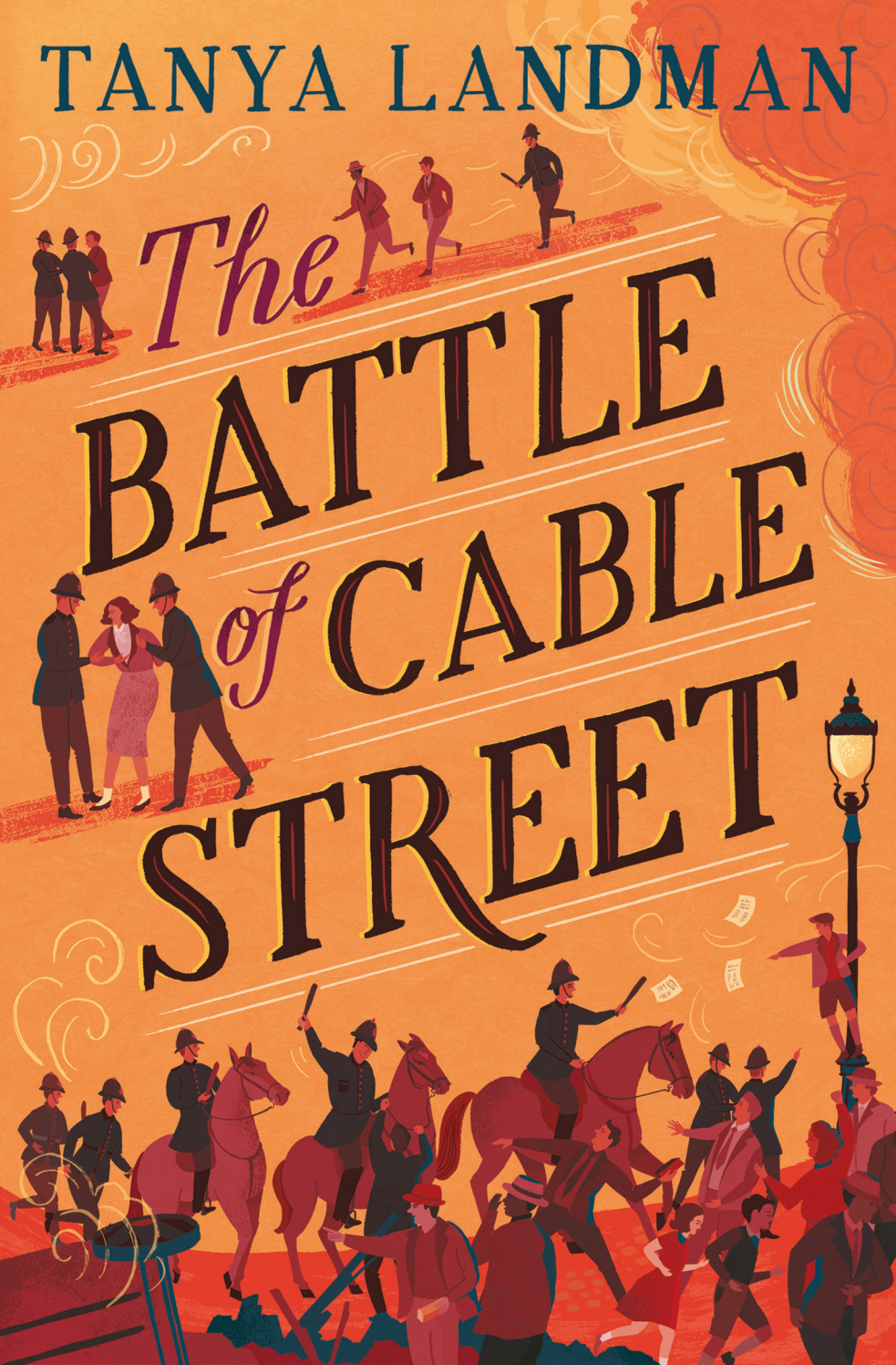
TANYA LANDMAN

The BATTLE of CABLE STREET



The BATTLE of CABLE STREET

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Barrington Stoke

First published in 2022 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

Text © 2022 Tanya Landman
Illustrations © 2022 Sara Mulvanny

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

ISBN: 978-1-80090-108-7

Printed by Hussar Books, Poland

To Keren,
for infinite wisdom and
expert advice

CHAPTER 1

Stepney, London, 2020

There's a lot of talk these days about the Second World War and how plucky little Britain stood up to Hitler all alone. People rave about the Blitz Spirit when bombs were being dropped on us night after night and we all just kept calm and carried on. They say that Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s was Germany's problem, and that nothing like that could ever possibly happen over here.

