

# Behind the Diner

By C. Jade Wyton

*A very large, very loyal mimic named Rusty will do anything to protect the teenage girl who cares for it.*

***Contains descriptions of violence and animal injury.***

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The nightly routine behind Jones' Diner was beat-by-beat, now. It was the same as it had been for the past two years.

Tegan, the teenage waitress, would come out with the scraps and leftovers from the day in a plastic garbage bag with the instructions from the cook to toss the entire thing into the dumpster.... And every night she would tear the knot open with her cat-like claws and walk over to the dumpster next to the dumpster, tickle that dumpster's side until it giggled, and then upend the bag of food into it.

She got in trouble for it every time, too. Though the dumpster wasn't sure why, exactly.

Something about Mr Jones not liking it living behind his diner, and that Tegan's constant feedings had attracted it...

Though, the dumpster had to huff in humour at Mr Jones; the old man never tried to chase it away. And —when he thought no one was looking— he would sometimes scratch at its side and coo to it.

He was a funny man.

And Tegan was a lovely girl.

Such a lovely girl!

'Hey, Rusty!' Tegan's voice called into the alley, and the mimic gave a loud purr in response. 'Got your dinner, boy! Yes I do! *Yes I do!*'

Rusty gave a happy groan as it felt Tegan's claws on its side, tickling it playfully.

It rumbled at her touch; feeling its exterior soften and jiggle like jello as it giggled and trilled in joy.

Then she fed it, scratching it along the rim of its lid as it chewed and chewed and then burped.

'Good boy!' she laughed, her feline tail lashing side-to-side. 'That's my good boy!'

The mimic purred deeply, the ground at its feet rumbling, and gave the young girl a loving lick.

'Ew!' she giggled, wiping the spit off her face. 'Okay, okay, I gotta go finish packing up the kitchen, then I'll come and say goodbye, okay?'

Rusty gave another loud purr.

'Yeah, okay!' Tegan cooed, and pecked a little kiss on Rusty's side.

The mimic licked its lid as Tegan deposited the empty rubbish bag in the real dumpster and returned to the diner. It knew she'd be out in only another ten or so minutes to collect her bike from behind its rump so she could head home, so it

waited patiently for her as Jones scolded her again.

‘I’ve told you not to feed that thing!’ he told her; eliciting a laugh in response. ‘I’m serious, Tegan!’

‘You’re never serious, you old goof!’ Tegan replied.

Then, the sound of the old-and-loud dishwasher being turned on covered up their voices. Just like it did every night.

It was a nice routine.

Rusty liked it.

It made Rusty very, very happy.

There was nobody that Rusty loved more in the world than Tegan.

Tegan was Rusty’s everything. Ever since she had first started working at the diner the mimic’s life had been improved. She would bring it toys and food, and she’d scratch its side and talk to it on her breaks. Sometimes she’d stay late after work just to spend time with it!

Oh, Tegan was perfect, and Rusty loved her.

It loved her a whole lot.

It would give her anything.

Anything at all!

It would give Tegan the whole world, if it knew how to catch it.

The diner door opened again and Tegan stepped out, her apron now missing from her front as she hurried down the two small steps and rushed over to Rusty.

She pet its side; giving it two mighty thumps at the end so it knew to move over so she could get to her bike.

‘Good boy,’ she told it when it shifted. ‘You do such a good job at keeping that safe for me!’

Yes. Of course it did.

It would do anything for Tegan.

*Anything!*

Tegan lashed her tail playfully, pecking another kiss onto Rusty (this one right between its eyes) before pulling her bike upright and mounting it.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow, boy!’

Rusty gave a happy groan and settled down in place as its girl kicked off.

She turned the corner, just as she did every night, and—

Rusty leapt to its feet at the sound of her cry, and it rushed for the alley’s exit as it heard her bike crash to the ground.

‘Get *off* me!’ Tegan shouted, and Rusty turned the corner to see her struggling with an older man.

He yanked at her backpack, which was wrapped tight around her shoulder, and she yanked back; desperately trying to free her arm from the strap.

