

C H A P T E R N I N E

THE GLOVES

‘NO, SHOE. YOU CAN’T WALK ACROSS THERE. The gap’s too wide for the net.’ Lovegrove stood looking over the gorge. Shoestring had fixed his rope to a tree on the far side.

‘I don’t care about the safety net,’ he said. ‘It’s more exciting without it.’

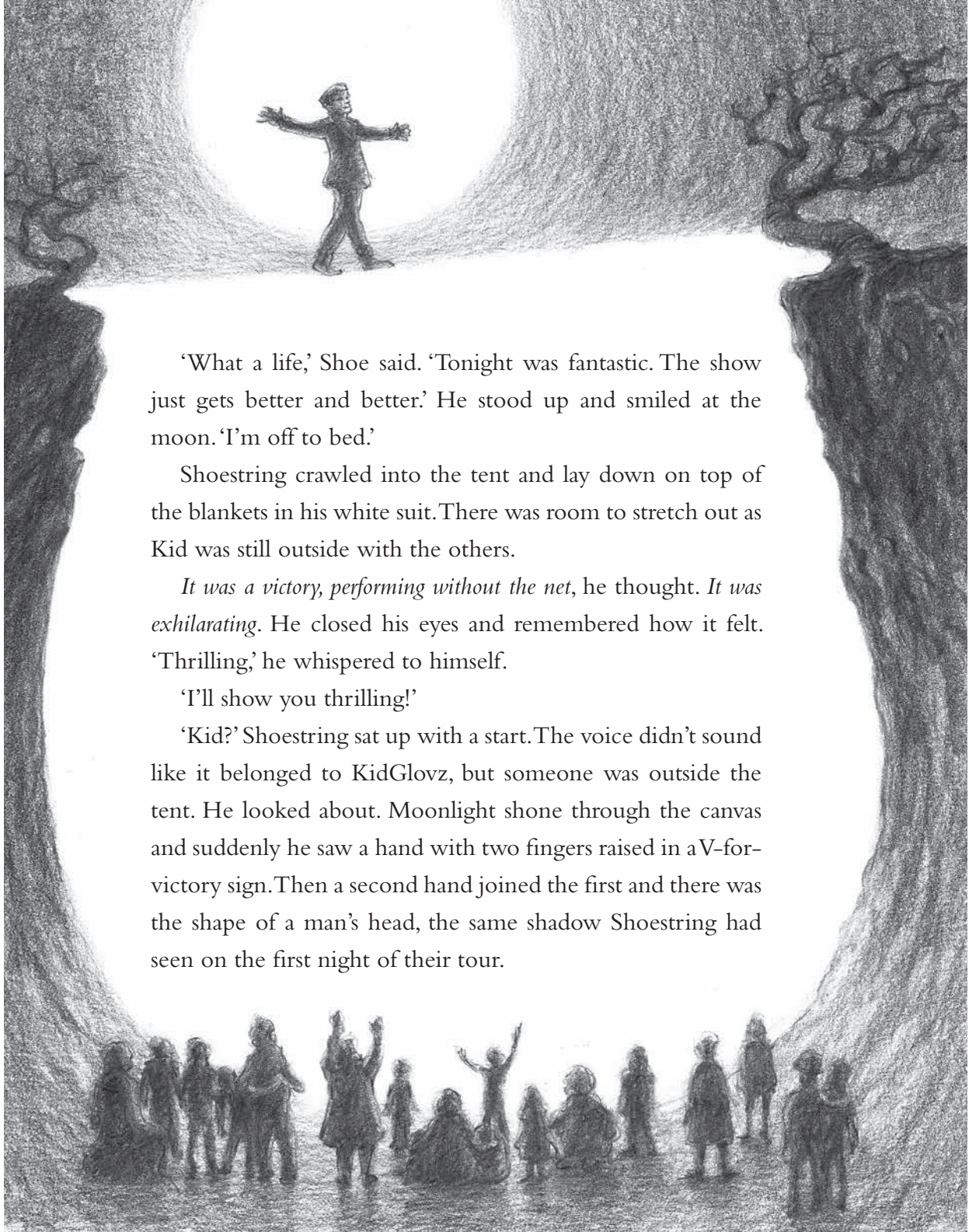
‘What if you fall?’

