

## The Battle of the River Plate

*And there's the Ark Royal, keeping a good distance from the enemy...*

There were a couple of quiet explosions – *pop-pop-pop*. The noise of tinny gunfire competing unsuccessfully with the gulls wheeling and screeching overhead.

*Oh, and the Achilles has taken a hit, but luckily she has been able to contact the Ark Royal, who is racing to her aid . . .*

'Racing' wasn't quite the word that Jackson would have used for the rather laboured progress the Ark Royal was making across the boating lake in the park.

*And here come the RAF bombers! Excellent shooting, boys! Let's hear it for the RAF and the escorts.*

. . .

A rather weak cheer went up from the audience as two very small wooden planes jerked across the boating lake on zip wires.

'Jesus,' Nathan muttered. 'This is pathetic.'

'Don't swear,' Jackson said automatically. It *was* pathetic in some ways (*the smallest manned navy in the world!*), but that was the charm of it, surely? The boats were replicas, the longest twenty foot at most, the others considerably less. There were park employees concealed inside the boats, steering them. The audience was sitting on wooden benches on raked concrete steps. For an hour beforehand an old-fashioned kind of man had played old-fashioned kind of music on an organ in a bandstand and now the same old-fashioned man was commentating on the battle. In an old-fashioned kind of way. ('Is this ever going to end?' Nathan asked.)

Jackson had come here as a kid once himself, not with his own family (when he had a family) – they never did anything together, never went anywhere, not even a day-trip. That was the working class for you, too busy working to have time for pleasure, and too poor to pay for it if they managed to find the time. ('Didn't you hear, Jackson?' Julia said. 'The class war's over. Everyone lost.') He couldn't remember the circumstances – perhaps he had come here on a Scouts outing, or with the Boys' Brigade, or even the Salvation Army – the young Jackson had clung to any organization going in the hope of getting something for free. He didn't let the fact that he was brought up as a Catholic interfere with his beliefs. He had even signed the Pledge at the age of ten, promising the local Salvation Army Temperance Society his lifelong sobriety in exchange for a lemonade and a plate of cakes. ('And how did that work out for you?' Julia asked.) It was a relief when he eventually discovered the real Army, where everything was free. At a price.

'The Battle of the River Plate,' Jackson told Nathan, 'was the first naval battle of the Second World War.' One of his jobs as a father was to educate, especially on his specialist subjects – cars, wars, women. ('Jackson, you know nothing about women,' Julia said. 'Exactly,' Jackson said.) Nathan met any information conveyed to him by either rolling his eyes or appearing to be deaf. Jackson hoped that, somehow or other, his son was unconsciously absorbing the continual bombardment of advice and warnings that his behaviour necessitated – 'Don't walk so close to the edge of the cliff. Use your knife and fork, not your fingers. Give up your seat on the bus.' Although when did Nathan ever go anywhere on a bus? He was ferried around like a lord. Jackson's son was thirteen and his ego was big enough to swallow planets whole.

'What do they mean – "manned"?' Nathan said.

'There are people inside the boats, steering them.'

'There aren't,' he scoffed. 'That's stupid.'

'There are. You'll see.'

*Here comes Exeter as well. And the enemy submarine is in trouble now . . .*

'You wait,' Jackson said. 'One day you'll have kids of your own and you'll find that you make them do all the things that you currently despise – museums, stately homes, walks in the countryside – and they in turn will hate you for it. That, my son, is how cosmic justice works.'

'I won't be doing *this*,' Nathan said.

'And that sound you can hear will be me laughing.'

'No, it won't. You'll be dead by then.'

'Thanks. Thanks, Nathan.' Jackson sighed. Had he been so callous at his son's age? And he hardly needed reminding of his mortality, he saw it in his own boy growing older every day.

Looking on the bright side, Nathan was talking in more or less whole sentences this afternoon, rather than the usual simian grunts. He was slumped on the bench, his long legs sprawled out, his arms folded in what could only be described as a sarcastic manner. His feet (designer trainers, of course) were enormous – it wouldn't be long before he was taller than Jackson. When Jackson was his son's age he had two sets of clothes and one of those was his school uniform. Apart from his gym plimsolls ('Your what?' Nathan puzzled), he had possessed just the one pair of shoes and would have been baffled by the concepts 'designer' or 'logo'.

By the time Jackson was thirteen his mother was already dead of cancer, his sister had been murdered and his brother had killed himself, helpfully leaving his body – hanging from the light fitting – for Jackson to find when he came home from school. Jackson never got the chance to be selfish, to sprawl and make demands and fold his arms sarcastically. And anyway, if he had, his father would have given him a good skelping. Not that Jackson wished suffering on his son – God forbid – but a little less narcissism wouldn't go amiss.

