

# IF NOBODY WANTS HIM, THAT'S FINE. HE'LL JUST TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF.

When his father dies, Dave knows nothing will ever be the same. And then it happens. Dave lands in an orphanage—the cold and strict Hebrew Home for Boys in Harlem—far from the life he knew on the Lower East Side. But he's not *so* worried. He knows he'll be okay. He always is. If it doesn't work out, he'll just leave, find a better place to stay. But it's not that simple.

Outside the gates of the orphanage, the nighttime streets of Harlem buzz with jazz musicians and swindlers; exclusive parties and mystifying strangers. Inside, another world unfolds, thick with rare friendships and bitter enemies. Perhaps somewhere, among it all, Dave can find a place that feels like home.

*"Touching, beautifully told." —The New York Times Book Review*

*"Poignant and energetic." (Starred review) —Publishers Weekly*

*"This novel will provide inspiration while offering a unique view of a culturally diverse New York City." (Starred review) —School Library Journal*

ALA Notable Book

ALA Best Book for Young Adults

New York Public Library Children's Books

*Publishers Weekly* Best Book

School Library Journal Best Book

 **HarperTrophy®**

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Ages 8–12

Cover art © 2001 by Mark Elliot

Cover © 2001 by HarperCollins Publishers Inc.



CHAPTER  
1

FROM THE START, I've always made trouble. My mama died of complications from having me. I once joked about it to my older brother, Gideon. I said I could make trouble even before I was born. Gideon thought I was serious because he said, "You didn't do it on purpose, Dave. You were too young. You weren't even yourself yet."

No, I didn't do it on purpose, but probably I was fooling around in her belly, having a fine time, and I kicked or punched too hard, and one thing led to another, and she died.

I had nothing to do with Papa dying, though. He died on Tuesday, October 26, 1926, when he fell off the roof of a house he was helping to build.



About four years before he died, when I was seven, I got in trouble for smearing glue on the chair of Izzy, the class bully. My stepmother, Ida, had to go to P.S. 42 and promise the principal that I'd never smear glue on anybody's chair ever again. I never did, but Ida had to visit P.S. 42 often anyway. I batted a ball into our fourth-grade teacher's rear end (by accident—my aim wasn't *that* good). I fought with Izzy on the stairs. I let a mouse loose in our classroom. And more. Some things I didn't do but got blamed for because I'd done everything else.

Papa tried to be mad when I got into trouble. "You have to behave," he'd say.

I'd say, "Yes, Papa."

"Ida can't do her work if she has to go to school because of you."

"I know." Ida made ladies' blouses on the sewing machine next to her and Papa's bed.

"This is the end of it, then. Yes?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Good." Then he always asked, "What happened?"

At the beginning of my story, he'd listen and frown, but then the frown would disappear and his shoulders would start to shake. A little while later he'd be laughing and wiping tears from his eyes.

Papa was a woodworker. Before he came to the United States, he made a cabinet for the sultan of Turkey. The sultan was so pleased with the three hidden

drawers Papa put into it that he gave Papa a gold medal.

Whenever he told about the medal, Papa would laugh. “We had to come to this country because of the sultan,” he’d say. “I didn’t want any more work from him. If he liked what you did, he gave you a medal. If he didn’t like it . . .” Papa would drag a finger across his throat. “. . . Too bad for you.” He’d laugh some more and add, “When we came to New York City, I sold the medal and bought your mama a dress.”

But this wasn’t the real reason Papa came to the United States. The real reason was too serious for him to talk about, so he’d joke about his medal instead. The truth was that there had been a war, and Greece had taken over the city where he lived. Papa and his family, the Caros family, had sided with Turkey, and so they all moved here when Greece won.

The day Papa died, I was late getting home after school. Detention and then stickball. When I got there, Gideon was sitting on the steps outside our building. As soon as I saw him, I knew something was wrong. He was never out here. He was always upstairs or at the library, studying. When I got close enough, I saw he had been crying.

“What happened?”

“Papa . . .”

I ran into the building. Gideon followed me.

Papa was in the front room, lying on the couch where Gideon and I slept at night. He wasn’t bleeding,

but he didn't look right. He looked like Papa in a photograph, not like Papa. His face was too white, with gray shadows under his eyes and on his cheeks.

"Papa!"

He didn't move. Ida stood at the window, looking out. She didn't turn when I came in. Mrs. Stern from across the hall stood next to her, patting her back.

"I hit a home run, Papa. We won the game." I nudged his shoulder. His arm swung off the edge of the couch. His fingers dangled a few inches above the floor.

I knew he was dead then, but I said to Gideon, "Did Papa break his arm?" And then I said to Papa, "I'll make you laugh so it won't hurt." But I couldn't think of anything funny. Then I remembered an old joke. "What did the caterpillar say to the boa constrictor?"

"Dave . . ." Gideon said.

Mrs. Stern left Ida and started toward me. She was going to hug me and I didn't want her to.

"No. Listen. Papa wants to hear it. The caterpillar said, 'I don't want to be around when *you* turn into a butterfly.'" I laughed. "Do you get it, Papa?" I leaned down and said right into his ear, "Isn't it funny? Don't you get it?"

From where she stood, Ida said, "Don't *you* get it? He's dead."

Mrs. Stern turned me away from Papa and held me. I stood stiffly against her.

Ida went on talking. "In six months we would have moved out of here. We almost had enough saved up."

I pulled away from Mrs. Stern and ran out of the house.

Gideon caught up with me after I'd gone a block. "Where are you going, Dave?"

I didn't answer him. I was heading for Seward Park to see if anyone was still playing stickball. When I got there, my friends were gone, but our stick was still lying on the ground. I found a ball under the Nash that was parked on Essex Street.

"I'll show you how I got the homer." I threw the ball in the air and swung at it. I missed. I swung again and missed. And again. And again. Once Gideon told me to stop, but I wouldn't. I kept swinging and missing. I started to cry.

"Why can't I hit it?" I said. "What's wrong with me?"

"You'll get it if you keep trying." Gideon was crying too.

"Why are *you* crying? You're not even trying to hit it." I laughed in the middle of crying. Then I connected. Crack.

Papa was dead.

The ball didn't go far. The stick, when I threw it with all my might, went farther and crashed into the brick wall outside the boys' toilet.

I crouched down and cried, really cried. I pictured Papa at breakfast, dipping bread into his coffee, the bread making his cheek bulge while he chewed. I pictured him before he left the house, trying to kiss Ida

good-bye and her pushing him away. I pictured him tossing his hat in the air and positioning himself under it, so it landed square on his head. I pictured him saying good-bye to me and Gideon the way he always did. “Good-bye, genius” to Gideon. “Good-bye, rascal” to me.

And then he went out, back straight, looking taller than he really was. Looking happy, because Papa was always happy. And now he was dead. He wouldn’t be happy about being dead.

I stopped thinking. I just kept yelling in my brain, “Papa,” over and over. And crying.