‘Get off!’ Tegan cried again. ‘Let me *go!*’

‘Stop struggling!’ growled the man, releasing one hand from the backpack and reaching into his pocket. ‘I *mean* it!’

Rusty let out a growl as the man retrieved something boxy and metal from his coat. He swung the end of it at Tegan and she let out a pained cry— Which Rusty echoed with a furious snarl.

‘Wha—’ the man cut off as he turned and saw Rusty at the edge of the alley. He released Tegan, stepping back in shock as his eyes went wide and he held up the

metal thing to point at the mimic.

Rusty gave a growl, stepping forward as Tegan stumbled to its side.

‘Rusty— Rusty, no! Don’t!’ Tegan cried, putting her hands against the mimic in an attempt to push it back towards the alley. ‘Rusty don’t! He’ll hurt you!’

Rusty didn’t care.

This man had hurt Tegan.

This man had *hurt Tegan!*

The smell of the blood dripping out of Tegan’s nose made Rusty shake from its lid to its legs.

How dare he....

*HOW DARE HE!*

A roar escaped from Rusty’s chest, so deep and loud and furious it made the diner windows rattle, and then it lunged at the man.

*HOW DARE HE! HOW DARE HE! HOW DARE HE—*

*BANG!*

The metal thing went off, and Rusty felt a sharp pain shoot through its body as it collapsed to the pavement.

‘RUSTY!’ Tegan’s shriek cried over the ringing sound in Rusty’s head. ‘Rusty! Rusty, no!’

Rusty gave a groan as agony shook through its body.

It could see the man rushing away down the street, and tried to rise to its feet to follow—

*Oh, it hurt!*

‘*Rusty!*’ Tegan cried, her hands gripping at the worst spot of pain on Rusty’s body. ‘Rusty, no! *No!* Don’t move! Rusty, just hold on, boy!’

‘What’s going on?!’ it was Mr Jones’ voice; rushing through the diner’s front door. ‘Oh my gods— What happened?!’

‘He shot Rusty!’ Tegan sobbed, her voice breaking in a squeak as she tried to push pressure against the mimic’s wound. ‘He shot Rusty! He— He— He shot— My Rusty! He—’

‘Get him in the car!’ Mr Jones ordered, rushing for the other side of the road and clambering into one of the cars. ‘We’ll find a vet— *Somewhere* will be open! Somewhere *has* to be!’

Tegan couldn’t reply; she could barely breathe she was crying so hard.

‘Tegan! Get him *up!*’ Mr Jones shouted, swinging the car around and mounting the curb. ‘Rusty! Up! In the car, boy! Come on! Come on!’

Rusty groaned as it felt Mr Jones’ hands on its side; desperately trying to push it up.

‘*Please, Rusty,*’ Tegan managed— And Rusty felt itself shiver.

*It had to get up....*

*It had to get up... for Tegan....*

It took a deep breath, bracing itself, and with trembling legs it rose to its feet and stumbled forward.

‘Thatta boy!’ Mr Jones praised, leading the mimic to the open car boot. ‘In. Come on! In! You can do it! You can do it! Good boy!’

It took all of Rusty’s strength to make the agonising step into the car, and as soon as it was up it collapsed onto its side with an exhausted groan.

‘Stay with us, boy,’ Mr Jones told it, helping lift Tegan into the boot so she could press her hands back against the mimic’s wound. ‘You’re going to be alright.’

The boot slammed shut, though Rusty barely heard it over Tegan’s sobbing. And it barely felt the car rumble and lurch as its heart beat painfully.

‘*You’ll be okay,*’ Tegan sniffled, burying her face into Rusty’s side. ‘*Please... You have to be okay....*’

Rusty let out a low groan and licked at Tegan; its long, wet tongue running weakly along her side as it saw Mr Jones ignoring the red stop lights of the road.

‘Just hold on, Rusty,’ Tegan sobbed. ‘You’ll be okay. I promise. It’s going to be okay!’

Yes, the mimic thought as it shifted to nuzzle into its girl. *It is going to be okay... because I kept you safe.... I kept you safe... and that’s all that matters....*

*Good girl, Tegan.*

*Good girl....*

*I love you....*

—END—

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