



CALEB



TED



ISABEL

*He's lived and breathed video games all his life.
But what happens when the puzzles become real?*

Twelve-year-old Ted Gerson has spent most of his summer playing video games. So when his great-uncle dies and grants him all the so-called treasure in his overstuffed junk shop of an apartment, Ted explores it like it's another level to beat. And to his shock, he finds that his weird Great-Uncle Ted actually *has* set the place up like a real-life escape-the-room game!

Using his specially honed skills, Ted sets off to win the greatest game he's ever played, with help from his friends Caleb and Isabel. Together they discover that Uncle Ted's "treasure" might be exactly that—real gold and jewels! With each puzzle Ted and his friends solve, they get closer to unraveling the mystery—but someone dangerous is hot on their heels, and Ted must face his most challenging game yet.

**PJ Our Way is a fun and interactive
Jewish program for kids by kids!**

**Go to www.pjourway.org to learn
more. And spread the word!**



Sponsored by the Harold Grinspoon Foundation



YEARLING MYSTERY

Cover art © 2016 by Octavi Navarro

Cover art by Katrina Damkoehler

Also available as an ebook

CLICK

HERE

TO

START

a novel

DENIS MARKELL

DELACORTE PRESS





CHAPTER 1

WHO KNEW A MAN WITH TUBES IN HIS NOSE COULD BE FUNNY?

It looks like something from a science-fiction movie, with so many machines and tubes going into and out of bags hung on poles.

For a moment, it doesn't register that all those tubes and hoses are connected to a person.

I have no memory of what he looked like when I was little, and the only photo of Great-Uncle Ted in our house is from ages and ages ago. It shows a burly man with a crew cut, sitting in a living room in the 1960s. He's got a cigarette in one hand and a lighter in the other. I wonder if he hadn't smoked so many cigarettes maybe he wouldn't be here now. He's looking at the camera with a confident grin that says this is not a man to mess with. The only other place I've ever seen Asian men with kick-butt expressions like that is in samurai or martial-arts movies.

Not that I watch them all that much.

I mean, it's bad enough other people make assumptions about us Asian kids. No need for me to help out.

But I gotta say, that photo can't be further from the old man lying in this bed. The grossest thing is the tube going right up into his nose. It looks horrible, and is attached to a machine that does who knows what.

I go and stand awkwardly by the window, unsure of what to do. I wish Mom had come in with me, but she said Great-Uncle Ted wants to see me alone. Dying man's last wish and all, I guess. I clear my throat and sort of whisper, "Um, hi?"

"Arwhk."

The two veiny sacs of his eyelids slowly open, and when he sees me, he gestures, beckoning me over with one hand.

I gingerly approach the chair next to his bed, careful not to disturb any of the wires and tubes snaking around him. It's hard—I have visions of knocking into some hose or other just as I'm supposed to be having a nice visit.

"Gghhh . . ." Great-Uncle Ted catches my eye and reaches out.

Without thinking, I flinch. I have a flashback to a movie I saw where a guy laid out like this had a monster burst out of his chest and jump on someone's face. I'm not saying I expect that to happen here, but hey, it does go through my mind.

Great-Uncle Ted's eyes change. He points impatiently to something on the table.

A pad and paper. There is spidery writing on it.

"You want me to . . . give you the pad?" I ask.

Now there's a flash of fire in Great-Uncle Ted's eyes. I know

when someone's ticked off. The message is clearly *Yes, you idiot. Give me the pad.*

I hand the pad to my great-uncle, who winces in pain as he presses a button on the side of his bed that raises him to a seated position.

Slowly, he writes something and then hands me the pad.

Hurts too much to talk. You Amanda's boy, Ted?

I start to write an answer on the pad.

The next thing I know, Great-Uncle Ted yanks the pad out of my hands. The old dude is surprisingly strong!

BEEP BEEP BEEP

Great. Now the heart-rate machine is going a lot faster. That can't be good.

He scribbles something and hands the pad back to me.

I'm not deaf, you little dope. Talk to me.

