

# The Rules

## By C. Jade Wyton

*Barbra Bloom has asked Troy Slader to come and help with some yard work. While he takes a break, they talk— And while they do Barbra's young daughter, Becky, decides that she has a lot to say to the adults.*

~~~~~

Barbra was very grateful that Troy Slader had come over to help mow the lawn.

It was something that had needed doing for a long time, but it just wasn't fair to ask Isa to do it. The poor woman was already in charge of so much. Much more than she had originally been hired for— She didn't need *more* responsibility.

And Ken certainly couldn't do it. The last time Ken had been near the lawn mower the noise had put him on the ground, trembling and covering his ears. Even just today, upon hearing that the lawn was going to be mowed, the man had vanished out the front door to god-knows-where for... three hours, now.

So, not wanting to be unfair to Isa or cruel to her husband (or risk getting blisters on her hands when she had a jewellery photoshoot coming up) she'd called on the man who'd helped empty their gutters when they'd filled with gunk and overflowed. The man who'd helped fix the broken window after some neighbourhood kids had accidentally put their soccer-ball through it. And who'd helped repaint Becky's bedroom, when she had begged that it be painted a *very* specific shade of pink.

Troy had never asked much in return for these favours. Saying something about hearing from one of his clients about one of their friend's friends, and how Ken had once mended their kid's ballet uniform when they hadn't been able to afford a new one.

Ken hadn't remembered doing so but Barbra still thought it was *very* believable. Ken's kind nature had been what had charmed her, after all! That, and he forgot about a *lot* of things....

Though, since Mimi's escape from the house about six months ago, he had stopped forgetting to close the doors.

Barbra still felt guilty about just *how* angry she'd been at him— But she hadn't been able to help it at the time. Becky was hurting herself, and they were both terrified for their daughter, and Barbra just wished they hadn't fought like they had.

She'd regretted refusing to share a bed with Ken for those nights Mimi was missing.... It had given him a new anxiety on top of all his old ones, and she often felt him reach out to touch her during the night to check if she was still there.

At least Becky had finally forgiven him....

Though Barbra still wasn't sure that *she'd* been forgiven for buying the new couches.

Every time Becky went to sit down she'd sniff at them and then make a *very* upset face before retreating to the old chair she'd been allowed to keep.

Ken had made a good call, with that one.

Barbra let out a sigh as she passed the chairs, cold drinks in hand, and headed for the back door.

It was a hot day. And Troy had been working hard; he'd be thirsty.

Barbra paused as she reached the hall, listening upstairs for her daughter.

*'Mimi... up! And... roll over... sit.... Good girl!'*

Ah, she was training Mimi. That was something that could keep her occupied for *hours* if she wasn't interrupted.... Best to leave her to it; it would give Barbra time to talk to Troy.

It should be fine as long as she kept an ear out.

Barbra made her way to the back yard where Troy was at the shed, exchanging the mower for some pruners, and held the drink she'd gotten him up so he could see it.

'Ah! Wonderful!' he exclaimed, putting the pruners back down and pulling off his gloves as he made his way over and accepted the drink. 'Thanks, Barb.'

'No, thank *you*,' Barbra put her hand on Troy's shoulder. 'You have *no* idea how grateful I am for this. The last thing I want is for the long grass to attract snakes!'

'Mm,' Troy gave a knowing nod. 'Don't want little Beck getting bit!'

'Exactly!' Barbra returned Troy's nod. 'I didn't let her outside yesterday because I was worried about it, and she had *such* a tantrum! Tears, screaming, foot stomping— Everything!'

Troy let out a hearty laugh. 'Ah, sounds like a handful. You gotta wonder where they get it from.'

'Oh, she gets it from me,' Barbra waved a hand in front of her face and scrunched up her nose, eliciting another laugh from Troy. '*Absolutely* from me. No question!'

'Ah. Well, at least she'll grow out of it,' Troy said, downing the last of his drink.

'Hm, I don't know about that,' Barbra hummed, sipping at her own drink. 'But it could be worse, I suppose. I could have ended up with a kid like that Masters' girl!'

Troy's brow raised, and he gave a slow nod. 'Oh, yeah. She's... *something*.'

'I'm half-convinced she's why Becky was always so hesitant to go to dance,' Barbra scrunched up her nose again; though this time it wasn't done playfully. 'Spoilt brat! I saw her teacher tell her she misstepped, once, and I swear she almost screamed a hole through the damn roof! At least when Becky screams like that it's about something sensible.'

Troy gave a laugh, and shook his head. 'Sensible like getting the wrong meat from the butcher?'

Barbra winced, and sucked a breath in through her teeth. 'You heard about poor Grimalkin's shin, then?'

'Yeah, Dolly heard about it,' Troy ran his finger around the rim of his empty cup and chuckled. 'Baran told Jed, Jed told Otto, Otto told Diana, and Diana told her.'

'Oh I see. So the whole town knows about my daughter's meltdown over ham?' Barbra's sigh was humoured, but still a sigh, as she took Troy's empty cup

