

The Writing on the Wall

By Adina Tanner

There is a single sentence scratched into the wall of the second floor bathroom in Eastville High School. No one knows how it got there. Many people never even notice it. But if you're one of the lucky ones, it can change your life.

All things considered, Taylor Bennett was having a pretty awful day. It surely wasn't the *worst* day of her life—that spot had been reserved—but it wasn't great. All day, Taylor was surrounded by sympathy. There was no escape from the pitying looks, the sad smiles, the uncomfortable pats on the back. There was no escape from that dreaded, *dreaded* phrase:

“Our thoughts and prayers are with your family.”

“Thanks, Ms. Stevens.”

Thoughts and prayers don't bring your mom back from the dead.

Lunch felt...weird. To an outsider, it wouldn't have looked like anything was wrong, but to Taylor, nothing was right.

Something had changed.

No.

Everything had.

English class.

“Can I go to the bathroom?”

Mr. Reynolds turned around. Cue pitying smile.

“Sure, Taylor. Take all the time you need.”

Taylor winced. That last part was unnecessary.

Taylor thought that the second floor bathroom was the smallest and ugliest room in the entire building. It was barely used, though, so it made a great hiding spot. Taylor sat down.

Why was life so *unfair*?

If her mom was still alive, she would have told Taylor not to think that way. To stay optimistic. To make the best of what she still had.

The bell rang, startling Taylor. She quickly wiped her eyes and went to wash her face.

She grabbed a paper towel and looked in the mirror. Looking back at her was a puffy, red face, and—wait, what was that on the wall?

Taylor turned around. There was something written there. Curious, Taylor stepped closer to read it.

Reading the sentence felt like a hug, somehow. A warm, comforting hug that told her everything would be okay. The words smiled at her and Taylor found herself smiling back, for the first time in weeks.

Taylor left the bathroom, but the sentence stayed with her.

It would never leave.

“Go sit in the car, I need the restroom.”

“Mom?”

“Just go. I’ll come out soon.”

Madge Anderson didn’t stay to watch her son sulk off down the deserted hallway. She turned on her heels and made a beeline for the bathroom.

She didn’t need the restroom.

She needed a break.

When Madge had seen the school's number on her caller ID for the third time this month, she knew it was bad.

"Mrs. Anderson?"

Madge sighed.

"Yes?"

"This is Principal Evans. We're going to need to see you about Jack."

Oh, it was bad alright.

The official phrase used was "asked not to return," but everyone knew what it really meant.

Expelled.

Jack had been expelled.

In the second floor bathroom of Eastville High, Madge stared at her reflection in the mirror.

Was she a bad mother?

Madge was trying, she was trying *so* hard.

Not hard enough, it seemed.

Madge leaned her arm against the wall and then immediately sprung back. Something had poked her in the arm. It was... a small piece of wood?

Madge removed the splinter and looked back at the wall. There was something written there, but she couldn't make it out. She put her glasses on and looked again.

Her jaw dropped.

Five minutes later, Madge was back in the car.

“Mom?”

Madge turned around, her smile wide.

“I love you, kid.”

When Madge thought of that night, years later, she didn't remember the worry and disappointment. All she could think about was that sentence, and how it had made all the difference.

Before he knew what he was doing, Jason Lewis was pushing open the creaky door to the second floor bathroom.

He had been walking back to his office when he saw Ms. Evans across the hall. Before she could spot him, he quickly ducked into the closest hiding spot he could find, which just so happened to be the second floor bathroom.

He couldn't face Principal Evans. He wasn't ready.

Jason had gotten that email two weeks ago. He knew this because Gmail was kind enough to remind him.

Sent two weeks ago. Follow up?

Jason hit “ignore.”

Amelia Evans wanted to meet with him, and Jason knew the exact reason why.

He needed to decide if he was staying on as a teacher next year. It doesn't seem like such a problem, right? It's a stable job he enjoys doing—why *not* stay?

If Jason continued teaching, he would be fully admitting that he would never become a doctor like his family *so* wanted him to. At every family event or holiday, when asked:

“So, Jason, what have you decided to do with your life?”

He would have to respond:

“Oh, I’m a full-time teacher now.”

He would have to constantly ignore the judgemental looks and the snide comments.

But he would also be doing the thing he loved—teaching.

Jason groaned and rubbed his hands over his face. He needed to make a decision soon.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jason spotted something scribbled on the wall. He sighed. Even after all the assemblies about respecting public property, students still graffitied anything they could get away with. Jason wet a paper towel and started to wipe away the words, but they would budge.

“What the heck—”

The words were engraved on the wall, not written. Jason scoffed and stepped back. His eyes scanned the sentence. The second he took in what it said, he relaxed. The weight that had been on his shoulders was gone. Jason kept reading the sentence over, each time gaining more confidence. Jason took one last look at the sentence, walked out of the bathroom and nearly bumped into Ms. Evans.

“Jason! I’ve been looking for you. Do you have a minute to step into my office?”

Jason smiled broadly.

“Certainly.”
