



THE QUIET
STRENGTH
OF JADE

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The Quiet Strength of Jade

I never meant to begin a program. Not in the official sense. At first, it was just a handful of women in the kitchen with me, washing jars and folding laundry, staying longer than their tasks required because they didn't want to go back to the silence waiting for them. I saw something in their eyes I recognized; the kind of lost that feels heavier than empty.

The idea for what became the Women in Crisis program was planted like all seeds are: without ceremony, without anyone knowing it would take root. I had no grant or plan, no ledger entry carved out in Willow's careful script. Just a sense that when women have lost their ground, they need a place to stand again; somewhere safe, somewhere useful, somewhere that reminds them they are more than what was taken from them.

I remember sitting at the long oak table in the school's side room, scraps of fabric piled high, a single sewing machine whirring as if it were singing a song only we could hear. One of the women stitched a crooked line into an old sheet we were cutting down into rags. She looked up at me with trembling hands and said, *"I haven't done anything right in years."*

I touched the uneven stitches with my fingertips, smoothed the cloth flat, and told her, *"This is beautiful. It will hold."*

That was the moment I knew this wasn't about fabric or rags or even skill. It was about holding. Being held. Finding strength in small, useful things.

From those beginnings came circles. Circles became classes. Classes became a program with its own name: *Women in Crisis*. Sponsored by the school, yes, but in truth, it sponsors itself. Each woman who passes through brings her own strength, her own memory of survival, her own offering of hands.

Now the shelves are lined with preparedness kits we've built together, meals cooked in bulk for the Parish are cooling on the windowsill, haircuts echo with laughter in the small bathroom where mirrors hang crooked on the walls, and sewing machines hum most days like steady heartbeats.

I still see the beginnings every time I walk into that room; the uneven stitches, the uncertain faces, the fragile way a woman learns to sit in a chair as if she deserves to be there. I see myself, too, in those early hours, fumbling to trust again, to build something out of what was broken.

We call it a program. I call it a circle of survival. A reminder that no matter what we've lost, we can begin again, thread by thread.

The Threshold

The room always felt like it breathed before the women arrived. Morning light softened against the wide windows, slanting in across shelves lined with cloth and jars, across wooden floors scuffed by decades of use. If Jade closed her eyes, she could almost hear the space inhaling, long and slow, as if preparing itself to hold the weight of whatever stories and silences would be carried into it that day.

She lingered at the doorway with one hand on the frame, looking in. The smell of sage drifted faint but steady from the corner where last night's smudge stick had burned down to ash. She always cleansed the room when it was empty, not for show, but because she knew how memory clung to places. Pain had a way of sticking to the walls unless you told it otherwise.

Today the scent of sage mingled with lavender and rosemary bundles drying overhead. Soap, too; bars Jesi and Lyla had left curing on the shelf, gave off their clean, sharp perfume. Somewhere beneath it all was the metallic scent of machine oil. Tekren had been here last week, tending the sewing machines with the same patience he used on his rooftop tools and garden beds. The pedals no longer squeaked, the gears turned smooth. Jade smiled a little at the thought, his hands always fixing, always steady. He had never once rushed her.

She stepped inside, boots tapping softly on the wood. The chairs in the circle waited in silence, six of them, drawn close but not too close. Enough space to breathe. Enough space to belong without crowding. She adjusted one slightly, her hand lingering on the backrest. She remembered the first time she herself had sat in a circle like this, years ago, far from Bitter Sweet.

The memory rose sudden and uninvited: a small basement room, white walls that smelled of mildew, folding chairs in a rough circle. She had sat on the edge of one, knees tight together, eyes darting to the exit as if she might run. Her chest had thudded so loud she'd wondered if anyone else could hear it. She hadn't trusted her own voice. Hadn't trusted anyone else's face. Back then, silence had been her only armor. She'd wanted to disappear.

But someone had noticed. A woman with a scarf wound around her head had caught her gaze and nodded. Just a nod, nothing more. As if to say: *you don't have to speak yet. You're allowed to sit here.* That nod had steadied her in ways she hadn't understood until much later.

It was that memory that shaped how she prepared this room now. Every folded cloth, every pencil lined neatly on the writing table, every chipped teacup set out; these details spoke one quiet message: *you belong here, even if you don't believe it yet.*

She moved to the window and lit a small candle, setting it on the sill where morning sunlight poured in. Outside, Bitter Sweet stirred alive, the clang of pots in the kitchen,

voices of children tumbling like birdsong, the creak of garden gates. She let that life steady her breath. Then she turned back to the waiting circle.

The door creaked.

Marin slipped in first, clutching something to her chest. Seventeen? Maybe eighteen? Too young, Jade always thought, too young to carry the weight her eyes revealed. Her hair hung loose, falling across her face like a curtain. She kept her gaze on the floor, as though it might offer her safety. The bundle in her arms, a threadbare sweater, Jade noticed, was gripped so tightly the girl's knuckles whitened.

Behind her, Anita entered with deliberate slowness. She looked older, perhaps late forties, her shoulders bowed as if years of carrying invisible loads had pressed her down. Her hands were rough, the skin cracked, her mouth set in a line that had long ago forgotten softness. Still, Jade saw her glance briefly at the sewing machines, something like familiarity flickering in her gaze.

