

Hi Emily. I'm thinking I'd like to do a re-write of the Celeste-Charlie story. May I submit what I cobbled together as some working ideas to build the story on? The main underlying theme is going to be shared experience / agency / those themes we'd already decided would keep the right tone to the story. Yes, Charlie does end up in costume, but the focus is education on a number of fronts. So, here is what I've come up with:

Celeste's Girl-New Premise

Characters

1) Celeste

- * Parents: Will Shelley, anaesthetist; Sharon Shelley, part-time ICU nurse
- * Celeste is 18, independent, has a career objective in fashion design or historical costume research, stands out from her peers as more of a leader than a follower; has had a bad relationship with a male athlete, so relationship-shy/ambivalent; has been working summertime jobs and holiday work at a historical faire in the wardrobe department, working her way up but not in leadership

2) Charlie

- * Parents: Roger Rossignol, Navy NCO (almost always absent, unfaithful to wife); Lauren Rossignol, homemaker
- * Charlie is a small, slender waif of a 18 year-old, excellent at detail work, design, geometry, English; extremely poor at maths, physical activities such as sports (uncoordinated), set back 1 year due to poor scholarship performance

3) Mara

- * Department head of wardrobe at the faire; Celeste's emotional and career ally; ascerbic wit, not a warm person
but with a good heart; suspicious of Charlie at first but

warms to him;

4) Graham

* Department head of maintenance at the faire;

Story Stub - A Revision

Celeste meets Charlie in the girl's bathroom in the library. She doesn't recognise him as the left-behind kid from her class. Later, when the teacher was putting together teams, she recognises him and realises that she never noticed him before and that he's that kid no one wants to hang with. Based on her encounter in the girls' loo, she decides to team up with him. His meticulous manner of drawing and writing fascinates her. It occurs to her that he would do really well in Wardrobe as repair person but she has no clout so can't get him hired anyway.

He drops out of school that summer to work at the faire in maintenance. Graham quickly decides he's hopeless due to his slight frame and wants to fire him, but Charlie pleads with him: he needs the work/money. Graham approaches Mara who initially scoffs at the idea, but Celeste suggests Mara give him a try. Mara likes Celeste so Charlie gets his chance... and proves his worth.

Absolutely, yes — and what you've just posted is already a *very* workable foundation. You've done the most important thing: you've rebuilt the engine around **purpose** (shared experience, agency, education), so the costume element becomes a *consequence* of character + environment rather than the point of the story.

Below is how I'd "lock in" your premise so it has a clean spine, strong tone, and a natural escalation that keeps Celeste (and Mara) decisively in control without making anyone cartoonish.

What you already have that's strong (and worth protecting)

1) The girls' bathroom meet-cute is *perfect* for this story's ethics

It's not a "gotcha," it's a *misread that becomes a catalyst*. Celeste's first impression of Charlie is sensory and immediate — he's *out of place*, not in a lurid way, but in a "how did you end up here?" way. That gives you:

- intimacy without sexualisation
- tension without humiliation
- a reason Celeste is curious *and* protective without being sentimental

2) Charlie's competence is specific

"Detail work, design, geometry, English" is exactly the sort of competence Wardrobe respects. That means the story can say: *he isn't weak; he's misassigned*. That's educational in itself.

3) Mara is your tonal guardian

Mara being acerbic, unsentimental, and competent lets you keep the story from drifting into "romantic rescue." She can be the adult-ish gatekeeper of dignity: *we don't exploit people here; we train them.*

The clean "spine" of the revised story

Here's the version that gives you a strong through-line and makes the costume element feel earned:

Act I — Misrecognition → Curiosity → A deliberate choice

- Bathroom encounter: Celeste clocks Charlie as "wrong category," but doesn't yet know what she's seeing.
- Team assignment at school: she *chooses* him. Not pity. Strategy + curiosity + a faint sense of fairness.
- She notices his drafting habits, handwriting, patience, how he "thinks in seams and margins" even if he doesn't know those words.

Celeste's motive (clean and defensible):

She's not saving him; she's selecting him — because she's the sort of girl who sees unused talent and hates waste.

Act II — The Faire tests everyone's values

- Charlie takes Maintenance because it's the "male" lane and he thinks he should try. It goes poorly.

- Graham's reaction is the expected one: pragmatic, dismissive, slightly contemptuous ("you can't lift, you can't climb, you're a liability").
- Celeste intervenes *professionally*, not emotionally: she proposes a transfer, not a rescue.
- Mara initially refuses because she thinks "boys in wardrobe" means trouble, distraction, or gawking.

Key pivot scene: Celeste convinces Mara using *work language*, not moral language. She doesn't say "be nice." She says: "You need hands. You need eyes. He has both."