‘I won’t. I’m sure of it.’



THAT NIGHT BY THE CAMPFIRE, SHOESTRING was in high spirits. It was a beautiful evening. Grimwade was singing as he washed the dishes, accompanied by Kid’s accordion. Ace and Lobe were playing cards and the girls had their noses in the book. Lovegrove was giving Hugo a brush and each time Grimwade finished a song the dog raised his head and barked for more, making everyone laugh.





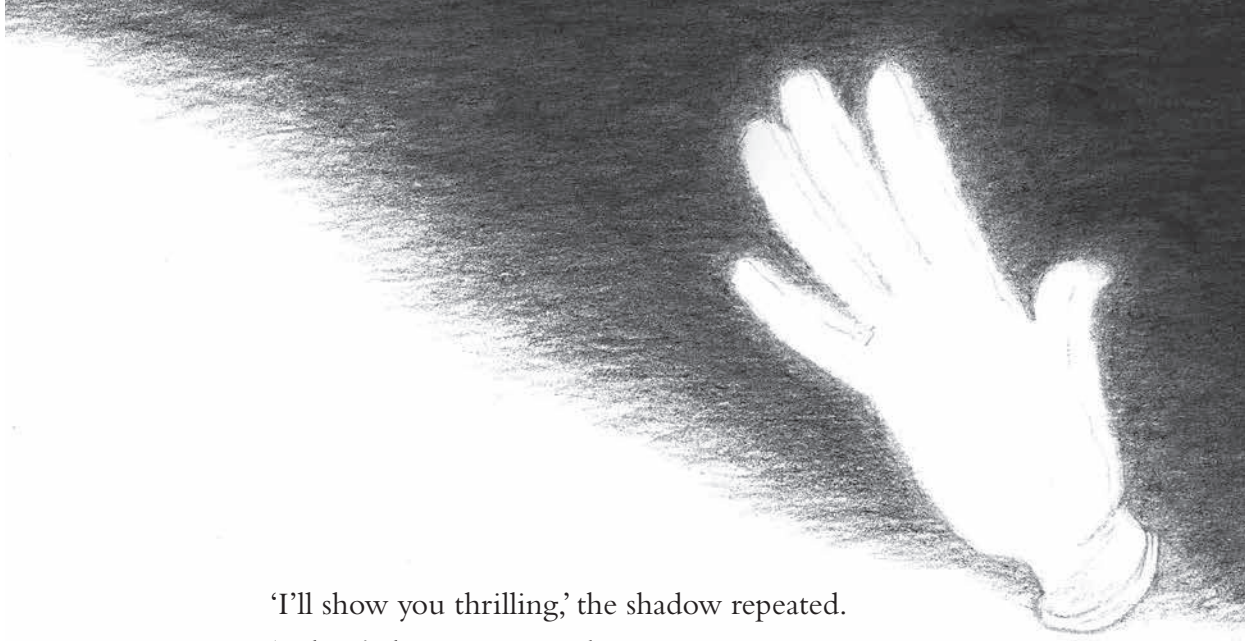
‘What a life,’ Shoe said. ‘Tonight was fantastic. The show just gets better and better.’ He stood up and smiled at the moon. ‘I’m off to bed.’

Shoestring crawled into the tent and lay down on top of the blankets in his white suit. There was room to stretch out as Kid was still outside with the others.

It was a victory, performing without the net, he thought. It was exhilarating. He closed his eyes and remembered how it felt. ‘Thrilling,’ he whispered to himself.

‘I’ll show you thrilling!’

‘Kid?’ Shoestring sat up with a start. The voice didn’t sound like it belonged to KidGlovz, but someone was outside the tent. He looked about. Moonlight shone through the canvas and suddenly he saw a hand with two fingers raised in a V-for-victory sign. Then a second hand joined the first and there was the shape of a man’s head, the same shadow Shoestring had seen on the first night of their tour.



