend extraordinarily and had looked forward to the fun to be had on Jamaica station with two such commanders. "Alas, I am afraid to say Captain Yates has resigned his commission. Captain Parker is taking command of *Audacious*." Ned glanced around the quay. "There is his first officer. Come, I shall introduce you."

"Thank you, sir." Midshipman Lott straightened the white collar and cuffs of his too-large coat.

Ned caught his counterpart's attention and met him near the steps to the upper rampart. He made the introduction and stood back as the first lieutenant of *Audacious*, Montgomery Howe, put a series of questions to the lad. Lott answered each quickly and with near text-book precision.

"Well done, Mr. Lott. You are ordered to present yourself day after tomorrow to begin your official duties."

The boy's face paled. "Sir, may I have until next Thursday?"

"The day before we sail?" Howe crossed his arms and glared at Ned and then at Lott.

Ned ground his teeth at the boy's impertinence, which was casting him—Ned—in a bad light. He'd recommended the lad, after all.

"Yes, sir. I am aware it is an inconvenience, but my mother is a widow, and I must see that she is settled—that our business affairs are settled—before I could leave on such a long journey."

"And it will take a sennight?" Ned asked.

"We live in the north part of the country, sir. 'Tis a three days' journey by post, sir." Lott spoke to the cobblestones below his feet.

Aye, well should he be ashamed to make such a request... though many years ago, a newly made captain had let a newly made lieutenant have four days to see to his own widowed mother and sister.

Apparently, from the expression that flickered across Howe's face, he had also received a similar mercy some time earlier in his career. "Very well, then. You are to present yourself to me on deck of *Audacious* no later than seven bells in the morning watch Thursday next. If you are late, your spot will be given to someone else. Understand?"

"Aye, sir!" Lott touched the brim of his hat again. "Thank you, sir."

"Dismissed—oh, and Mr. Lott?"

The boy, a few paces away already, halted and turned, at attention again. "Aye, sir?"

"Make yourself more presentable by next week if you can. You can find plenty of secondhand uniforms available in the shops in much better condition than yours. And get a haircut. I do not allow midshipmen to tuck their hair under their collars."

Lott's hand flew to the back of his neck, eyes wide. "Aye, aye, sir."

"Dismissed."

Ned moved to stand beside Howe as the boy ran down the quay. "Sorry for the inconvenience, Monty, but I have a feeling that boy will do well by you."

"I've never heard a lad recite the answers so perfectly. He's slight. Says he's fifteen? Can't be more than thirteen or fourteen."

"Some boys don't mature as quickly as others. You should remember

that quite well.” Ned bumped his shoulder against his former berth mate’s.

Howe shoved him back. “Just because you gained height and a deeper voice before I did doesn’t mean you matured faster, Ned. In fact, you could probably learn manners in decorum and respect from little Charlie Lott.”

Ned guffawed and bade his friend farewell. He wasn’t certain if he could learn anything from the young midshipman, but he would certainly look out for him and do whatever he could to promote the boy’s interest. He had the feeling Charles Lott would make a good officer some day.



Charlotte Ransome dived behind a large shrub and held her breath. Footsteps crunched on the gravel garden path, coming toward her closer and closer.

Had he seen her?

Keep walking. Please, Lord, let him keep walking.

When he reached her shrub, Charlotte squeezed her eyes shut, fearful of blinking. If the gardener had seen and recognized her, he would report her to the Yateses, who would in turn report her to her mother and brother—and all would be lost.

A gust of wind rustled the verdure around her. Her heart thundered against her ribs, and she feared she might be sick.

But the gardener did not stop. Long after his footsteps faded, Charlotte kept to her hiding place. Quiet descended until only the noise of the streets and alleys beyond the garden walls filtered in around the enclosure behind the enormous townhouse.

Peeking around the shrub, she found the path clear once again.

Sneaking into the garden through the servants’ entrance in the rear had proven risky but successful. She hadn’t been sure she’d avoid being spotted by any of the servants, busy with their early morning duties, but Providence appeared to be with her.