I laugh in spite of myself. Of course. Duh.

"Yes, uh, sir . . . I'm Ted." I feel a little weird introducing myself, since *he* knows who I am, but since I don't remember him, it feels like the right thing to do. And I'm pretty sure he seems like a "sir."

The old man writes some more. He's writing with more energy now.

You got big. Do you still like playing games?

"What games do you mean, sir?" I ask.

Kissing games.

What th—?

“Uh, no, sir,” I begin. “I don’t enjoy kissing games. That is, I’ve never played them. Maybe I would enjoy them if I did. I mean, you never know about something until you try it, right?” I’m babbling now. Trying to look casual, I lean against something, then realize it’s a pole holding some fluid going into my great-uncle (or maybe coming out of him—hard to tell). Gross. I attempt to cross my legs, but I dare anyone to try to do it while wearing these ICU snot-green-colored clown pants they made me wear over my jeans to come in here. It’s not so simple. So my leg sort of hovers half hoisted.

Meanwhile, Great-Uncle Ted is scribbling away.

I know you like computer games, you little twerp. I just wanted to see your face.

I laugh, and I see a hint of a smile under all the machinery.

You like the ones where you shoot people?

“I’m not allowed to play those,” I say, which is the truth.

I didn’t ask if you were allowed to. I asked if you liked them.

I smile and nod. This guy is pretty sharp. “Um . . . yeah, I play them sometimes.”

Great-Uncle Ted looks at me with an expression I can’t make out.

A lot of fun, huh?

“I guess.” I shrug.

I hope that’s the only way you ever have to shoot and kill a man. The other way is a lot less fun.

“You’ve killed a man?” I try to ask casually, but it kind of comes out in a squeak. Not my most macho moment, but give me a break, I wasn’t ready for this.

Quite a few, yes.

What did Uncle Ted *do* before he retired? I wonder what sort of professions call for killing men. Or more precisely, “quite a few” men. Was he a soldier? A *hit man*?

Let’s talk about something else. Why do you like these games so much?

I’m happy to move on. “I don’t think the shooting games are all that—and that’s the truth. It’s more something to do with my friends when we hang out. What I really like is what are called escape-the-room games.”

Tell me about them.

Sure, why not? “They’re kind of puzzles, where you’re stuck in a room and have to figure a way out.”

Great-Uncle Ted’s eyes survey the space around him.

There's only one way to escape this room.

“Well, I don’t agree,” I say eagerly, standing up to look around. “There are all sorts of exits, if you look carefully. Not just the door. There’s that window. You could tie your sheets together and climb down there, or maybe there’s an air-conditioning duct—”

TAP TAP TAP.

My brilliant analysis is interrupted by the sound of my great-uncle’s pencil tapping loudly on the pad to get my attention.

I was actually referring to dying, Ted. Try to keep up.

I sit down, deflated. “I guess I didn’t think of that,” I say honestly, “because you seem so alive.”

Great-Uncle Ted does his best to roll his eyes.

Don't bother sucking up to a dying man, Ted. You any good at these room games?

“Never seen a game I couldn’t solve or beat. I’m always the top scorer—that means I’ve solved them quicker than anyone else. I guess that makes me the best,” I say, before realizing how obnoxious it sounds. “That sounds like bragging. Sorry.”

You ever heard of Dizzy Dean?

Okay, that’s a little random. But old people do that sometimes. The name does sound kind of familiar, but I can’t place it. I shake my head.

One of the best pitchers in the history of baseball.

When you go home, look up what he said about bragging.

Great-Uncle Ted settles back onto his pillow. He's clearly tired.

I stare out the window, watching the headlights of the traffic below making patterns on the ceiling. "Yeah. That's about the one thing I am good at," I say softly, almost to myself. I hear scratching, and he's up and writing more.

Don't ever sell yourself short, Ted. Your mother says you're very smart.

I nod my head and laugh. "Yeah, I know, I just don't 'apply myself.' She's always saying that. Lila's the smart one."