Then Selene came, so silently Jade almost missed her. Tall but folded inward, her presence like a shadow that didn't want to be seen. Her dark hair was pulled back, severe, as though to erase herself. She hovered at the doorway, her body angled toward escape.

Last was Elira, new this week. Dust clung to her skirt; she had traveled far, that much was clear. Her sharp eyes moved over the room with suspicion, every corner measured, every chair assessed. She carried a satchel close against her ribs. She didn't step fully in until she seemed certain no one would block her way out.

The silence that followed their arrival was thick, brittle. Jade let it sit. She knew not to rush. These first minutes mattered; silence itself was part of the threshold.

"Welcome," Jade said at last, her voice even, gentle but sure. "This room is yours as much as it is mine. Sit where you feel comfortable."

Anita moved first, lowering herself heavily into a chair. The scrape of wood against wood echoed too loudly. Marin followed, almost timidly, perching on the edge of a chair with her bundle still pressed against her lap. Selene slid into the chair nearest the door, her eyes down, her body taut. Elira hesitated longest, then sat stiffly, her satchel clutched in her lap, as if daring the chair to hold her.

Jade walked into the circle but didn't sit yet. She looked at each of them, letting her gaze rest long enough to show she saw them, but not long enough to demand anything in return.

"I know it isn't easy to walk through this door," she said. "And it isn't easy to sit in that chair. I've been where you are. I know the courage it takes."

The words hung in the air. Marin's eyes flickered up, startled, then back down. Selene's fingers picked at the hem of her sleeve. Anita exhaled slowly, shoulders sinking just a fraction. Elira's jaw tightened, but she didn't move.

Jade drew out a chair of her own, lowering herself into it with steady slowness. She leaned forward, elbows resting lightly on her knees.

"This is a place to learn," she said. "But more than that, it's a place to remember who you are. Sometimes we start with the smallest things. Thread and fabric. Soap and scissors. A meal shared. They might look ordinary. But they are ways of holding life steady again."

Behind her, the sewing machines stood quiet, waiting. Soon they would hum their steady rhythm, like heartbeats. But not yet. First came the circle. First came the remembering.

She thought again of her own trembling years ago. The way silence had been both her shield and her prison. She had not believed she could ever trust again, not after broken promises, not after nights that had left her raw and hollow. But Tekren had shown her another way, not with words, but with constancy. With his quiet tending of rooftop gardens, his steady fixing of what was broken. His presence had been like the oil in those machines: smoothing what was rusted, refusing to let her life grind to a halt.

She didn't tell them all that, not yet. But she let it shape her voice, its low strength.

"You don't have to speak today," she said, looking around the circle. "You don't have to do anything but sit. That's enough. You're enough."

She nodded then, to each of them, one by one, just as that woman years ago had nodded to her. It was a quiet offering, a lifeline without demand.

Marin's eyes shimmered as if a tear might fall. Anita's hands stilled. Selene's body shifted, just slightly, away from the door. Elira looked down at her satchel, her grip loosening by a thread.

The threshold had been crossed.

The Program Foundations

The first week of a new circle was always tender, like the first stitching of a seam; you could tug too hard and unravel everything, or you could move with patience and let the threads learn how to hold together. Jade had learned this the long way. She no longer expected women to pour their stories out in the first days. Instead, she built the rhythm of the room carefully, like weaving a fabric strong enough to carry them.

Each morning began with the circle. Always the circle. Jade would arrive early, light the small candle on the sill, and set cups on the table. Steam would rise from the kettle in the back corner, filling the room with the earthy scent of sage tea.

On the first morning, when the women arrived still uncertain in their chairs, Jade poured the tea slowly, the stream amber and fragrant. She handed the cups one by one, her fingers brushing each woman's hand for just a moment.

"This tea is simple," she said. "Sage leaves, dried and steeped. Our grandmothers would have called it a medicine for clearing; body and mind. But I like to think of it as a reminder: that the earth gives us what we need to breathe again."

Marin sipped hers with caution, as though the warmth itself might betray her. Anita cupped hers in her rough palms, inhaling deeply, eyes closing just for a second. Selene held the cup near her chest without drinking. Elira stared into hers like it might reveal a secret.

After the cups were filled, Jade guided them through a short breath practice. "Breathe in, count to four. Hold. Breathe out, count to six. That's all. Nothing complicated."

The room shifted. Shoulders lowered. Hands unclenched. Even Selene's chest rose and fell more slowly.

Sometimes Willow joined these circles. She would step in with her long braid streaked silver, carrying small jars or sprigs of herbs. Her voice was soft but sure as she spoke about each plant, how rosemary sharpened memory, how lavender softened grief, how sage steadied the spirit.

"These herbs," Willow would say, "are not just medicine for the body. They remind us of what is already in us. Memory. Rest. Strength."

The women rarely spoke at first. That was fine. Jade didn't press. The circle wasn't about words, it was about presence.

