

**In the summer of 1941,
Irene must perform the
most perilous balancing act
of her life....**

Irene grew up traveling around Germany with her family's circus, surrounded by her loved ones, and thrilling the crowds with her performance on the high wire...until one day, the audience boos. Irene's family is Jewish, and the increasing power of Adolf Hitler's Nazis has put them all in grave danger.

When the circus is forced to shut down and Irene's father is taken away, Irene and her mother must go into hiding with another circus. Every day is a frightening new kind of balancing act, caught between the desire to perform and the need to hide—even in plain sight.

A HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE BOOK
FOR YOUNG READERS

Hidden on the High Wire

KATHY KACER

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PART ONE



The Lorch Family Circus,
November 1939

Chapter 1

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN and children of all ages, please direct your attention high above the center ring.”

Thirteen-year-old Irene Danner was poised on the high wire, arms outstretched, head up, looking straight ahead. Her straight, blonde hair was pulled back into a tight bun so it wouldn't fall into her eyes. Her wide skirt, trimmed in satin and dotted with hand-sewn crystals, sparkled in the spotlight. Her shoulders were relaxed, just as her grandfather, Opa, had always instructed: *Don't look down*, he had said. *Feel the wire under you instead.*

They called it a wire even though it was really a taut, thick rope. Irene's leather-soled slippers gripped it, her feet nearly wrapping around it like her arms

had once encircled Opa's neck when she hugged him. He was gone now. He had died years earlier while performing in Belgium, but his voice was as clear in Irene's head as if he were standing next to her, whispering in her ear.

She lifted her arms high above her head and pivoted on both feet, turning to face the other direction, and then lowered her arms again. Many tightrope walkers carried a long pole or even an umbrella. It helped balance their weight evenly across the wire. Not Irene. She preferred her hands free, outstretched on either side for stability.

A strong body comes of a strong mind, Opa had said. Irene could focus better than most seasoned performers. She was able to block any distractions that might test her concentration. At thirteen, some would have said that she was too young for this dangerous act. But the circus was in Irene's blood, and she had been on the wire since she could barely walk, trained under Opa's watchful eyes. The Lorch Family Circus, that was who they were—a Jewish circus with a legacy that went back four generations to Irene's great-great-grandfather, Hirsch Lorch. When he died, he passed the circus on to his son, Irene's great-grandfather, Adolf Lorch. And when Adolf died the circus went

to Irene's Opa, Julius. Each generation had cherished and nurtured the circus as if it were another child.

This circus has belonged to our family for decades, Opa had said. *Be proud of what we've built here.*

"I am, Opa," Irene whispered into the air, as the bright spotlight followed her from one end of the wire to the other.

A sudden wobble and the wire quivered under her feet. The audience members gasped. But there was no need for anyone to worry. Sometimes, she even pretended that she was wobbling even when she wasn't. *Make the audience sit up and pay attention.* More of her grandfather's words. Irene straightened herself, settling the quiver under her feet, and continued forward.

There was no net below Irene. Opa had objected when Irene had wanted to do away with it. But she'd insisted. "I can do it, Opa. And the audience will love the danger." Reluctantly, he had agreed. But he'd always been poised in the shadows just below her, ready to rush forward and catch her if something went wrong. After his death, her father stood under the wire. That's where he was now, watching her routine closely. He'd taken over the circus after Opa's death, and as the ringmaster, he was in charge of every act.

Irene knew that Mama also watched every show from behind the curtain. Her mother was in charge of the horses. She had once been a gifted equestrian performing with the circus. Lately, she'd passed those responsibilities to the younger performers. Still, she always stayed backstage, supervising it all—and keeping one eye on her daughter. She was also a talented seamstress who designed and sewed many of the circus costumes, including Irene's.

Applause reached Irene's ears, mixed with others hushing as if they were worried that the noise might make Irene stumble. She smiled and was just about to pivot again when a voice rang out from the audience. It wasn't the appreciation she usually received from the crowd. It sounded as if someone was booing!

That's not possible, Irene thought, freezing on the wire. There was silence under the big tent, and Irene stood perfectly still, waiting to hear if the sound came back. Still silence. *No*, she finally thought. She must have heard wrong. She shook her head slightly, clearing the incident from her mind. She was about to take another step when a man shouted out from the audience. This time, there was no mistaking his words. They made Irene's blood run cold.

“Jews, out of here! We don't want you anymore!”

His voice was joined by a second one, this time a woman's, even louder than the first. "Close the circus! Get rid of the Jews!"

Other members of the audience gasped, followed by a smattering of applause mixed with more hushing noises.

Her vision blurred. Her body went stiff. All her focus and control vanished. She wobbled on the rope, feeling it quiver under her feet. But this time, the shaking was for real.

Irene abandoned her routine and headed blindly to the side of the ring.