'I'll show you thrilling,' the shadow repeated.

'What?' Shoestring stared.

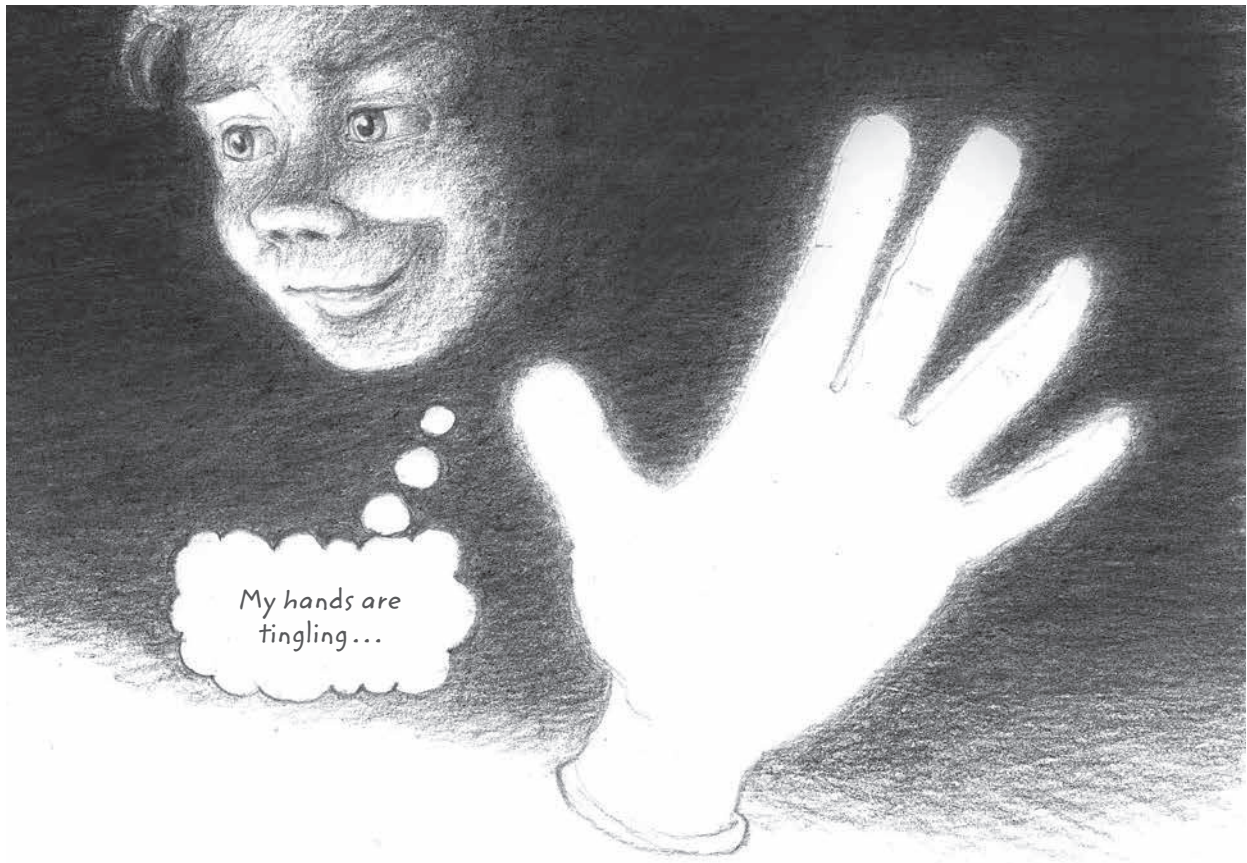
'Try on the gloves and you'll know what it is to be truly thrilled.'

'What do you mean?'

The shadow came apart and the gloves disappeared. A moment later they were inside the tent.