After tea, the day moved into work. Work was the hinge on which the program turned, not busywork, but useful, tangible skills that stitched dignity back into daily life.

The sewing machines were old, the tables scratched, but when the pedals pressed down and the needles bit into fabric, the room filled with a rhythm that steadied nerves.

Anita found herself at ease there. Her hands, though cracked, knew how to guide a hem. She muttered about uneven stitches, but Jade noticed the way her back straightened when a line came out clean.

“This is something I can still do,” Anita whispered once, almost to herself.

“Yes,” Jade replied quietly. “And it matters.”

Marin struggled at first, her seams crooked, thread bunching in tangles. She cursed under her breath, tears threatening. Jade leaned beside her.

“Don’t fight the machine,” she said. “Guide it. Let it follow your pace.” She placed her hand lightly over Marin’s trembling one. Together they ran the fabric through again. The line came out straight enough to hold. Marin blinked in surprise.

Selene chose hand sewing, her long fingers working silently at repairs. She rarely spoke, but the pile of mended clothing at her side grew steadily. Jade respected her silence, knowing it was its own offering.

Twice a week, Jesi and Lyla joined them in the kitchen wing. The women learned to blanch and freeze vegetables, to dry herbs, to can fruits in jars that gleamed like stained glass.

Anita perked up in these lessons, recalling her mother’s cellar shelves from years ago. Marin burned her first attempt at jam, then laughed, really laughed, for the first time Jade had seen. Even Elira leaned in, carefully labeling jars in a neat hand, her suspicion easing into concentration.

Cooking became a shared language. Kneading bread side by side, chopping vegetables shoulder to shoulder, the women found themselves humming along with Jesi’s tunes.

In the small bathroom with its crooked mirrors, Jade set up stools and scissors. The air filled with strands of hair drifting to the floor, light as feathers.

Marin surprised them all by taking to the shears quickly. She clipped Anita’s ends with careful precision, her brow furrowed in focus. Anita looked in the mirror afterward, startled at her reflection softened, renewed.

“See?” Jade told Marin. “Your hands know more than you think.”

Sessions of personal wellness were quieter. Jade spoke about simple hygiene, first aid, the importance of rest. Sometimes Willow came with salves or teas, teaching about herbs for women’s health.

Selene asked about herbs for sleep, her voice breaking the silence for the first time. Willow handed her a small sachet of lavender. Selene held it like a fragile gift.

Elira remained guarded, arms crossed, but Jade noticed she never missed these lessons. She wrote notes in a small book she carried, her eyes sharp and intent.

The day always closed with journaling. Jade set out notebooks, some new, some stitched together from recycled paper.

“You don’t have to write full sentences,” she told them. “Just words. Or sketches. Or silence on the page. Whatever comes.”

At first the pages stayed nearly blank. Marin drew tiny flowers. Anita listed the day’s tasks. Selene left hers untouched. Elira scribbled furiously but hid the pages from view.

Over time, the notebooks began to fill. Marin wrote small prayers. Anita began to recall recipes from memory. Selene one night wrote just a single line: *I am still here.*

When they felt ready, Jade invited sharing. Not forced. Never forced. Some nights no one spoke. Some nights a single voice broke through and the others listened, breath held.

One evening, after the room was quiet and the women gone, Jade lingered over the abandoned notebooks. She didn’t read them, privacy was sacred, but she touched the covers lightly. She remembered when she herself had first been given a notebook after the storm of her own trauma. She had written nothing for weeks. Then, one night, a single word: *trust.*

It had taken years to grow into it. Years, and Tekren’s steady patience.

The program was not hers alone, and Jade knew it.

Resha came often, her voice strong, guiding the women in simple exercises of leadership: speaking their names aloud, practicing eye contact, even role-playing difficult conversations. “Leadership isn’t about being loud,” Resha told them. “It’s about remembering you have a voice.”

Jesi and Lyla were constant in the kitchen and textiles, patient and encouraging. Jesi taught them how to stretch food, how to plan meals with what little they had. Lyla shared laughter freely, coaxing smiles from even Selene.

Tezani managed the skills ledger, carefully writing down the hours each woman contributed, the tasks completed. She explained it clearly: “This isn’t about debt. It’s about dignity. Every skill you practice is an offering to the community. And the community gives back to you.”

The women began to look at that ledger with pride. Their names, once forgotten, now marked on pages of contribution.

In every lesson, Jade wove her belief: that healing was not about grand gestures, but usefulness.

She told them, “The world told us we were broken. But broken things still hold. Look at these chairs; scuffed, dented, yet sturdy. Look at these hands; scarred, cracked, but capable. Healing isn’t about erasing scars. It’s about finding the use in them.”

She shared carefully of herself, how promises once broken had left her wary, how silence had once swallowed her whole. How Tekren had taught her that trust wasn’t about words but about showing up, day after day, without demand.

“I’m not asking you to trust me yet,” she said once. “I’m asking you to trust the work. The needle. The bread dough. The notebook page. They’ll meet you where you are.”

The women listened, some skeptical, some softened. But Jade knew; it was enough. Seeds were being planted.

