

No Buts, Becky!

by José Patterson

Illustrated by Patricia Drew



For David

and for my grandchildren

Michael, Emily, Louis, Sally, Raphi, Oscar, Felix and Lily.

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Chapter 1

When Becky's mother was alive, she taught her that the Yiddish words 'oy vey' do not only mean 'oh dear.'

They can also mean trouble. Becky was quite sure that the tall, strange man was trouble. Why else did just one look at him make her break out in goosebumps? He wasn't family, so why was he here? Something else happened only this morning which was an even worse kind of *oy vey*. Bubbe, her Grandmother, suddenly announced, "I'm getting too old and sick to look after you and Yossie. You need a new mother, and what's more, your father agrees with me." *A new mother!* Just like that: no warning: three terrible words. Her mouth had gone dry and she had stood, shocked and shaking, listening to her heart thumping. What did Bubbe mean and what exactly

had her father agreed to?

Becky watched the stranger *schmoozing* and fussing around Bubbe. What was he doing here? she asked herself again. She didn't trust him one little bit.

"Good *Shabbos*, good *Shabbos*, Mrs Feldman," he gushed, repeating the traditional Jewish Sabbath greeting to Bubbe. "What a great honour it is to be here. Jacob, my friend," he nodded at Becky's father, "God has blessed you with two wonderful children. Ah! Yossie, Yossie," he crooned, patting the boy's head, "your grandmother tells me that you're learning to read Hebrew and studying the Torah – God's holy law – so you'll be a great rabbi when you're a man. Such pride and joy for your family."

Becky felt sorry for her little brother who squirmed with embarrassment. 'He's only just eight years old and he doesn't want to be a rabbi,' she wanted to tell everyone, but she didn't dare. *Please God*, she prayed, *don't let that man start on me*.

"And as for your daughter, Becky," the stranger smirked, "what a lucky man you are Jacob, to have such a pretty daughter."

Me – pretty? Me with frizzy hair? Me with my lopsided nose? Becky had to bite her tongue to stop herself answering back. *He's not blind*, Becky thought, *he can see perfectly well that I'm plain, always have been, for all of my ten years in fact. He's just schmoozing again to get round Papa*.

Friday night, the beginning of the Sabbath, was different from the rest of the week. The table was covered with a white cloth used only on *Shabbos*. In the centre, two candles flickered gently in the polished brass candlesticks. Next to them was a bottle of special wine and two *challahs* – plaited poppy seed loaves. The water in the Russian samovar kettle bubbled quietly. The gas light hissed gently, making little plopping, spluttering sounds. Its burning gas-jet heated the small, white

gauze cover until it glowed, sending shimmering beams of light dancing across the shabby room. A fire crackled cheerfully in the grate behind the iron bars of the black cooking range. Papa poured out the wine, recited the Sabbath blessings, sprinkled salt on the slices of challah, and handed them round.

Becky bit her lips to stop them trembling. Friday night was the time she missed her mother the most. Not just the hugs and kisses and all the bits of gossip she'd heard, but the way Mama always encouraged her. "My Becky," she would say with a smile, "is going to be a scholarship girl, you'll see. Everyone should be blessed with such a clever daughter." It was only a year since she had died. Papa had been sad and silent for hours on end. Family, friends and neighbours had brought food and comfort. Then Bubbe had moved in to look after them.

Becky looked across at her brother. She knew that Bubbe's news had upset him. On their way to school this morning, he had stopped suddenly and looked at her with his big, dark eyes.

"Becky, what did Bubbe mean when she said we needed a new mother?"

She gave him a quick hug.

"Take no notice, Yossie," she had told him. "You know what Bubbe's like when she's trying to get all the work done before *Shabbos*. She nearly bit my head off this morning when I accidentally knocked over her cup of tea. Don't worry about it, okay?"

But she couldn't forget it. *A new mother!* – those words haunted her. She couldn't concentrate on anything else, in or out of school.

Becky looked round the table. Bubbe was fussing over

her guest, Yossie was hungry – as always, even Papa managed a smile or two. *Everyone seems happy enough*, she thought, *except me*. Becky wished she knew what Bubbe and Papa were planning; she hated being the last to know everything. Why when she desperately wanted to talk to her Papa did he invite this strange, *schmoozing* man who gabbled away all the time and made her head ache? She wondered what her mama would have thought of it. *If only...* she chewed her lip slowly as an idea flashed into her mind.

Flat 74 Rothschild Buildings,
Brick Lane,
Whitechapel,
London.

Friday 6th November 1908

Dear Mama,

If only I could write to you and send my letter straight to Heaven! I'm not allowed to write because it's Shabbos, so instead I'll do it inside my head.