She cautiously made her way across the garden to the back of the house. She peeked through the window of Collin Yates's study and, finding it empty, slipped inside, relieved no one had discovered that she'd left it unlocked when she sneaked out of the house near dawn. She stuck her head out into the hallway, and, hearing no movement, made her way upstairs as quietly as she could. She paused on the landing and looked around the corner, down the hallway on which all of the bedrooms opened. No stirrings, no sounds. Heart pounding wildly and trying to keep her feet from touching the floor, she made her way along the thick carpet to the bedroom at the end of the hall and slipped inside, pushing the door closed with a soft click.

Movement across the room caught her eye. Turning to face the intruder, she found herself looking at a bedraggled boy in an oversized coat and britches, a tall, round hat jammed on his head almost down to his eyes.

She laughed, and the bedraggled midshipman in the mirror did likewise. Yes, her disguise was convincing enough to startle even herself. With a sigh she unbuttoned the coat and pulled it off, dropping it to the floor. When Lieutenant Cochrane had looked at her with recognition in his gray eyes, she was certain her entire plan would crash like a ship against a rocky shore. She sent up a quick prayer of thanks that he hadn't connected her appearance as Charles Lott with her true identity.

Sinking into the chair at the dressing table, she yanked off the hat and pulled her long thick hair out from under the high collar of the uniform coat. She'd tried pinning it flat to her head, but the cumbersome length of it—past her waist when unbound—created too much bulk for even the oversized hat to conceal.

The small porcelain clock on the mantel chimed once. Half-past eight. Panic once again rising, Charlotte peeled out of the uniform—picked up for mere pennies the first time she'd been able to sneak away from her mother's and Mrs. Yates's chaperonage a few days ago—stuffed it in the bottom of her trunk, threw her sleeping gown over

her head, and jumped into the bed, still trying to find the sleeves with her hands as the bedroom door swung quietly open.

At the thump of the water pitcher on the commode, Charlotte sat up as if awakened by the sound.

Her maid curtsied. "Good morning, miss. I brought you fresh water for washing."

"Thank you." Charlotte grabbed her dressing gown from the end of the bed and shrugged into it, and then she stepped behind the screen in the corner. The scent of lilacs drifted up from the warm water as she poured it into the porcelain basin in the top of the exquisite dark-wood cabinet.

After running most of the way back from the dockyard, the wet cloth felt good against her skin, especially on her neck and back where her thick braid had been pressed against her by her uniform coat.

With the maid's assistance, she soon stood before the mirror where Midshipman Charles Lott had been reflected less than an hour ago, now looking upon a fashionable young lady. Fear that she wouldn't be able to pull off her plan swirled in her stomach, but she pushed it aside.

"The irons are ready, miss."

Charlotte sat at the dressing table, sipped the coffee which had been delivered while she dressed, and reviewed her plans for the next eight days as the maid twisted and twirled and pinned her hair.

Anticipation, anxiety, and excitement danced within her veins. In just over a week, she would leave Portsmouth on a grand adventure. A grand adventure that would culminate in arriving in Jamaica, being reunited with Henry Winchester, and marrying him.



"Your new rank suits you, Commodore Ransome."

William met Julia's green eyes in the mirror's reflection. Sitting in the middle of the bed in her white sleeping gown, her coppery hair cascading in riotous curls around her shoulders and back, she looked

as young as when he'd made the gut-wrenching decision to walk away from her twelve years ago.

Now she was his wife. His knees quaked at the thought.

He returned to the examination of his new uniform coat, delivered from the tailor just this morning. "I am indebted to your father for arranging the promotion. There are many officers more deserving. All will say I received special favor because I am now his son-in-law."

"As you should know by now," Julia said, climbing off the bed and crossing to her dressing table, "my father does nothing unless he thinks it best for the Royal Navy." Drawing her hairbrush through her fountain of hair, she ambled across the colorful carpet toward him. "He secured your promotion before he knew of our engagement, so that did not have any bearing on his decision." She pulled the mass of her hair over her left shoulder and continued pulling the soft bristles of the brush through it. "And when have you ever worried about rumors going around about your being favored by my father?" A mischievous grin quirked the corners of her full lips. "Isn't worrying about rumors and gossip what got us here in the first place?"

The fact she'd forgiven him, that she could now joke about the past, both thrilled and humbled him. He did not deserve her.

She set the brush down and came to stand behind him, looking around him at the reflection. She ran her hand along his sleeve to the braid-laden cuff. His arm tingled in reaction. He did not want to respond to her like this—every time she spoke, moved, breathed, he lost track of everything but her. He had to conquer it; otherwise, her presence aboard ship would be detrimental to his command.