The Women's Stories

The rhythm of the room had begun to take hold. It always did, sooner than Jade expected. A week, two weeks, and the silence of the first days softened into something else, hesitant laughter, murmured questions, even sighs of relief that came when a task was finally completed. The women didn't always notice it happening. But Jade did. She watched carefully, the way a gardener watched for small green shoots breaking through soil.

Marin: The Young Mother

Marin was the youngest of the group, though she carried herself like someone far older. At first, her eyes rarely left the floor, her hands clutched tightly in her lap. She flinched at sudden sounds, avoided the touch of others. Jade wondered what shadows she carried, what absence she held behind those wide eyes.

It was in the small bathroom with its crooked mirrors that Marin's hands found something steady. Jade had set up stools there, a cape draped across the back of one, scissors gleaming in a tray. She asked if anyone wanted to try trimming hair. Silence stretched, but Marin, almost without thinking, stepped forward.

Her hands shook at first. Anita volunteered as the patient, her jaw set, clearly skeptical. Marin clipped unevenly, strands falling crooked. She bit her lip, muttering an apology.

"Breathe," Jade told her softly. "Don't fight the scissors. Guide them, like a river guides its current."

Marin tried again. Her face drew tight with concentration. The scissors snipped more cleanly this time, and when Anita turned to look in the mirror, her expression shifted from doubt to surprise.

"It's... not bad," Anita admitted, running her fingers through the trimmed hair. "Better than I expected."

A small smile flickered across Marin's face. It was the first Jade had seen.

From then on, Marin took to the shears with determination. She practiced on herself, on Anita again, even offering to trim Selene's long hair (which Selene declined, but the offer itself was bold). Word spread, and soon other women in the school came asking for cuts. Marin's shoulders straightened when she worked. Her laugh returned, hesitant but real.

One evening, she lingered after class, sweeping up hair. She paused, broom in hand, and whispered to Jade:

"I didn't think I could do anything right anymore."

Jade touched her arm gently. "Your hands remember. Sometimes before your heart does."

Marin's eyes shone. She nodded, clutching the broom like it was a lifeline.

Anita: The Middle-Aged Seamstress

Anita was different. Her body carried years of labor, her face lined with exhaustion. She came into the program resentful, muttering about wasted time. "I should've had my life together by now," she said once, shaking her head as she pulled fabric across the table. "Starting over at my age? It's shameful."

Jade knew that shame well. She let Anita speak it without correction. Instead, she placed a square of fabric in front of her, handed her thread. "Just mend this seam," she said.

Anita's hands, though cracked, moved with surprising steadiness. The stitches came neat, almost beautiful. She frowned down at them, suspicious of her own skill.

"See?" Jade said softly. "Not starting over. Continuing. The work never left you."

Anita didn't answer. But she returned the next day, and the next. She began to volunteer for the mending pile, repairing school uniforms, children's sweaters, even old quilts that had nearly fallen apart. She never smiled, not outright, but her mouth softened as she worked, her back straightened.

The turning point came when the Parish sent over a bundle of torn clothing. Anita stayed late, insisting on finishing it that night. When she finally folded the repaired pieces, she ran her hand over them slowly.

"My mother used to sew every winter," she murmured. "We had nothing, but her stitches made us feel rich."

Her eyes glistened, but she blinked quickly and shoved the clothes aside. Still, Jade saw the pride there, hidden but alive.

Later that week, Anita caught sight of Marin fumbling with a hem. Instead of scolding, she moved beside her. "No, hold it like this. Pin here. Let the fabric work with you."

Marin listened, wide-eyed. Jade watched from across the room, heart swelling. Pride was returning, not only in Anita's own hands, but in passing it on.

Selene: The Bookish One

Selene remained the quietest. She worked with her head bent, mending clothes in silence, drinking her tea with eyes lowered. Jade wondered if she would ever speak.

One afternoon, during Willow's visit, Selene surprised them all. Willow was teaching about herbs for calm and sleep, passing around sachets of lavender. Selene raised her head and asked, almost too softly to hear:

"Are there herbs... for memory? For forgetting, I mean?"

The room fell still. Willow paused, her eyes gentle. "There are herbs that help soften memory's edges," she said carefully. "But I think sometimes memory must be reshaped, not erased."

Selene looked down quickly, clutching the lavender in her hands. But the next day, she lingered after class. Jade found her by the writing table, staring at the blank page of her notebook.

"I used to teach," Selene whispered. "Children. Reading and writing. But... I can't anymore. Not after..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

"You can again," Jade said softly.

Selene's eyes filled. "No one would trust me now."

"I do," Jade replied simply.

Weeks later, the Parish asked for volunteers to help children with literacy. Selene resisted at first but eventually agreed. When she returned from her first session, her face held something new; not a smile, exactly, but a lightness.

"They listened," she told Jade, almost in disbelief. "They wanted to learn."

And slowly, Selene began to speak more, her voice still soft but carrying. Her journal filled with fragments of lessons, small sketches of letters and words. The teacher in her was returning, thread by thread.

Elira: The Tension

It was Elira who threatened to leave. Her suspicion never fully lifted. She often sat stiff, her eyes narrowed, her notebook clutched like a shield. One evening, after journaling, she stood abruptly.