Julia, Nathan's mother, could go toe to toe with Jackson in the grief stakes – one sister murdered, one sister who killed herself, one who died of cancer. ('Oh, and don't forget Daddy's sexual abuse,' she reminded him. 'Trumps to me, I think.') And now all the wretchedness of their shared pasts had been distilled into this one child. What if somehow, despite his untroubled appearance, it had lodged in Nathan's DNA and infected his blood, and even now tragedy and grief were growing and multiplying in his bones like a cancer. ('Have you even tried being an optimist?' Julia said. 'Once,' Jackson said. 'It didn't suit me.')

'I thought you said you were going to get me an ice-cream.'

'I think what you meant to say was, "Dad, can I have that ice-cream you promised and seem to have temporarily forgotten about? Please?"'

'Yeah, whatever.' After an impressively long pause he added, reluctantly, 'Please.' ('I serve at the pleasure of the President,' an unruffled Julia said when their offspring demanded something.)

'What do you want?'

'Magnum. Double peanut butter.'

'I think you might be setting your sights quite high there.'

'Whatever. A Cornetto.'

'Still high.'

Nathan came trailing clouds of instructions where food was concerned. Julia was surprisingly neurotic about snacks. 'Try and control what he eats,' she said. 'He can have a small chocolate bar but no sweets, definitely no Haribo. He's like a Gremlin after midnight if he gets too much sugar. And if you can get a piece of fruit into him then you're a better woman than me.' Another year or two and Julia would be worrying about cigarettes and alcohol and drugs. She should enjoy the sugar years, Jackson thought.

'While I'm getting your ice-cream,' Jackson said to Nathan, 'make sure you keep an eye on our friend Gary there in the front row, will you?' Nathan showed no sign of having heard him so Jackson waited a beat and then said, 'What did I just say?'

'You said, "While I'm gone make sure you keep an eye on our friend Gary there in the front row, will you?"'

'Right. Good,' Jackson said, slightly chastened, not that he was going to show it. 'Here,' he said, handing over his iPhone, 'take a photograph if he does anything interesting.'

When Jackson got up, the dog followed him, labouring up the steps behind him to the café. Julia's dog, Dido, a yellow Labrador, overweight and ageing. Years ago, when Jackson was first introduced to Dido by Julia ('Jackson, this is Dido – Dido, this is Jackson'), he thought the dog must have been called after the singer, but it turned out she was the namesake of the Queen of Carthage. That was Julia in a nutshell.

Dido – the dog, not the Queen of Carthage – also came with a long list of instructions. You would think Jackson had never looked after a child or a dog before. ('But it wasn't my child or my dog,' Julia pointed out. 'I believe that should be our child,' Jackson said.)

Nathan had been three years old before Jackson was able to claim any ownership of him. Julia, for reasons best known to herself, had denied that Jackson was Nathan's father, so he had already missed the best years before she admitted to his paternity. ('I wanted him to myself,' she said.) Now that the worst years had arrived, however, it seemed that she was more than keen to share him.

Julia was going to be 'ferociously' busy for nearly the entire school holiday, so Jackson had brought Nathan to stay with him in the cottage he was currently renting, on the east coast of Yorkshire, a couple of miles north of Whitby. With good wi-fi Jackson could run his business – Brodie Investigations – from just about anywhere. The internet was evil but you had to love it.

Julia played a pathologist ('*the* pathologist,' she corrected) in the long-running police procedural *Collier*. *Collier* was described as 'gritty northern drama', although these days it was tired hokum thought up by cynical metropolitan types off their heads on coke, or worse, most of the time.

Julia had been given her own storyline for once. 'It's a big arc,' she told Jackson. He thought she said 'ark' and it took him a while to sort this mystery out in his head. Now, still, whenever she talked about 'my arc' he had a vision of her leading an increasingly bizarre parade of puzzled animals, two by two, up a gangplank. She wouldn't be the worst person to be with during the Flood. Beneath her scatty, actressy demeanour she was resilient and resourceful, not to mention good with animals.

Her contract was up for renewal and they were drip-feeding the script to her, so, she said, she was pretty certain that she was heading for a grisly exit at the end of her 'arc'. ('Aren't we all?' Jackson said.) Julia was sanguine, it had been a good run, she said. Her agent was keeping an eye on a Restoration Comedy that was coming up at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. ('Proper acting,' Julia said. 'And if that fails there's always Strictly. I've been offered it twice already. They're obviously scraping the bottom of the barrel.') She had a lovely throaty laugh, especially when being self-deprecating. Or pretending to be. It had a certain charm.