A knock on the door roused both of them. The maid Lady Dalrymple had assigned to Julia entered on Julia's entreaty.

"I will leave you." William inclined his head and made for the door, and then he stopped as soon as he reached it. He turned and smiled at her. "Do not be long."

"I will join you for breakfast shortly."

He stood in the hallway a few moments after the door closed,

separating him from Julia for the first time since their wedding yesterday morning. Pleasure and regret battled within him. Marrying Julia Witherington had, in less than twenty-four hours, brought him more joy than he could ever have dreamed or deserved. Yet when he thought of his duty, of his commitment to the Royal Navy, to king and country, he couldn't help but fear he'd made his life more difficult by marrying at such a time.

The east wing of the manor house at Brampton Park, home to Lady Dalrymple, rang with emptiness. While William appreciated the privacy afforded them by the dowager viscountess's invitation to stay in the unused section for their wedding night—with hints she would like them to stay even longer—the grandeur of it made his skin crawl, and he could not wait until he could deposit Julia at her father's house and return to his ship.

After two wrong turns, he managed to find the small breakfast room, unused for nearly a century according to Lady Dalrymple, since the new wing and the much larger dining room had been completed.

The small room, paneled with dark wood, set him somewhat more at ease. By ignoring the narrow, tall windows, he could almost imagine himself aboard a ship in this room.

He paced, waiting for Julia, pondering how he could recover his good sense around her. When she entered the room a little while later—queenly in a purple dress, her hair the only crown she would ever need—he realized the only way he would be able to regain control of his mind would be to limit his contact with her.

Trying not to watch her serve eggs, sausage, and toast onto her plate, nor admire the curve of her neck above the lace set into the neck of her gown, William piled food onto his own plate, held Julia's chair for her, and then took his place at the head of the small table.

"I must return to my ship today."

Julia stirred sugar into her coffee. "Of course. I knew you would need to spend your days preparing *Alexandra* for the voyage."

He cleared his throat of the bite of egg that wished to lodge there. "What I mean is that I must return to *reside* aboard my ship."

Julia's spoon clanked against her cup. Her face paled, and the light which had danced in her eyes all morning vanished.

William's innards clenched. Perhaps he should have eased into the idea instead of blurting it out. He blamed it on her. He could not think clearly in her presence.

"Have...have you received word from your crew that there is trouble?" Her voice quavered.

"No. It is nothing like that." Unable to stop himself, he reached across the corner of the table and took her hand in his. "My duty is to my ship, to my crew. I am needed there. Here, my attentions and loyalty are divided."

For a brief moment, Julia's chin quivered. But she pressed her lips together and drew in a deep breath. "I understand. And I have no desire to draw you away from your duties. I have already created too much inconvenience and upheaval in your life. I do not wish to generate more. However, I have promised Lady Dalrymple we would join her tonight for her dinner and card party as her honored guests. If we were to abdicate from her hospitality today, how would that reflect on her?"

Though well masked, the pain in Julia's expression made William want to retract his words, to promise her he would stay here with her the remainder of the time they had in England. Any other woman would have been offended by his blundering, unreasonable demand. Julia apologized for inconveniencing him.

He raised her hand and kissed the back of it. "Aye. We will stay one more night." Then, giving in to impulse, he leaned over, cupped that quivering chin, and claimed her lips in a searing kiss. "And I will not have you thinking yourself an inconvenience to me."

His action resulted in the desired effect—the spark rekindled in her green eyes. She ran her finger along his jaw. "You lie too well, Commodore Ransome."

"You start off our marriage ill, Mrs. Ransome, if you believe I would ever lie to you." He squeezed her hand and then tucked in to his breakfast.

“Conceal the hard truth, then,” she said, cocking her head and sending the spiral curls at her temples dancing, “for the last few days have not been a convenience to you.”

“An upheaval, certainly.” He feigned a close interest in the piece of sausage speared on his fork. “However, any inconvenience I have suffered has been more than adequately recompensed not just by gaining a wife, but by finally receiving the complete approbation of my admiral.”

Julia’s gasp preceded a gale of laughter.

A surge of contentment washed away the morning’s anxieties. Perhaps being married would not interfere with his duty to the navy as severely as he’d feared.