Lila is my big sister, the bane of my existence. Lila the straight-A student, Lila the president of the student body. Lila, who got the highest Board scores in La Purisma High's history. Lila, who gave the most beautifully written senior address at her graduation, currently crushing it in her freshman year at Harvard. I mean, seriously. Why even try to compete with that?

Your mother told me you're smarter than your sister. You just don't know it.

Oh, snap! I hope there's a burn unit at Harvard, because Lila just got *smoked*. Big-time!

I'm starting to like Great-Uncle Ted. But I feel bad. We've been talking about me the whole time I've been here. Well,

except for the part about him killing a lot of people. I'm pretty sure I don't want to hear more about that.

"So I guess you knew my mom when she was a little kid," I begin. "What was she like?"

Amanda was a pain in the a

He stops and his eye drifts up to my face and back down to his pad.

Amanda was a pain in the a behind, if you'll excuse my French.

I can't believe I thought this was going to be boring. This is *great!* "Seriously? How so?" It takes all the self-control I can muster to get this out without cracking up.

He writes for a long time, then hands the pad to me.

When she was nine, she had this thing where no matter what you would ask her she'd say, "That's for me to know and you to find out."

Like you'd ask her, "What flavor ice cream do you want?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"What movie do you want to see?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out!"

"Do I have lung cancer?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out!"

I choke at that last one.

Great-Uncle Ted waves his hand wearily.

I made that last one up. But she did say it all the time. She thought it was cute. It stopped being cute after the first day. Then it was annoying as heck.

Great-Uncle Ted pauses.

But she was always smart. And I'm very proud of her.

Great-Uncle Ted was the one who paid for Mom to come to California from Hawaii and go to nursing school. She's been working here at La Purisma General Hospital for as long as I can remember.

Great-Uncle Ted looks up from the paper, and his wise, half-lidded eyes meet mine. He scrawls on the page and holds up the pad.

Please tell me about the games you play. How you solve these puzzles.

Wait. Is a real, live adult person actually asking me *details* about the games I play? This is unheard of.

So I go on and on, explaining how the games work, how at first nothing seems to make sense. But then, as I put my mind to it, a little click goes off in my head and the pieces begin to fit. It's an awesome feeling when it all comes together and you get it right.

Great-Uncle Ted seems genuinely interested, especially when I tell him about a particularly tricky puzzle, where if you look carefully at what appears to be a bunch of random drinking glasses on a tray, you realize they actually resemble the

hands of a clock set to a particular time. Which is one of the main clues to solving that game.

“You know, maybe if they let me, I can come back tomorrow with my laptop and show you some,” I’m saying, when I see that his head has fallen back onto the bed and his eyes are closed. “Great-Uncle Ted! Are you all right?” I gasp. “Should I get Mom?”

He wearily reaches for the pad and writes carefully.

I’m just tired. But I’m happy to see you again, Ted.

“I—I’m so glad I could talk to you too, sir,” I say, feeling my breathing slow down again.

I feel so much better about everything now. You are ready.

Huh? What does that mean?

“That’s good, sir.”

The old man looks up at me. The energy is clearly draining out of him.

You must promise me one thing.

“I know, sir. I promise I’ll work harder in school, and I’ll never tell Mom you thought she was a pain in the behind—”

I think he’ll laugh at this, but instead, he gathers his strength and writes furiously across the pad.

No! Listen to me! You must promise me

He’s writing slower now, forcing the words out of the pen.

“Yes, sir?”

Great-Uncle Ted falls back and throws the pad at me.

*THE BOX IS ONLY THE BEGINNING. KEEP LOOKING
FOR THE ANSWERS. ALWAYS GO FOR BROKE!
PROMISE ME!*

With great effort, he tugs on my sleeve. I lean toward him. He pulls me down until my ear is close to his face. I can just make out the word he is saying.

“Promise!” the old man croaks. He releases my sleeve. He looks peaceful now, like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders.

As my great-uncle falls asleep, I hear my own voice, sounding far away, whispering, “I promise.”