They're talking nonsense.

But most people just want an easy life, and facts are itchy, awkward things that can make you feel sweaty and uncomfortable. If I've learned one thing in my long, long life it's that most people prefer pretty lies to ugly truths.

But maybe you're not like most people.

Maybe you're one of the brave ones?

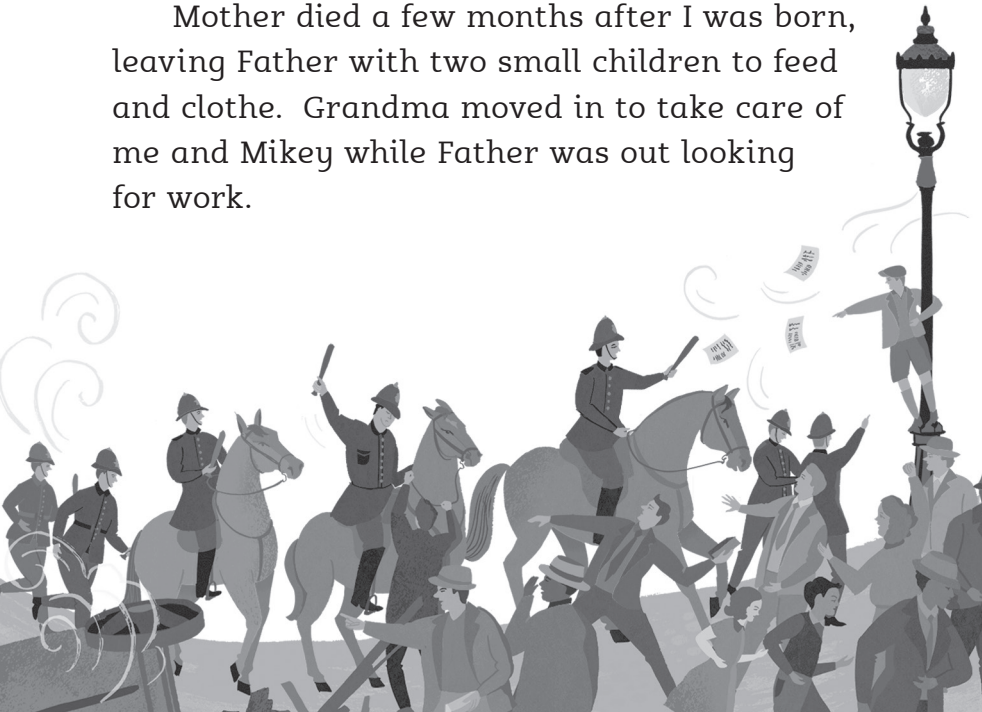
If you are, then read on.

CHAPTER 2

Stepney, London, 1920s

My mother was a French dancer, according to Nathan Cohen. Nathan lived next door to us and he said Mother was as dainty and delicate as a bird. Me and my brother Mikey had to take his word for it. We didn't remember her.

Mother died a few months after I was born, leaving Father with two small children to feed and clothe. Grandma moved in to take care of me and Mikey while Father was out looking for work.



We lived in a flat with just two rooms on the third floor of a tenement block. The block was at the bottom of a dead-end road just off Cable Street in the heart of Stepney. It was a slum – the grottiest, nastiest place you could hope to imagine, crawling with rats and fleas and the like. Paragon Buildings was its official name, but the people who lived there called it the Paradise. We had one hell of a sense of humour.

The East End of London was a right old mix of people in those days. Stepney was mostly Jewish, with a big dollop of Irish thrown in for extra flavour. My family was both. Or neither, depending on how you look at it.

Grandma came from a family of Irish immigrants. Her grandparents had come to London to escape the famine in Ireland. Her parents were strict Roman Catholics, and they didn't approve of Grandma falling in love with a young Jewish man called Max. But Grandma didn't care what they thought. She married Max anyway, and after that her parents never spoke to her again.

Grandma and Max raised six sons. They were very happy together until Max dropped dead of a heart attack one morning. It seemed

like a terrible tragedy at the time, Father said. But then the Great War started, and Max's death got swallowed up in a huge tidal wave of horror.

In 1914, Father and his five brothers all went marching off to fight in France. Father was the only one of Grandma's sons who came home. And if you're thinking that maybe our family was just really unlucky, you'd be wrong. Everyone in the Paradise could have told you a similar story. Me and Mikey grew up surrounded by adults who were damaged in mind or body by that bloody war. They were all haunted by the ghosts of the dead.

