



***“You are a miserable old thief! Unless you return her mouth to me by seven o’clock this evening I will take it away from you by force.”***

So begins an incredible story, in which a young boy must solve the mystery of the stolen mouth and save two men from a duel to the death.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Under the Bed

There were three of us: Jonny, the strongest boy in class, Sam, who was as daring as a Japanese pilot and knew how to wiggle his ears, and me. No wait. That's no good.

There were seven of us, seven adventurous, sharp-eyed sleuths. And we had a dog too, a big dog, really smart, who could shoot a gun if necessary and lie without blushing. Yes, together we were invincible, we were . . .

No, there weren't seven of us and there weren't three of us, or a dog either, for that matter. It was just me, myself and I, otherwise I might have felt a little safer under the bed in the Beit Hakerem Home for the Aged waiting for the bully of Heidelberg to arrive. I only wish there had been someone

with me, someone who knew what to do in a pinch, someone with plenty of sleuthing experience and preferably a gun, or maybe a magnifying glass to look for prints on the body . . .

Frankly I was a little worried the body would turn out to be my own – to which I am more than a little attached – but I tried not to dwell on such melancholy thoughts, and stared ahead at the light coming from the crack below the door.

From my vantage point under the bed I could see, besides the door, a colourful rug, an old grey suitcase with two cloth belts and Mr Rosenthal's sneakers.

But I think I'd better explain myself first. I mean, whoever heard of starting a story under the bed? It isn't respectable, and it can get a little dusty too.

I was twelve years old when what I'm about to tell you took place. Today, sixteen years later, I still recall the pounding of my heart as I heard the approaching footsteps of the bully of Heidelberg University. Above

me on the bed sat Heinrich Rosenthal, a little man, seventy years old, with a big white mane of hair, but under the bed I was very much alone, and I remember thinking in those moments of suspense, maybe Mom's right, maybe I should go out and make friends my own age instead of always hanging around by myself or with weird old people like Mr Rosenthal. My parents used to get upset that I never went to parties at school or scout meetings and things like that. All I was upset about was that they were upset. I was fine. The kids at school had stopped pestering me to join their games – maybe they were sick of me, or maybe they just didn't care.

I kept telling them I was fine, but Dad would come into my room at night and sit on the edge of my bed in silence, staring at me. That was awful, even worse than my noisy fights with Mom, who used to scream at me that sometimes I acted more like an old man than a twelve-year-old boy. She didn't know Mr Rosenthal. That man was



as spry as any twenty year old. His motto was: Life begins at seventy.

I met Mr Rosenthal at the beginning of the school year. Our home room teacher had divided us into groups of ‘volunteers’. One of her suggested projects for us was to make friends with an elderly person.

As soon as Mom heard that out of all the school projects I had chosen ‘to adopt’ some old man and keep him company twice a week, she said, ‘Wouldn’t you know it?’ which is short for: ‘Wouldn’t you know it? That boy can’t leave his books and that darned rabbit of his for five minutes to go out and play soccer with someone his own age, oh no, not him, he has to make friends with a senior citizen, and what’s more, he’s doing it to spite me.’ That’s the unabridged version. ‘Wouldn’t you know it,’ is a lot more to the point, you have to admit. But it didn’t do her much good, because the next day I signed up with three other kids from my class to visit the Beit Hakerem Home for the Aged in Jerusalem.

Wait. There's something I want to say. I know some kids don't like to spend time with old people because old people are wrinkled and smelly and slow. What they don't seem to realise is that the reason old people look so neglected sometimes is that there's nobody around to take care of them and love them. It's like a simple rule of grammar, when someone deserts you, you start to feel deserted. That's what I kept hearing from the old people at the Home while I waited for Mr Rosenthal. Their friends and their colleagues, everyone deserted them once they moved into the Home. Even their own children stopped visiting after a time. They felt as if they'd been blotted out of everyone's heart. I have more to say on the subject, but it will have to wait.

Because just then, I heard the sound of heavy footsteps outside Mr Rosenthal's door. From where I was I could see Mr Rosenthal's spindly ankles trembling in his sneakers. I knew he was as frightened as I

was, even though he'd told me at least seven times that it was uncontrollable rage that was making him tremble. He'd also told me at least fourteen times that the bully of Heidelberg wore size 17 shoes, that he'd been an expert marksman in his student days in Germany, and could lift all twelve volumes of the medical encyclopaedia with one hand; he also told me about the time Schwartz punched five German students in the teeth for making anti-Semitic remarks.

And he told me a couple of other horrific stories that day, his face burning red under his ruffled white hair. Then he pounded his fist in his palm, seething in a heavy German accent, 'Let him dare walk in here! I'll teach him to threaten me! A thief he calls me – me, a thief! The brute! The beast! I'll beat the "chutzpah" out of him!' This was a bit strange coming from someone like Heinrich Rosenthal who was about as muscular as a schoolboy. I mean, even though he was in pretty good shape for his age and used to swim laps every day in the heated pool at

the Hebrew University, and even though he used to tease me that my favourite sport was blinking every time I turned the page, my feeling was that if it came to a match between my 'old guy' and the free-style-encyclopaedia-lifting-bully, Rosenthal didn't stand a chance. When I gently hinted as much, he sneered at me and said that if I was such a coward I could either go home or wait for him outside till after the terrible battle, and then help him roll the remains of Rudy Schwartz down the corridor. But I could tell from the bitterness in his voice how frightened he must be, which is why I informed him straight out that I would stay, no matter what.

Wordlessly he walked over to me and shook my hand. I saw his lips compress, a sign that he was touched. Then came a silence when courage, friendship and determination were welded together in our handshake. But as soon as we let go I felt paralysed with fear again, and I saw Mr Rosenthal's shoulders droop a little too. He

said that it was wrong of him to have involved me in this mess, that there was no way of knowing how it would turn out, not where a brute like Rudy Schwartz was concerned, and that maybe I really ought to go home. I told him that was out of the question, I was staying. I wasn't going to leave him alone with that total bully from Heidelberg, not after everything I'd heard about him and the strange threatening letter he'd written to Mr Rosenthal. I mean, I wasn't so tough or anything, but this way at least we would be two against one, which doubled the chances of one of us coming out of this alive to tell the story of the battle to future generations – or past generations – like my mom and dad.

And that was how we arrived at the same devious idea: I would hide under the bed till we discovered what Rudy Schwartz's intentions were, and then I would jump out and triumph over evil, or at least kick it in the shins.

Actually we already knew what his



intentions were because he'd spelled them out pretty clearly in the letter Mr Rosenthal received that morning.

The letter, now lying on the table, said, 'You are a miserable thief! Unless you return her mouth to me by seven o'clock this evening, I will take it away from you by force, and nothing will stop me.' And in the margin there were three words written in red ink that had a very peculiar ring, 'Honour or Death', and below, the signature – Rudy Schwartz.