'As suspected, no Magnums, no Cornettos, they only had Bassani's,' Jackson said, returning with two cones held aloft like flambeaux. You might have thought that people would want their kids to stop eating Bassani's ice-cream after what had happened. Carmody's amusements were still there as well, a rowdy, popular presence on the front. Ice-cream and arcades – the perfect lures for kids. It must be getting on for a decade since the case was in the papers? (The older Jackson grew, the more slippery time became.) Antonio Bassani and Michael Carmody, local 'worthies' – one of them was in jail and the other one had topped himself, but Jackson could never remember which was which. He wouldn't be surprised if the one in jail wasn't due to get out soon, if he hadn't already. Bassani and Carmody liked kids. They liked kids too much. They liked handing kids around to other men who liked kids too much. Like gifts, like forfeits.

An eternally hungry Dido had waddled back hopefully on his heels and in lieu of ice-cream Jackson gave her a bone-shaped dog treat. He supposed it didn't make much difference to her what shape it was.

'I got a vanilla and a chocolate,' he said to Nathan. 'Which do you want?' A rhetorical question. Who under voting age ever chose vanilla?

'Chocolate. Thanks.'

*Thanks* – a small triumph for good manners, Jackson thought. ('He'll come good in the end,' Julia told him. 'Being a teenager is so difficult, their hormones are in chaos, they're exhausted a lot of the time. All that growing uses up a lot of energy.') But what about all those teenagers in the past who had left school at fourteen (nearly the same age as Nathan!) and gone into factories and steelworks and down coal mines? (Jackson's own father and his father before him, for example.) Or Jackson himself, in the Army at sixteen, a youth broken into pieces by authority and put back together again by it as a man. Were those teenagers, himself included, allowed the indulgence of chaotic hormones? No, they were not. They went to work alongside men and behaved themselves, they brought their pay packets home to their mothers (or fathers) at the end of the week and— ('Oh, do shut up, will you?' Julia said wearily. 'That life's gone and it isn't coming back.')

'Where's Gary?' Jackson asked, scanning the banks of seats.

'Gary?'

'The Gary you're supposed to be keeping an eye on.'

Without looking up from his phone, Nathan nodded in the direction of the dragon boats where Gary and Kirsty were queuing for tickets.

*And the battle is over and the Union Jack is being hoisted. Let's have a cheer for the good old Union flag!*

Jackson cheered along with the rest of the audience. He gave Nathan a friendly nudge and said, 'Come on, cheer the good old Union flag.'

'Hurrah,' Nathan said laconically. Oh, irony, thy name is Nathan Land, Jackson thought. His son had his mother's surname, it was a source of some contention between Julia and Jackson. To put it mildly. 'Nathan Land' to Jackson's ears sounded like the name of an eighteenth-century Jewish financier, the progenitor of a European banking dynasty. 'Nat Brodie', on the other hand, sounded like a robust adventurer, someone striking west, following the frontier in search of gold or cattle, loose-moraled women following in his wake. ('When did you get so fanciful?' Julia asked. Probably when I met you, Jackson thought.)

'Can we go now?' Nathan said, yawning excessively and unselfconsciously.

'In a minute, when I've finished this,' Jackson said, indicating his ice-cream. Nothing, in Jackson's opinion, made a grown man look more of a twit than walking around licking an ice-cream cone.

The combatants of the Battle of the River Plate began their lap of honour. The men inside had removed the top part of the boats – like conning towers – and were waving at the crowd.

'See?' Jackson said to Nathan. 'Told you so.'

Nathan rolled his eyes. 'So you did. Now can we go?'

'Yeah, well, let's just check on our Gary.'

Nathan moaned as if he was about to be waterboarded.

'Suck it up,' Jackson said cheerfully.

Now that the smallest manned navy in the world was sailing off to its moorings, the park's dragon boats were coming back out – pedalos in bright primary colours with long necks and big dragon heads, like cartoon versions of Viking longboats. Gary and Kirsty had already mounted their own fiery steed, Gary pedalling heroically out into the middle of the boating lake. Jackson took a couple of photos. When he checked his phone he was pleasantly surprised to find that Nathan had taken a burst – the modern equivalent of the flicker-books of his own childhood – while Jackson was off buying the ice-creams. Gary and Kirsty kissing, puckered up like a pair of puffer fish. 'Good lad,' Jackson said to Nathan.

'Now can we go?'

'Yes, we can.'