and started back towards the house. 'I'm just lucky Baran's so patient.'

'Patient?' Troy scoffed, trailing her. 'Barb, there are a lot of words I could call Baran Grimalkin, but *patient* isn't one of them!'

Barbra just shrugged. 'I'd say anyone who can put up with Becky's demands for Mimi's diet is patient.... I gave that stupid thing a half a piece of toast, once, and Becky lectured me for *thirty minutes* about why I shouldn't have! Like it wouldn't have just stolen it out of the bin, anyway.'

Troy laughed again, wiping the last of his sweat off his brow as he followed Barbra inside. 'It's a little menace, isn't it?'

'Oh, god, yes!' Barbra gave an exasperated-but-playful cry as she headed for the kitchen. 'And it's not like Becky hasn't trained it! It *knows* how to behave, and it will do anything Becky tells it to.... But the moment she leaves the room, it's tearing around knocking over lamps and ripping open cushions!'

'And that's why I won't let the boys get a dog,' Troy joked, leaning against the bench as Barbra rinsed out the cups and put them aside with the rest of the dirty dishes.

Then he stretched, and the heart-and-chain tattoo on his chest expanded and shrunk as his muscles twitched, and Barbra couldn't help but watch it as it looked like it was giving a very strange beat.

It was a very nice tattoo. Brilliant penmanship that was clean and bright; overall just a fantastic piece of art—

'I have to warn you, Barb, I'm a married man,' Troy's quip pulled Barbra's attention back to his grin, and she shook her head at him.

'Please, Troy,' she scoffed playfully. 'Take *one* look at Ken and tell me that you're my type!'

The laugh that escaped Troy was more like a bark, and Barbra gave him an exaggerated eye-roll.

'You should bring Dolly over sometime,' Barbra suggested, leaning against the bench. 'For dinner, maybe? I could invite Kath and Deb, too. Make an event out of it?'

'Oh yeah, could be fun!' Troy nodded. 'Could bring the boys with us and—'

'*Who are YOU?!*' the loud, furious shout cut Troy off and he turned, stunned, to stare at the young half-elf girl who stood in the kitchen doorway. 'Where! Is your! *SHIRT!*'

'Becky!' Barbra scolded. 'Do *not* talk to Mr Slader that way—'

'HE'S GOT!' Becky interrupted, stomping her foot. 'NO SHIRT! Not allowed! No! Shirt stays! On! Isa says so! Gotta wear! A shirt!'

'Mr Slader doesn't have to wear a shirt if he doesn't want to,' Barbra said.

'Why not?!'

'Because he's a boy.'

'Stupid!' Becky retorted, grabbing at the hem of her own shirt and starting to lift it over her head. 'If stranger has the wearing of no shirt, then Becky— Me! I am Becky! With no shirt!'

'Oh, *Becky!*' Barbra let out an exasperated groan and lunged for her daughter, tugging the child's clothes back on. 'No! You keep your clothes on!'

'Why! Shirt!'

'Because!'

‘Because *why?*!’

‘Because girls have to wear shirts!’ Barbra scolded as Troy tried to smother his laugh. ‘It’s the *rules!*’

‘Stupid rules!’ Becky growled. ‘Stupid! Don’t get it!’

‘Yes— It is,’ Barbra agreed through grit teeth. ‘But it’s still a rule!’

‘Dad breaks stupid rules!’

‘And Dad gets in trouble when he does!’ Barbra snapped, ignoring Troy’s muffled snickering. ‘You remember when Dad didn’t wear shoes, and wasn’t allowed in the shops?’

Becky scowled at that memory, puffing out her cheeks and stomping her foot.

‘Or when he didn’t listen to Isa about packing away his laptop charger, and tripped on it?’

Another stomp, and Becky slapped her hands furiously against her sides.

‘Mhm,’ Barbra gave a slow nod, knowing her daughter knew she was right.

‘And if you break rules —no matter how stupid you think they are— you’ll get in trouble, too!’

Becky glowered at her mother with a dark look, before snorting. ‘Why do *you* never get told off?!’

The sound that escaped Troy was cut off as Barbra turned and smacked him on the shoulder, giving irritated frown that clearly read: *you’re not helping!*

Then, Becky gasped— And Barbra immediately realised she’d made a very big mistake.

‘*Mum!*’ Becky exclaimed, covering her mouth. ‘You *hit!* Mum! *Hit* him! You did! That’s allowed! Not allowed! *You* broke rules! You *hit!*’

*Gods above....*

‘Yes...’ Barbra forced out. ‘I... believe I just... did....’

‘Means *I* can hit people!’ Becky declared, causing another fit of laughter from Troy. ‘I can hit!’

‘No!’ Barbra snapped. ‘Absolutely *not!*’

‘Then you get in trouble!’

Barbra raised a finger and took a deep, deep breath, which she let out as a groan. ‘Yes. I get in trouble.’

‘Go to your *ROOM!*’ Becky demanded, pointing towards the stairs.

‘Becky, don’t raise your voice at me,’ Barbra told her. ‘I might be in trouble but I am still your mother.’

Becky closed her mouth tightly at that, shifting in place for a minute before pointing to the stairs again. ‘Ten minutes. You gotta cool off! No hitting! Bedroom for ten minutes! Until you calm down. Those are the rules! Yep! You gotta do ‘em!’

‘Yeah, Barb,’ Troy cut in with a humoured sniff. ‘You *gotta* follow the rules!’

‘Oh, you’re laughing *now*, Troy. But you forget...’ Barbra raised her brow, and put her hands on her hips. ‘Becky needs supervision. And you’re the only other adult in the house right now.’

For a moment, Troy hesitated. Then, his brow furrowed. ‘Huh?’

‘Have fun babysitting,’ Barbra grinned, then turned on her heels and headed for the stairs. ‘I’ll see you both in ten minutes.’

