A Painted Promise

“The assignment is due Monday, and I won’t be tolerating any more late submissions,” she said, her eyes locking onto me. I slouched in my seat, using every ounce of willpower not to roll my eyes.

The rest of the class muttered quietly, some scribbling notes, others scrolling through their phones while everyone else pretended not to see. I stared at my notebook, then at my pencil, then back at my notebook, not ready to start whatever we were doing in class.

The bell rang, and I felt the weight of the day lift off my shoulders. I headed straight to my favorite spot in the whole school—the eco garden. It was filled with the calming scent of flowers, the fresh air from the newly planted trees, and my personal favorite, the soft hum of the solar flowers rotating towards the sun. Sometimes I wondered why this place was always so empty.

I claimed a table under one of the solar flowers and started sketching, enjoying the quiet, until familiar laughter broke through the stillness. Danielle and Sophia had just come from last period. Our faces lit up when we saw each other.

“Ugh, I hate high school schedules,” Danielle groaned, slamming her bag onto the table. “We only see each other at lunch and the end of the day!”
I laughed. “Yeah, it’s like the school’s trying to keep us apart on purpose.
Sophia grinned. “Maybe they’re scared we wouldn't actually get anything done if we were in the same class.”

We talked about random things, the group project in science, the vending machine that kept eating people’s coins, and how everyone was still unhappy with the biodegradable trays and utensils, despite our eco club campaigning for months to make it happen.

I glanced at my phone and saw the time and six new text messages from my mom.

“I should head out,” I said. “My mom’s going to be fuming when I get home.”

“Same,” Sophia sighed.

“See you tomorrow?” added Danielle

“Yeah, like always,” I said, smiling as we each headed our separate ways home.

Outside, the air was cooler than usual, and I heard a faint hum in the distance, as the electric bus approached our school gate. I tapped my card and slid into my usual seat. I put on my headphones and watched the city roll by through the windows. Toronto has been lined with tall, polluting skyscrapers for as long as I could remember, but now that things have changed, it felt refreshing not to see grey smoke pouring from every building, but instead to catch glimpses of green spreading across the rooftops.

The bus was quiet, electric, and smooth, a small constant in my life ever since sixth grade.

The ride felt shorter than usual today.

When I got off, the sun had already started setting. I took the familiar path home and took the shortcut through the community garden. That's when I saw it—the mural.

It looked different, half of it was covered in construction tape, and the other half was being scraped by workers on ladders. The bold words, the bright colours of the flowers and bees I remember, were fading away.

I stopped on the sidewalk, "They're painting over it." I thought. The mural really wasn't that big of a deal. It was painted on a small brick wall beside our community garden by an upcoming artist, but it was the story behind it that mattered. It was one of the first environmental murals in our neighborhood, the place where we held our first protest for rooftop gardens, solar panels, and better recycling and composting systems for our apartment. Now, the mural was probably getting replaced with some advertisement that no one asked for.

I thought about saying something, what they were doing, or at least if they'll keep part of the mural, but the words never came out. What could I even do? I was just a ninth grader walking home from school.

By the time I reached my building, I had almost convinced myself to let it go. After all, buildings get torn down, stores get closed, murals get painted over, that's just the way life goes, *right?* But when I reached the lobby I saw a small poster on the community board, something I'd never seen before. "NOTICE: Construction on Community Garden Wall; Sponsored Advertisement Coming Soon!"

I was too upset to read the rest. Just as I had expected, an ad. They were painting over our mural about sustainability to put an *ad*.

I wasn't going to sit back and watch this happen. I knew I wasn't the only one ready to do something about it. First it would be the mural, then the community garden, and then everything else we worked hard for. I took a picture of the notice and thought for a second before shoving it into my pocket.

I stormed up the stairs ready to solve this problem. I didn't know exactly what I could do yet, but the thought of staying quiet suddenly felt worse than doing nothing.

I opened my phone and sent a quick message to the group chat with Danielle and Sophia:

Zara: They're painting over the mural. For an ad.

Sophia: What?! No way.

Danielle: You're joking… are they even allowed to do that?

Zara: It doesn't matter, we're not going to let it happen. Meet me at the eco-garden after school.

*"*We're doing *something* about this*,"* I thought to myself, and drifted off to sleep.

The next day at school felt like any regular day, the struggle to shove your way to class, staring at the clock, and the sigh of relief when I heard the dismissal bell.