"This is pointless," she snapped. "Writing words won't change anything. Sewing won't fix me. Haircuts won't make me safe."

The others froze, eyes wide. Jade stood slowly. "You're right," she said. "These things won't fix you. But they might remind you that you're more than what happened to you. They might show you, you can still give, still create."

Elira's jaw tightened. "I can't trust anyone here."

Jade's throat ached. She looked down, then back up. "I know," she said quietly. "I couldn't either."

The room hushed. Even the candle's flame seemed to still.

Jade continued, her voice low. "There was a time I believed trust was a lie. I'd been betrayed, promises broken so deep they left scars you couldn't see. I built walls. Silence became safer than speaking. But then someone showed up, day after day, patient, steady. He didn't demand I heal. He just stayed. Tended what was broken. And little by little, I remembered how to breathe in the presence of another without fear."

Her thoughts flickered to Tekren, his rooftop garden, his quiet hands oiling machines, the way he never pressed her, only offered steadiness.

She looked back at Elira. "Trust doesn't come quickly. No one here will force it. But you are safe to stay, or safe to go. Either way, you belong."

Elira's eyes glistened, her fists clenching and unclenching. Slowly, she lowered herself back into her chair.

No one spoke for a long time. But the silence was different now. Thicker, yes, but alive with shared weight.

Crisis & Contribution

The first signs of strain came quietly, like seams pulling at the edges of fabric.

Jade noticed it in the storeroom one morning. The shelves, once neatly stacked with bolts of fabric, soap bars, jars of beans and rice, looked bare. Spools of thread dwindled to a handful. The last of the scissors had lost their edge. She ran her fingers along the wood where stacks had once stood, a hollowness pressing in her chest.

The school was stretched thin, she knew. Bitter Sweet carried the Parish's evening meals, the children's lessons, the clinic. Supplies ebbed and flowed with trade, but this season had been lean. She closed the storeroom door and pressed her forehead against it for a moment. *How can we hold them steady if the ground itself shakes?*

That same week, word reached her that the Parish Council was questioning the program. Sister Miriam delivered it gently, her hands folded, her voice low.

"They wonder," Miriam said, "if the school can continue supporting the Women in Crisis room. They ask what it gives back."

Jade nodded slowly, her throat tight. She knew this moment would come eventually. She knew some would see only mouths to feed, supplies stretched thinner. What they couldn't yet see was the way dignity was being stitched back together.

That evening, she sat long after the others had gone, candlelight flickering across her journal. She wrote:

They ask what it gives back. But how do you measure the way a woman straightens her shoulders again? The first time laughter slips free after years of silence? The way trembling hands find usefulness, the way eyes look up instead of down?

She closed the book. Tears burned at the corners of her eyes, but she brushed them away. Tomorrow, she would tell the women the truth. She wouldn't hide it.

The next morning, Jade poured the sage tea as always. The women sat with their cups, the circle quiet. She held hers in both hands, letting the warmth steady her.

"There's something you should know," she said.

Their eyes lifted, cautious.

"The Parish is asking whether our program should continue. Supplies are short. They wonder what we contribute in return."

Silence fell heavy. Elira scowled, muttering, "Of course. They think we're charity cases."

Anita's shoulders hunched, shame flickering across her face. "Maybe they're right. I've taken enough in my life."

Marin clutched her cup tightly, her voice trembling. "But we're... learning. Isn't that enough?"

Selene's eyes lowered. She said nothing, but her silence carried fear.

Jade looked at each of them, her chest aching. "I want you to hear me: this program matters. *You* matter. But maybe it's time we show them what that looks like. Not because we owe them, because you are capable. Because what you've learned is worth sharing."

Her words hung there. Slowly, Anita lifted her head. "What could we even give?"

Jade leaned forward. "What do your hands already know?"

They began to plan. Not quickly, not smoothly, but with sparks of determination.

Anita suggested sewing quilts, warmth was always needed in winter. Her eyes glimmered as she spoke of piecing scraps together into something whole.

Marin offered haircuts for the children at the Parish. "They tease each other when their hair grows wild," she said softly. "I could make them feel... cared for."

Selene hesitated, then spoke. "The children who come to me... they need notebooks, pencils. I could make simple workbooks, maybe. If I had paper."

Elira crossed her arms, skeptical. But the next day she came with a list neatly written in her notebook: soap, candles, salves. "If we make preparedness kits, families won't have to go without in the dark."

The circle leaned in, voices overlapping for the first time. Ideas sprouted like seedlings in fertile soil.

Jade sat back, heart swelling. This was what she had prayed for, not dependence, but contribution.

The room filled with sound. Sewing machines hummed late into the night as Anita guided the others, piecing together scraps of fabric into patchwork quilts. Marin tied knots with clumsy fingers, laughing at her uneven lines until Anita grumbled, "Even crooked stitches hold."

In the kitchen, Jesi and Lyla helped them mix lye and fat, stirring soap until it thickened, pouring it into molds. The sharp scent filled the air. Elira oversaw the labels, her handwriting precise.