~~~~~

For a “punishment,” Barbra thought that being sent to her room was actually rather pleasant. She’d laid in bed and let herself calm down from *whatever* it was had gotten her so worked up, and felt a lot better for it.

Which, of course, was exactly what the intended effect was supposed to be; only it was *meant* to be *Becky* sent off to cool down. Not an adult. And certainly not *her*.

But Barbra wasn’t going to complain; instead she was taking advantage of the excuse to just sit and do nothing.

She managed to stay in her room for an extra five minutes before there was a knock on her door.

‘Yes?’ she called, sitting up.

‘Becky says that I have to come in and tell you time is up?’ Troy chuckled, slowly creaking open the door. ‘And that you’re not in trouble anymore.’

‘Ah, I see,’ Barbra returned Troy’s laugh and rose to her feet. ‘Did she give you any trouble?’

‘Nothing I couldn’t handle,’ said Troy. ‘She told me I smelt like the couch, and then she saw my mimic tattoo and... well. That was the topic of conversation. She showed me Mimi, and asked if I got the tattoo because I liked mimics— I told her about how one almost took my arm off and got a lecture on being more careful.’

‘Oh, that sounds like her,’ Barbra grinned. ‘How’d you get away?’

‘I didn’t,’ Troy made a face. ‘I just got sent to check on you, but I had to promise I’d come right back so she could show me Mimi’s care books.’

Barbra scoffed, rolling her eyes, and followed Troy into Becky’s room.

Immediately Becky went off again; talking and talking and talking. About Mimi. And mimics. And her mimic books. And her mimic DVDs. And her mimic-print shirts.

And Barbra found herself smiling as she stood by the door and watched.

Troy was a very patient man. And she was grateful for that. Not everyone had the patience to sit and listen to Becky go on, and on. And on.... And *on* about her interests the way she did.

Especially when she began to get her words mixed up, and stuttered. And....

*Ah....*

Barbra felt her smile fall as Becky got caught on a word; repeating it over and over as she tried to process what to say next.

‘It— It— It—’ she stammered, forcefully. ‘It— It— It—’

Troy raised his hand, and gently *bonked* it against the top of Becky’s head; sending her into a surprised silence.

Then she made a noise that sounded like the halfway between an offended “*huh?*” and a confused “*what?*” and put a hand to her head.

‘You were skipping like a record,’ Troy told her. ‘So I gave you a little bonk like I give the jukebox at the bar. Did it work?’

For a moment, Becky stared at Troy.

Then she laughed.

‘Bonk!’ she exclaimed, spinning in an excited circle. ‘I got all bonked! Bonked like a jukebox!’

‘Ah, dang, I think I changed the channel!’ Troy chuckled, crouching down and ruffling Becky’s hair. ‘Oh well. What do you want to talk about, now?’

‘Hmm...’ Becky stopped spinning, tapping her chin thoughtfully before pointing to Troy’s face. ‘You have teeth!’

‘I do, yes—’

‘Big teeth!’ Becky continued, clambering up Troy and grabbing at his fangs. ‘Sharp! Pointy! I like ‘em!’

‘*Becky!*’ Barbra squawked, leaping from her place at the door to remove her daughter’s hand from inside a very stunned-looking Troy’s mouth. ‘We don’t put our hands in people’s *mouths!*’

‘I do!’

‘No you *don’t*, young lady!’

‘*I do!*’ Becky declared, loudly.

‘Alright— You know what?’ Barbra scooped up her daughter, and hefted her in the direction of the bed. ‘You’re being *too silly*. That means you’re tired and need a nap!’

—END—

If you enjoyed reading, please consider supporting me and my work at  
[cjadewyton.com](http://cjadewyton.com)