Finally, I ran to the eco garden and was a little taken aback by the sight of Sophia and Danielle already at our table. Danielle was already scribbling something on her tablet, while Sophia was aggressively typing on her laptop.

"Got a plan yet?" I asked.

"Actually, yes!" exclaimed Sophia. "Check it out, I posted on every social media platform I have with the hashtag *#GreenOverGreed,* look, this one already has twenty likes!"

Barely even looking up from her screen, Danielle said, "What if we start a campaign,like with actual petitions, posters, maybe even talk to the news club?"

"I mean, we already have the perfect slogan," I said. "We can divide up the work into the posters, petitions, and the mural sketch."

Danielle nodded, already opening a new document. "If I can get signatures from a few teachers, it might move faster," she said, typing quickly.

Sophia spun her laptop around. "I'll make the posters tonight, make them something bold, maybe with the mural's old colors."

I smiled, pulling out my sketchbook.

For a while, the garden echoed with the familiar sounds of tapping keys and flipping pages, until—“RRRING!”

“Sorry, I forgot to turn it off,” snapped Sophia. “It’s my dad. Sorry, I gotta go, guys.”

We all exchanged looks and let out a collective sigh.

“It’s okay. It was about time we started packing up anyway,” I said. “Same time tomorrow?”

Danielle groaned. “Ugh, I can’t make it. What about the day after?”

We all nodded in agreement and went our separate ways. On the bus ride home, I couldn’t stop thinking about what might actually happen—we *might* just get our mural back.

In the next few days, us three worked our heads off, and soon enough, *#GreenOverGreed* was everywhere. Posters covered the school bulletin boards, lockers, and even the digital announcement screens. Some people stopped to read them, others just walked by, but it was enough to get attention.

At lunch, the eco garden had a few guests. Students from other grades were there, asking what the campaign was about, how they could help, or where to sign the petition. Danielle had printed copies ready, handing out a pencil to everyone nearby, while Sophia explained passionately how the city had approved an ad to cover the community mural, and why said mural was so important. I had my rough sketch on a big spreadsheet taped on in the corner, with a few people looking at it.

“It’s not just about the paint!” Sophia said, handing out even more posters. “It’s about how everything meaningful gets replaced by something we can buy.

A round of applause erupted in the small crowd.

We kept working, but now we had many more people helping. My art club joined in on the sketch, the news club finally decided to cover the mural, and Sophia’s dad, who’s a lawyer, helped Danielle with all the petition work.

Soon enough, posters covered the whole school, signatures were piling up (nearly 300), and my draft of the new painting was complete. In my sketch, the city bloomed again—gardens climbing up brick walls, solar flowers turning toward the sky, and rivers of color weaving through the streets. Everything was moving as planned.

The community garden group reached out, saying they wanted to help us talk to city representatives. For the first time, it felt like our voices were actually being heard.

Two environmental representatives from the city came to visit: a woman who looked fairly young and new to the job, and a man who seemed harsh at first but warmed up as our presentation went on. Their names were Amanda and Dan, and they almost instantly accepted our project. A few Eco and Art Club members came to help. It was short, but it felt like an eternity, trying to read the representatives' faces and worrying I'd mispronounce a word I'd practiced over and over.

A couple of days after our presentation got approved, our trio visited the mural. The printing of the ad had been "paused temporarily", so we were just staring at a blank wall.
"I can't believe we actually did it!" exclaimed Danielle.
"Hold your horses," said Sophia. "We still don't know if the company with the ad has surrendered."

"Oh, come on," I said. "We've got this. We already hired a painter, and 'paused temporarily' clearly means they're backing down."

We all laughed together and started walking back home.

Two weeks later, there it was. I recognized parts from my sketch—the rooftop gardens, the people biking, and the children planting trees in the corner. The mural was back, brighter and bolder than ever.

It wasn't just us three; there was a whole crowd watching the grand opening we never asked for. When the curtains revealed the mural, a huge round of applause broke out, and I couldn't help but feel proud of myself and our team.

The two environmental representatives who approved our project were there. "We appreciate all the hard work that went into this mural, from our determined students to our talented painter!" they said. The crowd erupted into applause once again. After the speech, they came up to the three of us and handed each of us a marker.

"I think it's missing something," said Amanda. Dan shifted his gaze toward the mural. Danielle and Sophia turned their heads to me, and together we walked up to the wall and signed our names in an empty corner.

I stepped back and looked at the mural one last time. The signatures looked so small but felt so big. The mural wasn't just a wall anymore—it was a promise, a reminder that even the smallest spark can grow into something that lights a community.