My lovely teacher, Miss Bennet, taught us how to write a proper letter today. The address goes first, then the date which is Friday, 6th November, 1908, then 'Dear Somebody or Other' ending with 'Yours faithfully.' "Who can we write to, Miss?" one of the children asked her.

"Your family and friends for a start," Miss Bennet said. "Why, you could even send a letter to the king of England, but I would like to see your handwriting improve first. It would be a pity if King Edward V11 can't read what you've written, wouldn't it?"

Rothschild Buildings is just the same. Old Mrs Galinsky in flat 35 is going mad. The other day she leant over the banisters and yelled at Yossie. "You, boy, you there, stop whistling. It's bad luck! You'll call up the devil!" Then guess what! Her false teeth – just the top set – fell out of her mouth and dropped right down the stairwell! I made Yossie go in quickly before he got the giggles, and I found her teeth – a bit slimy, ugh! – and gave them back to her. I had to look away when she put them back in!

I still go to take our cholent pot to Mr Marston the baker every Friday afternoon. He loves having his little joke. He lifted the cholent pot lid, peeped in, pretended to taste it and said it was not only the most delicious beef stew in Rothschild Buildings, but in the whole of the East End of London!! I don't suppose, like me, he's ever been to the West End of London, or else he would have included it! Then he gave me a metal tag with a number on it, put the matching one on the handle of the pot and pushed it to the back of the oven with a long handled paddle to cook overnight. Then guess what? He told me he had heard that I'm a big help to Bubbe and gave me a piece of cake. Wasn't that kind of him?

Bubbe's been in a funny mood and snaps at me for the most little thing. I think the pain in her legs make her grumpy. She drove me mad when we went shopping in the market yesterday. She kept poking and prodding the chickens. This one was too scraggy, that one too fatty. I thought she'd never make up her mind!

Papa's Shabbos guest was cross-eyed with thick bushy eyebrows which shot up and down very quickly when he spoke! I know he can't help it but it's very difficult to talk to someone like that because you don't know which eye to look at. His coat wasn't very clean and he had a red handkerchief in his top pocket. He kept stroking his beard and smiling and nodding and schmoozing. He made such loud slurping noises when he drank his chicken soup that Yossie got the giggles and Papa sent him out of the room.

Now – I'm going to share the 'Secrets Of My Heart' with you. I read that somewhere and I think it sounds lovely! I don't think Miss Bennet would think so but I don't care – I'm going to tell you! Bubbe's chicken soup is very good but not nearly as good as yours!

I hope you are happy up there with God. I love you very much.

Yours faithfully,

Rebecca Feldman.





Chapter 2

A gentle tap on the front door woke Becky with a start.

“I’m Meg,” the young girl said, twisting her apron nervously. “Me Mam’s sick. She sent me to ‘elp you.”

“Come in, come in. It’s too cold standing out there. My name is Rebecca, but everyone calls me Becky.”

“You’ll ‘ave to tell me what to do, Becky, ‘cos I’ve forgotten what Mam said.”

“Course I will. Can you light the samovar?”

“The what?”

“The samovar – over there, it’s like a big kettle.”

Meg shook her head.

“See those bits of wood over there in the corner? You can use them. My father’s a carpenter so he’s allowed to bring

some home. The charcoal's in that box and there's lots of old newspapers all over the place!"

Meg carefully followed all of Becky's instructions. She poured water into the samovar and emptied the little ash tray at the bottom. Then she crumpled up some paper and dropped it down the central tube. Carefully, she lit the paper, and slowly fed in thin sticks of wood, then thicker ones. As soon as they were burning well she added the charcoal.

"Well that's one job done," Meg said as she wiped her hands on her apron. "I'll make you a cup a tea when the water boils." She looked at the empty grate and shivered. "It's so cold in 'ere. I'd better light the fire before you freeze to death."

"Thanks Meg."

"That's better," Meg said later, sweeping up left over bits of wood. "Now that's what I call a good blaze."

"Mmm, lovely," Becky murmured, warming her hands.

Meg hesitated, then looked shyly at Becky and muttered, "I 'ope you don't think I'm being cheeky like, but..."

"I know what you're going to say," Becky butted in, "why am I standing here watching you work when I can just as easily do it myself – right?"

"I didn't mean to ..." Meg looked embarrassed.

"It's okay. I can't do the chores today because it's *Shabbos*."

"What?"

"*Shabbos* is the Sabbath day, God's holy day of rest. Jewish people who are religious like us are forbidden to do any kind of work today – make a fire, or cook, or touch any money, or even write a letter. We have to go to *shul* and say our prayers.