By candlelight, Selene drew letters and numbers onto pages, creating simple workbooks. Children from the school wandered in, curious, and she let them trace the letters with small fingers. Her eyes shone as they repeated sounds after her.

Hair fell in soft piles as Marin trimmed heads in the courtyard. Children squirmed, giggled, ran their fingers through freshly cut locks. She stood taller each time a child grinned in the mirror.

The ledger grew. Tezani marked down hours, tasks completed, items produced. He looked at Jade one evening and said quietly, "If anyone doubts their worth now, let them read these pages."

When the Parish gathered for the weekly meal, the women's work was displayed without fanfare. Quilts draped across benches. Soap bars stacked neatly in baskets. Preparedness kits; candles, soap, small jars of herbs, lined a table. Children wore their trimmed hair proudly, and Selene's workbooks were passed hand to hand, eyes lighting at the simple gift of learning.

Sister Miriam's eyes filled with tears as she touched the quilts. "These... these are beautiful."

The Council members murmured among themselves, surprised. One leaned down to a child, asking, "Who cut your hair so fine?" The boy beamed. "Marin did!"

Jade stood back, watching as the women's work spoke louder than she could. She saw Anita's chin lift, pride unhidden. Selene's hand brushed across the workbook pages, reverent. Elira stood taller, her arms no longer crossed. Marin laughed freely, her face unguarded.

For once, Jade didn't need to defend the program. The proof was in the lives touched.

That night, when the women had returned to their rooms, Jade sat in the quiet circle alone. The candle flickered, shadows dancing on the walls.

She thought of Tekren, how he had shown her, years ago, that steadiness was its own kind of gift. Not demanding, not pushing, just staying. His rooftop garden, his careful tending of broken tools, his way of showing up every day.

She whispered into the silence, as though speaking to him though he wasn't there: "I see now. Trust grows like this too. Slowly. Through what we give, not what we promise."

She closed her eyes, letting the scent of sage from the morning still linger in her lungs. Around her, the room seemed to hum with the echoes of the day's work, the machines, the laughter, the voices.

It was enough. More than enough.

The Circle of Strength

The weeks after the Parish gathering carried a different air. The women walked into the room with shoulders straighter, their steps less hesitant. The sewing machines still hummed, scissors still snipped, soap still hardened in molds, but the silence had changed. It wasn't brittle anymore. It had softened into a steady quiet, the kind that held room for breathing.

Jade knew this was the time. The time when the circle was ready not just to work, but to speak.

She rose early that morning, her hands trembling just slightly as she set the chairs. She polished the wood with a damp cloth, laid small sprigs of sage on each seat. In the center she placed a basket filled with their contributions; scraps of quilt fabric, a bar of soap, a pair of scissors, a workbook with children's writing in it, and a small jar of dried lavender.

When the women entered, they looked at the basket curiously. Jade waited until they had all sat before she spoke.

"Today," she said, "we're going to speak our strength."

Marin's eyes widened. Anita frowned. Selene shifted uncomfortably. Elira crossed her arms, suspicion flashing.

Jade smiled gently. "Not your whole story. Not your pain. Just one thing, one skill you've learned, one strength you carry, one hope you hold for tomorrow. That's all."

Marin went first, perhaps because she was too nervous to wait. She clutched the pair of scissors from the basket, her knuckles pale.

"My strength..." she began, voice trembling. "I thought I didn't have any. But... I guess it's this. Cutting hair. I didn't think anyone would trust me to touch them, not after... not after what I lost. But the kids, they smile when I'm done. They look at themselves and smile."

Her voice cracked. Tears filled her eyes, but she didn't hide them. "So maybe that's my strength. Making someone smile again."

The circle held her in silence, the good kind. Marin set the scissors back in the basket with reverence.

Anita reached for the quilt scrap, her hands steady now.

“I used to sew out of necessity. Patching holes, making things stretch longer. I was ashamed, coming here with nothing. But these weeks... I remembered. My mother’s hands. The sound of the machine in winter. The way stitches made us feel cared for.”

She pressed the fabric against her chest. “My strength is... I can mend. Not just cloth. Maybe people, too. I can help hold things together.”

Her voice softened on the last words, but her eyes shone with pride.

Selene hesitated a long time. The lavender jar sat waiting in the basket, its fragrance filling the air. Finally, she reached for the workbook instead.

“I thought my voice was gone,” she whispered. “After what happened... I didn’t think anyone would ever want to learn from me again. I told myself I wasn’t safe to teach. But the children...”

Her lips trembled. “They looked at me like I mattered. And when they read their first words, it was like... like I was alive again.”

She closed the workbook gently. “So maybe my strength is... I still have something to give. I can still teach.”

A soft murmur of agreement rippled around the circle. Selene’s eyes brimmed with tears, but she smiled, just barely.

The room grew still. All eyes turned to Elira. She sat rigid, arms crossed, glaring at the basket.

Finally, she leaned forward and picked up the bar of soap. She turned it over in her hands, the scent sharp between them.