They were empty gloves. Shoestring could see there was nothing inside them, yet they seemed full of themselves. Both hands hovered before him, palm up with the fingers spread. Then they flipped over so the openings gaped in his direction, as if daring him to try them on.

For a second Shoe remembered that dream he'd had the night before he left Cadenza and his heart began to race. He took a deep breath. *I'm not scared*, he told himself. *Not after tonight, not after walking across a sheer drop*. He thought of the crowds and felt their adulation. He heard the roar of approval.



'It can't hurt to try them on,' he said.

It was a strange feeling. Shoestring could hear Kid playing accordion. He could hear Grimwade singing and the others laughing and talking, but the sounds seemed far away. He flexed his fingers. The gloves were tight but not too tight. He felt the power in them. It was running up his arms. He crawled out of the tent and, putting his hands in his pockets, walked from the campsite.

'Hey, Shoe. Where are you going?' Kid called out, still playing.

'Just for a walk.'

He hurried down the road that led to the town and when he saw the lights of the first house, he began running. It wasn't late; people were still about. He saw a group sitting at a table outside a restaurant.

'It's the boy from the show,' a man called out. 'Bravo, lad! Your act was spectacular. Will you join us?'

Shoestring thanked the man, but declined. He felt he had something important to do but he wasn't sure what it was. He continued on his way and when he reached a shop window he paused at his reflection in the glass. He looked good in his white suit, and the gloves completed his outfit. He wished May could see him and thought how far he'd come since he was a thief and common pickpocket.

'Look at me now – The Boy Who Walks on Air!'

A smartly dressed man passed by. Shoestring noticed the fellow had a wallet poking from his back pocket and, before he knew what was happening, the wallet was in his hand. He hadn't meant to steal it – in fact, he hadn't even noticed himself doing it. *I should give it back*, he thought, and with that, the gloves tightened on his hands. 'Ouch!'

The man was halfway down the street by the time Shoestring caught up with him. 'You dropped your wallet.'

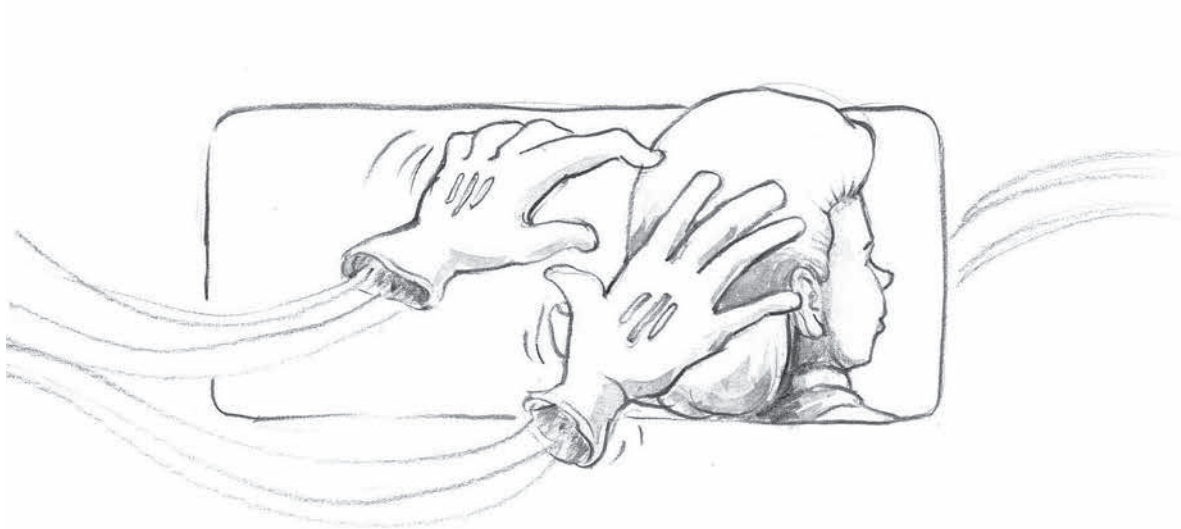
'Thank you. What an honest boy.'