"*Shul*?"

That's the Yiddish word for synagogue."

The bedroom door opened.

“Good *Shabbos*. Who’s this? Where’s Mrs Briggs?” Bubbe asked.

“She’s sick. She sent her daughter, Meg.”

Meg frowned. “Sorry, I don’t understand what she’s saying.”

“We speak Yiddish at home or with friends. Bubbe doesn’t know English very well. She’s learning!” Becky grinned.

“She’s not the only one! Honestly, Becky, I just don’t know ‘ow you manage to remember all them things you ‘ave to do every *Shabbos*, and speak Yiddish as well. You’re a bloomin’ marvel, and no mistake!”

Becky flushed with pleasure. “My mother taught me lots of things. She would have been really proud of me to hear you say that.”

Bubbe went into the kitchen and came back with a small parcel.

“Give zis to your mama” she said slowly in English. “Tell her, she should be well soon.” Then she pointed to the few coins on the dresser.

“You take them,” she said. “T’ank you.”

“Thanks very much Mrs Feldman. Oh, and good *Shabbos*,” she giggled.

“Becky, did you see that child?” Bubbe tut-tutted after Meg had left. “So pale and thin. Her poor mother has a hard life. Her husband spends most of his wages on drink, and hardly any on feeding his family. God help us if we can’t find a little something to give to folks worse off than us. We’re poor, it’s true,” she sighed, “but they’re poorer.”

“Bubbe, who was that strange man who came last night?” Becky asked.

Bubbe hesitated, “Papa met him in *shul* last night. He’s lonely, poor man, so your father asked him to eat with us.

Why not? After all it's – a *mitzvah* – a good deed to have a *Shabbos* guest.”

“But...”

“No buts, Becky. Call Papa and Yossie. We'll be late for *Shul*.”

“No need, I'm here,” Papa said quietly as he walked in. “Good *Shabbos*.”

“Good *Shabbos*, Papa. Who was our guest last night?”

Her father's head was buried in his newspaper. Becky was nervous, but she went on.

“Has he just come from Russia?”

“For shame, Becky! Can't your papa have a cup of tea in peace without all these silly questions?”

“But ...” Becky began, then stopped short.

“No buts, Becky,” Papa frowned, “you heard what your grandmother said.”

Becky had to bottle up her feelings of frustration. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, but she didn't dare. She knew better than to ignore her father's warning.

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The synagogue was crowded. Papa and Yossie joined the men in the main part of the building and Becky helped Bubbe climb slowly upstairs to the women's section. The row of seats ran along three sides. The holy ark, where the Torah scrolls were kept, stood against the eastern wall.

Down below Becky could see the tops of the men's heads covered in hats and *kipas* – little skull caps – with their shoulders draped in prayer shawls. Suddenly she saw Yossie, who was sitting next to Papa. She couldn't see who was next to him until he too happened to look up. It was their *Shabbos*

guest! Becky sat back in her seat, annoyed and upset. Then she felt something that didn't surprise her at all – another outbreak of goosebumps!

“You look as if you've got out of bed on the wrong side,” a voice breathed in Becky's ear. This was followed by a quick hug and a kiss from Auntie Essie, her mother's sister. Becky opened her mouth to speak, but Auntie Essie placed a finger on her lips. “Later. It'll keep till later,” she whispered.

Becky squeezed her hand. Auntie Essie was her favourite aunt. She never said, ‘no buts.’

When all the Hebrew psalms and prayers came to an end, the Torah scroll was rolled up and draped in a velvet cloth. The *chazan* – the reader – carried it slowly, the tiny silver bells on top of the scroll handles tinkling as he moved along. Carefully, he lowered it into its place in the ark and closed the doors.

It was time for the rabbi to give his sermon. Becky was bored and didn't listen. Just then she noticed a lady sitting next to Bubbe. It was the way this woman smiled at Bubbe and patted her hand that made her feel uneasy.

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“Becky, would you like to come home with me for a bite to eat?” Auntie Essie asked as soon as the service was over. “Yes? Good. I'll tell Bubbe.”

Becky didn't have long to wait.

“Everything's settled,” Auntie Essie told her. “Your father and Yossie will take Bubbe home, and if you give your tag to Mrs Kaminsky then she'll collect your cholent.”

They left the worshippers calling ‘Good *Shabbos*’ to each other as they streamed out on to the road. It was cold and damp and a steady drizzle washed the pavements and

cobblestones. The Jewish shops were all closed for *Shabbos*, but for everyone else it was just another busy, crowded Saturday. There was a deafening roar from the traffic: tramcars, motor-buses, horse-buses, horses and carriages, carts and wagons of every shape and size.