“I don’t trust easily,” she said bluntly. “I’ve been watching, waiting for this place to prove itself false. I almost left. But...” She swallowed hard. “But I didn’t. I stayed. And I helped make this. Soap. Simple. But useful. People need it. Families can hold it in their hands and know they won’t be dirty, they won’t stink, they won’t be less.”

She looked up, eyes fierce. “So maybe my strength is that I stayed. That I gave something useful. Even when I didn’t believe I could.”

The air crackled with her honesty. Jade nodded slowly, her chest tight with emotion.

The women turned to her then, expectant. Jade’s hands trembled as she reached for the lavender jar. She inhaled deeply, the scent pulling her back to memory.

“My strength...” she began softly. “For a long time, I thought it was silence. That silence kept me safe. But it also kept me lonely. I didn’t know if I’d ever trust anyone again; not after promises were broken, not after the ground I stood on crumbled.

“And then there was someone who didn’t ask me to heal quickly. He didn’t demand words or trust. He just showed up. Day after day. Steady. Quiet. Patient. That constancy became the ground I could stand on again.”

She looked at them, her eyes glistening. “So maybe my strength is that I learned trust again. Slowly. And now, I hope to be steady for you. The way he was steady for me.”

The women watched her, eyes wide, tears slipping down more than one cheek.

The door creaked softly. Tekren stepped in, his presence unassuming. He carried a small tin of oiled tools, clearly on his way to the rooftop garden, but he paused when he saw the circle.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “Didn’t mean to intrude.”

Jade shook her head, smiling faintly. “You’re welcome here.”

The women looked at him curiously. He nodded to them, eyes kind, then set the tin on a shelf and slipped into a chair at the back. He didn’t speak, didn’t need to. His presence said enough: steady, quiet, here.

Jade’s chest swelled. She hadn’t planned for him to be part of this moment, but of course he belonged. He was proof that trust could be rebuilt, that constancy could be love.

They ended with silence, but not the brittle kind. This silence was thick with presence, with breath, with the weight of lives acknowledged. Jade lit the candle one final time, the flame steady.

“You’ve spoken your strengths,” she said. “Hold them close. Let them guide you. You are not just survivors. You are givers, makers, teachers, menders. You are more than what you’ve lost.”

The women nodded, some weeping openly, some smiling faintly, some simply breathing deeper.

Tekren rose quietly, touched Jade’s shoulder as he passed, then slipped back out. The touch lingered, not possessive, but steady. Like a promise kept.

Jade watched the women leave one by one, their steps lighter. The circle emptying, the candle burning low.

She sat for a while longer, her heart full. Trust was not fast. Healing was not simple. But tonight, the circle was strong.

The candle had burned down to a shallow pool of wax by the time Jade returned to the room that night. The women had gone back to their quarters, the sewing machines silent, the air still carrying faint traces of lavender and sage. The room always felt different after a circle of honesty, it hummed, somehow, as though the walls themselves had listened and agreed to hold the weight of what had been spoken.

Jade closed the door behind her, leaning against it for a moment, letting the quiet settle. She lit a new candle and placed it in the center of the circle, where the basket of objects still lay: the scissors, the quilt scrap, the workbook, the soap, the lavender jar. Each item now carried more than its use. They carried voices, hopes, confessions.

She pulled her journal from her bag and opened it to a fresh page. Her pen hovered before moving across the paper.

Tonight they spoke their strengths. Marin, with her scissors steady in trembling hands, claiming the gift of making others smile. Anita, reclaiming the pride of mending, seeing herself as one who holds things together. Selene, the teacher returning, speaking hope back into her own voice. Elira, fierce in her honesty, admitting that staying was strength enough. And me, admitting that trust can be learned again, that silence does not have to mean isolation.

Her pen paused, ink pooling at the edge of a letter. She thought of Tekren, how he had slipped into the circle, his quiet presence as grounding as the earth beneath them.

I spoke of you tonight without speaking your name, she wrote. Of your constancy, the way you showed me trust by tending the ordinary things; tools, gardens, moments. You taught me that healing is not rushed. That staying is its own kind of love.

She closed the journal gently, her throat tight with gratitude and ache.

She rose and moved to the corner shelf, where bundles of sage and lavender hung drying. She took one of each, binding them loosely with twine. Carrying them to the center of the circle, she set them beside the candle's flame. The scent rose almost immediately; sharp sage and sweet lavender twining together, filling the room with a fragrance that was both cleansing and comforting.

She whispered, not loudly, but enough that her own ears could hear:

“For the ones who came before, who stitched survival with bare hands. For the ones here now, finding worth again. For the ones yet to come, who will sit in these chairs and tremble, then rise. May the threads hold. May the silence soften. May trust return.”

Her eyes stung, but she did not wipe the tears. They belonged here, too.

Her gaze fell on the quilts stacked in the corner, patchwork pieces stitched unevenly but strong. She walked over, ran her hands across the fabric. Each scrap carried a story, someone's old shirt, a torn apron, a curtain from the Parish. Together, they had become something whole.

That was the truth she wanted the women to see: that brokenness did not mean uselessness. Stitches held. Threads bound. Pieces became a pattern.