Honest? Shoestring had never been called honest before. The man continued walking and Shoe was distracted by the smell of roasting nuts wafting from a street stall ahead.

He could see bags of hot nuts sitting on a table. A woman was cooking them over some coals. She turned her back for a moment and before he knew it the gloves slipped from his hands. They moved like lightning, grabbing a bag and tossing it in his direction. He caught it and hurried around a corner.

'I didn't steal them,' he said as he put one in his mouth. A second later the gloves were back. It was confusing, but the nuts were delicious. He felt like laughing with surprise. Shoe had almost finished the bag when two people walked past, a man and his son. They looked wealthy. The boy wore a fine scarf and a tailored coat and Shoestring couldn't help noticing his impressive head of hair.





The gloves moved too fast to see and in a moment the boy was bald as an old man. His face crumpled and he began to cry like a much younger child.

Shoestring stood in shock. Then he ran his fingers through his own hair. It felt thick and long, nothing like his usual haircut. The father's mouth dropped open for a moment before his bewilderment turned to anger.

'I don't know what confounded nonsense you're up to, young man, but you're not getting away with it!'

What am I up to? Shoestring asked himself. He checked his reflection in his mirror and he had to admit the new hair suited him.

'This is absurd,' the boy's father yelled. 'It's an abomination. You scoundrel. You thief!'

He grabbed Shoestring by the collar and began hauling him along the street. 'You can explain your unnatural act to the local constabulary.'

'The police?' Shoe's heart began to thump inside his chest. What could he say to defend himself? That the gloves did it? He looked at the man and wished he could speak like him, using big important words and saying them with such authority. The moment he had that thought the gloves shot through the air.

'Are you accusing me of confiscating your son's head of hair? I have never in all my life met with such a ludicrous suggestion.' The words rolled off Shoe's tongue as if he owned them. 'Unhand me. Have you taken leave of your senses?'



The man held Shoestring in one hand and his throat with the other. He opened and closed his mouth but nothing came out. By the time he reached the police station his face was red and a purple vein pulsed in his forehead.

‘He stole my hair. I swear it!’ The boy pointed at Shoe and his father nodded emphatically. His lips were clamped together now and he held Shoe tight.

The policeman shook his head and took a form from the drawer of his desk.

‘Name?’ he asked.

‘Shoestring.’

The policeman looked up. ‘Not Shoestring – The Boy Who Walks on Air?’

Shoestring nodded. ‘Yes, that’s me.’

The policeman touched his eyebrow with the top of his pen and smiled.

‘I heard the show was spectacular. Are you performing tomorrow night?’

‘Same time, same place.’ Shoestring’s fingers whipped two tickets from his top pocket and held them out. He stared at them for a second, wondering how they got there, then offered them to the policeman. ‘Please accept these free tickets.’

The policeman turned to the boy’s father.

‘Let him go,’ he ordered. ‘What’s this nonsense about?’

The man looked as if he might burst, but said nothing. Shoestring, however, was not lost for words.

‘An unfortunate misunderstanding, Constable. Nothing more.’

He tried not to show his surprise at the ease with which he spoke. The man gaped, his eyes bulging, and his son clung to him and sobbed. Shoe felt a twinge of guilt.

It doesn't matter, he told himself. Better than going to jail.

His heart was beating fast as he left the police station. Shoestring had a great fear of the police and rarely saw them at close quarters. He thought how brave he'd been, chatting away like that. How clever he was to offer the man the tickets. The gloves had done it, of course. The gloves had allowed him to steal and get off scot-free. It was astonishing!

He walked quickly up the street. The night was chilly and when he passed a shop with a display of scarves in the window, one caught his eye. It was deep blue with a pattern of silver stars and it was made of the finest wool. There was a flurry of white and in an instant the scarf was around his neck. The gloves moved so quickly he didn't see them leave his hands.

These gloves are thrilling, he thought. The shadow was right.

He headed home, hoping Kid was still awake.