“Here we are!” Auntie Essie puffed as she opened the door of her top floor apartment. “Take your wet things off, Becky darling, and warm yourself by the fire. What a godsend Lizzie is, lighting fires every *Shabbos* for all the Jewish families in this block. A real treasure!”

“We’ve got a new treasure, too, called Meg. It’s so quiet here, Auntie Essie. Where is everyone?”

“Your Uncle Joe is visiting an old tailor friend of his who’s very sick. Your cousins are with my sister-in-law and her family. They’ve promised to bring our cholent home later – if they remember. Here I am chatting away! Are you hungry?”

“Starving!”

“Good. The beetroots were going very cheap on the market yesterday which is why I decided to make them into soup. You know me for a bargain! So how about a bowl of soup and a slice or two of challah?”

“My mouth’s watering already!”

“And to finish off,” Essie said, tying her apron, “I’ve saved you a piece of apple cake. There’s hardly ever any leftovers here, even the mice and cockroaches have a hard time!” she laughed. “Come, let’s eat.”

“Mmm! It’s all so good,” Becky said between mouthfuls.

“Well?” Auntie Essie asked, when they had finished and cleared the table. “What’s on your mind, my dear?”

“Something terrible’s going on at home.”

“Terrible? What d’you mean?”

“Yesterday morning Bubbe suddenly announced that we

need a new mother,” she said slowly, playing with a few stray challah crumbs on the table while she tried to steady her voice. “Last night Papa brought a strange man home with him. I didn’t like him. He kept *schmoozing* all the time. Bubbe didn’t tell me he was coming but she must have known. Papa’s so quiet all the time, and... and...” her lips trembled, “I want to know what’s going on,” she gulped, fighting back her tears.

Auntie Essie gave her a big kiss and hugged her closely. “Don’t cry, Becky darling. Come, let’s gets warm by the fire.” When they were comfortably settled Auntie Essie told her: “Your guest last night was Abe Klein. Everybody knows him, he’s a matchmaker.”

“A matchmaker? What’s that?”

“A matchmaker is a person who arranges marriages.”

“He arranges marriages?” Becky repeated. In spite of the heat from the fire, she felt an icy chill trickle slowly down her back.

“Abe’s job is to get to know Jewish men and women who want to get married,” Auntie Essie explained. “Young and old, poor and not so poor, widows and widowers. When he finds two people who he thinks will suit each other, he introduces them, hoping they will make a good match. That’s why he’s called a matchmaker, you see.”

“Why does Papa need a matchmaker? Why can’t he choose someone himself?”

“Don’t be foolish, child. He can’t just speak to a strange woman without knowing anything about her, or if she comes from a good family. It’s just not done. He has to be properly introduced. That’s why your father’s spoken to Abe Klein.”

“Did you and Mama have a matchmaker in Russia?”

“Of course we did. Your father and Uncle Joe were friends of our cousins, which made things easier when the matchmaker introduced us. Our parents gave us their

blessing.” Auntie Essie smiled. “They say a good marriage is a match made in heaven!”

“Why does Bubbe want Papa to marry again?”

“Bubbe’s in a lot of pain with arthritis. You can see how hard it is for her to get up and down stairs. She’d love to go on looking after you and Yossie, but she can’t.”

“Does he want to get married again?”

“No one can ever replace your mother, that’s for sure,” Auntie Essie sighed, “but Bubbe’s getting worse and your father has to face facts.”

There was no holding back now.

“But what about Yossie and me?” Becky sobbed. “Suppose we don’t want a new mother, suppose we hate her!”

Auntie Essie cupped Becky’s face in her hands and looked into her eyes, which brimmed with tears.

“Becky, darling, don’t upset yourself. Your Papa loves you both very much, he wouldn’t want to make you unhappy for all the world. You’ll just have to trust him.”

*Flat 74 Rothschild Buildings,
Brick Lane,
Whitechapel,
London.*

Saturday, 7th November 1908

Dear Mama,

When I got home from Auntie Essie, I was just going upstairs when I heard a door slam and voices. One of them was the strange guest. I hid

in a corner of the stairwell so he wouldn't see me. He came downstairs with the lady who sat next to Bubbe in shul this morning. I got a whiff of herrings as she went by. You know I can't stand that smell.

Now – for the Secrets Of My Heart! The strange man is Abe Klein who is a matchmaker. Papa is thinking of getting married again. I am in the depths of despair and my eyes are all red and puffy from crying. Please tell God I don't want that herring smelling lady to be our new mother.

I miss you very much. God bless.

Yours faithfully,

Rebecca Feldman.