The Paradise was never, ever quiet. It's not surprising for tempers to flare when you pile damaged, haunted people on top of each other, pack them into a building so tight you can't stir them with a stick and keep them poor and desperate.

Morning, noon and night people shouted at each other in Irish and English and Yiddish and Russian and who knows what else. There was constant noise, and a lot of it came from the third floor where we lived. We had the Rosenbergs to the left and the Cohens to the right. Either side of them were the Smiths and the Murphys.

Mrs Smith hated Mrs Rosenberg. Their sons, Harry and Leo, had once come to blows. I can't for the life of me recall what started the fight. Who knows? Who cares? Harry Smith and Leo Rosenberg were always scrapping.

The boys made up two minutes later. But by then their mothers had got involved, taking their sons' sides and screaming at each other for hours. Mrs Smith and Mrs Rosenberg carried on arguing over the smallest things for days, weeks, years after that first falling-out. Sometimes those two women would be shouting insults all day long. They'd call each other nasty names until their throats were sore.

Every day, Grandma turfed me and Mikey out into the street to play. There was a whole gang of other kids out there, all boys apart from me. Girls living in the Paradise were Mother's Little Helpers, doing the chores, minding their younger siblings. On the rare occasions girls were allowed out, they played skipping games and the like.

But Grandma had raised six sons and no daughters. She didn't know what to do with me, so she dressed me in Mikey's old clothes. Grandma cut his hair with the kitchen scissors – short back and sides – then she did the same to

me. Right up until I started school, I looked like a boy, I acted like a boy, I got treated like a boy, and that suited me fine.

Whatever game we played, our next-door neighbour Nathan Cohen was always the leader. He was three years older than me and as tall and handsome as a film star. Nathan had dark curly hair and beautiful brown eyes. He was my hero. I was half in love with him before I could even walk. And I wasn't the only one. In our own different ways, all the gang were desperate to please Nathan.

Mikey did it by making Nathan laugh. My brother had wonky legs that curved like a wishbone from hip to ankle. Mikey rolled from side to side when he walked, as if he was a sailor who wasn't used to dry land. Mikey made fun of himself to stop people making fun of him. He was always playing the fool.

Harry Smith, on the other hand, took everything deadly serious. He was a few months younger than Nathan and did everything Nathan told him to without hesitation. If Nathan said jump, Harry would only stop to ask, "How high?"

Harry was Nathan's second-in-command. When Nathan was the pirate king plundering ships for treasure, Harry was his first mate. If Nathan was a captain leading a cavalry charge, Harry was by his side yelling, "Death or Glory!" Leo Rosenberg was devoted to Nathan and would have loved to have been in Harry's shoes. Maybe that was why they fell out so often. But the rest of us never argued; we just accepted whatever roles we were handed without question.

Nathan would make up all kinds of games. Sometimes he got the ideas from films he'd seen in the cinema. But mostly Nathan pulled stories out of his head. He wrapped us up in a make-believe world that was so much more real than the dull, drab one the grown-ups lived in.

Sometimes the kids from the next street got drawn in to our games. It didn't matter what we played – we were always the goodies, and they were always the baddies. We'd fight them all day. And I mean really fight, with sticks as swords. We'd use stones as cannonballs, and anything else we could get our hands on. Nathan always seemed to walk away unscathed, but me and Mikey went home from those battles covered in cuts and bruises. I didn't know what my legs

looked like without a peppering of scabs across my knees.

But our days weren't always spent yelling and running about the place. Sometimes Nathan would lead us all the way from Stepney to Bethnal Green, and on to the park. We'd lie there on the grass under the trees. Or we'd go down to the river and watch the tide coming in, filling the Thames with water. And in those quiet times my mind overflowed with tricky questions.

Why do the trees lose their leaves in winter?

Where does the water go when the tide is out?

Nathan said I asked all the right questions, but none of the answers were easy. He'd give me these long, complicated explanations. Nathan convinced me that there were fairies living in the park. The fairies made the trees lose their leaves so they could use them as blankets in winter. Nathan said there was a huge monster fast asleep and buried deep in the mud somewhere east of Tilbury. This monster breathed water instead of air and sucked the whole Thames in and out of its lungs twice a day.

The answers Nathan came up with were so good I pestered him with more and more

questions. But the one thing I never, ever asked was, “Why are we poor?”

It was just the way things were. The way they always had been; the way they’d always stay. Everyone was struggling, but we were all in the same boat. The boat had so many holes in it that it was steadily sinking no matter how hard we bailed. But I never, ever wondered why.

Not until Oswald Mosley came marching into our lives, with easy answers to all the wrong questions.

It was Oswald Mosley who turned the whole bloody boat upside down.