She folded one quilt carefully and set it back, her fingers lingering on the seams. *We do not rebuild alone*, she thought. *We mend each other, thread by thread.*

Before leaving, she turned to the ledger Tezani kept. She flipped through its pages, her eyes catching on each name, each mark of hours, each contribution noted. For years to come, this book would tell the story of the Women in Crisis program, not in lofty words, but in simple records of work given and received.

She imagined someone reading it years from now, seeing Marin's hours cutting hair, Anita's quilts, Selene's workbooks, Elira's kits. They might not know the tears, the trembling, the breakthroughs, but the record would stand. A testimony of usefulness, dignity, healing.

She whispered again, this time to the ledger itself: "Hold their names. Hold their worth."

She blew out the candle, leaving the room in darkness, the smell of sage and lavender lingering. For a moment, she stood there, her hand on the back of one of the chairs. She pictured the women's faces as they had spoken; fear, pride, tears, hope. She pictured Tekren's quiet nod, the way his presence had steadied her without words.

The silence was thick but no longer heavy. It was alive.

She opened the door, stepping into the cool night air. The courtyard stretched before her, stars sharp above. Somewhere on the rooftop, she knew Tekren was tending his plants by lantern light. Somewhere in the Parish, children traced letters in Selene's notebooks. Somewhere in the dormitories, Marin dreamed of laughter, Anita of quilts, Elira of staying one more day.

Jade took a long breath, filling her lungs with the night. She felt the threads of their lives weaving into something larger, something strong enough to hold.

She whispered into the dark:

"We do not rebuild alone. We mend each other, thread by thread, until our hands remember how to hold the world again."

And with that, she closed the door behind her.

Epilogue

The seasons turned. Leaves flamed, fell, and gave way to the soft hush of winter. Snow dusted the courtyard, catching in the branches of the school's great elm, and the Women in Crisis room glowed warm against the cold. The machines still hummed, the kettles still steamed, the circle of chairs still held their shape.

Not all the women stayed. Some moved on, back into the world, their lives steadied by the skills they had carried out from here. Marin found herself cutting hair at the Parish each week, children lining up with eager grins. Anita began sewing full-time for the school, her quilts now draped over every bed, her mending holding the fabric of the place together. Selene took a teaching corner at the Parish, her voice gaining strength with each child who learned a new letter under her hand. Even Elira, still fierce and guarded, found her footing helping to oversee the distribution of preparedness kits across the community.

Jade watched them all with a quiet pride that surprised her. It wasn't pride in herself, not really. It was pride in the way brokenness could still bear fruit, in the way silence could be softened into song.

One evening, after the day's work had ended, Jade climbed the rooftop steps where Tekren was tending his winter garden boxes. The lantern light cast his face in gold, his hands dark with soil as he tucked the roots of hardy greens into place.

"You're late," he said softly, without looking up.

"I was with the ledger," Jade replied, easing down onto the bench beside him. "I wanted to record the women's hours myself this time. Their names... it feels important to write them in my own hand."

Tekren nodded, watering a row with slow care. "It matters," he said simply.

She leaned back, looking out over the valley. The stars stretched wide, sharp against the cold. "Sometimes I wonder if any of it will last. If the world will remember these women, this work."

Tekren set down the watering can, his movements unhurried. He turned to her, eyes steady. "You remember," he said. "And they will, too. That's enough."

She swallowed hard, blinking against the sting of tears. His words, like always, were few but sure.

The mastiffs stirred nearby, their broad bodies rising as if to patrol, then settling again. Below, the school lights glowed warm. Somewhere, she knew, Marin was braiding a child's hair, Anita was quilting, Selene was preparing tomorrow's lesson, and Elira was double-checking the candle stock. The threads held.

Jade exhaled, her breath misting in the night air. "Thread by thread," she whispered, almost to herself.

Tekren's hand found hers, rough and steady. He didn't squeeze, didn't ask. He simply held it, like the earth held its roots.

For the first time in years, Jade let herself rest in that silence; not heavy, not brittle, but full.

And in that silence, she knew: the work would outlast them all.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for walking with Jade and the women of Bitter Sweet through this story. *Thread by Thread* was not an easy one to write; because it touches on wounds we often turn away from. Grief. Betrayal. Starting over when the world tells us we should already be whole.

Jade's story reminds me that healing is rarely quick or clean. It comes in the ordinary work of our hands, in the circles that hold us steady, and in the trust that can grow again when someone simply stays. I wanted to give voice to the women in crisis who too often go unnamed, to show that dignity returns in small ways: in stitches, in soap, in bread dough rising, in words written across a page.

If this story spoke to you, I invite you to linger in the wider **Bitter Sweet School Series**. Each companion short dives into the heart of a character who quietly keeps the school running, each with their own struggles, gifts, and ways of holding the community together. You'll find stories of rooftop gardens, ledgers, classrooms, kitchens, and the slow work of rebuilding trust and belonging.

I hope you'll continue on with me - into the next short, into the next voice. Because every corner of Bitter Sweet holds a story, and each story carries the same truth: we do not rebuild alone.

With gratitude for your time, your heart, and your willingness to walk these pages with me,

Davilyn Atwood
The Apothecary Press

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