Act III — Wardrobe becomes the classroom, and agency becomes the romance

- Charlie proves value fast: invisible repairs, period-fastening logic, inventory discipline, pattern symmetry.
- The costume angle arrives as a *training necessity*:
 - Wardrobe needs someone to test fit, movement, closures, quick-changes.
 - It's logically easier if the tester is the person doing the alterations.
 - Charlie is small; he fits women's stock garments without destroying them.
- The story stays clean because the *women set the rules*:
 - consent
 - privacy
 - language
 - purpose
 - boundaries

And if you want the "education" theme to sing: Charlie doesn't "become a girl." He becomes *skilled*, and the wardrobe lens teaches him about history, labour, women's bodies as *practical realities* (not objects), and the social power of presentation.

How to keep the costume element educational, not fetish-coded

Give it three anchors that repeat like a mantra:

1. **Function:** "This is for movement testing / silhouette accuracy / safety."
2. **Craft:** "This is seam allowance / boning channels / closures / fabric behaviour."
3. **Boundaries:** "This is not for display; it's for work."

If the story ever starts drifting, Mara yanks it back with one sentence.

Example Mara-line you can reuse in variants:

"We're not playing dress-ups. We're building an illusion that has to survive sweat, gravity, and tourists."

Character sharpening (small changes that add huge power)

Celeste

Right now she's strong — make her strength **directional**.

- She doesn't just "team up" with Charlie. She *assigns him a role*.
- She's not relationship-shy in a soft way; she's **selective**. That's different, and it reads more confident.

A really Celeste-ish trait to underline:

- She's already learned that "male charm" often masks entitlement. So she values Charlie's quietness because it doesn't demand space from her.

Charlie

Keep him waifish, but don't make him pathetic.

- His "weakness" is not incompetence; it's *misfit expectations* and learned deference.
- He's brave in the way quiet people are brave: he keeps showing up.

Give him a private code:

- He measures his worth by being useful.
- That makes Wardrobe addictive to him (and that's psychologically rich without being exploitative).

Mara

Make Mara the one who establishes the ethical framework explicitly.

She can do it once, early, and it will "legalise" the tone for the whole book.

Mara's suspicion of Charlie is a gift — it signals *safety*, not cruelty.

Graham

Make him not a villain, but a representative of a system.

- He thinks he's protecting his department.
- He's wrong, but in a way that feels real.

Let Celeste beat him with calm competence, not speeches.

Key scenes to build next (in order)

1) The bathroom scene (your hook)

Not long. Not melodramatic. Crisp, sensory, ambiguous.

Celeste clocks: *wrong door? wrong uniform? wrong confidence?*

Charlie clocks: *panic + shame + the terrifying fact she's calm.*

2) The classroom "selection" scene

Celeste chooses him publicly enough that it matters.

You want the social implication: she's not afraid of peer optics.

3) Graham tries to cut him

Charlie asks for one more chance. Graham refuses.

Celeste hears about it, and instead of arguing feelings, she proposes a transfer like a chess move.

4) Mara's interview / trial shift

Mara tests him. Hard.

Not "are you comfortable in women's clothes," but:

- Can you thread a needle fast?
- Can you hand-stitch invisibly?
- Can you follow inventory rules?
- Can you take critique without sulking?

5) The first "fit test" request (the moment that decides tone)

Mara frames it clinically, professionally.

Charlie can say no.

If he says yes, it's because he understands the *purpose* and wants to belong.

6) The boundary-setting scene (where women are firm)

Mara lays down rules. Celeste reinforces them.

This is where your story tells the reader: you're safe here.

A little dialogue sketch to show the tone you're aiming for

Graham (to Mara): "He's not built for ladders or wrench work. He'll get hurt."

Mara: "So don't put him on ladders."

Graham: "That's not how my shop runs."

Celeste: "Then it's not his shop. It's yours."

Mara (to Celeste, dry): "You always talk like you're already the manager."

Celeste: "I'm practising."

Mara (glances at Charlie): "Can you sew?"

Charlie: "I can... repair. Quietly."

Mara: "Good. I hate loud repairs."

That's the vibe: the women are unflustered, decisive, funny in a dry way, and they never ask permission to take up space.

Two small structural choices that will make this rewrite feel “adult” and intentional

Option A: Make Wardrobe the *true* main world (and school is just the inciting world)

School becomes the place where Charlie is misread and Celeste is under-stimulated.

The faire is where both of them become themselves.

Option B: Make the story's romantic tension about *mutual respect through craft*

Not “does he look cute in costume,” but:

- Celeste is turned on (emotionally, intellectually) by competence and reliability.
 - Charlie is flattened (in the best way) by being taken seriously by a girl who doesn't need him.
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If you want a single sentence “theme statement” to guide every scene “Agency is learned through work done with respect.”

If a scene doesn't serve that, it gets cut or rewritten.

If you'd like, paste your next chunk (or even just bullet beats), and I'll do one of these immediately:

- build a tight 12–15 beat outline (acts + turning points),

- draft the bathroom scene in your preferred prose style,
- or write Mara's "trial shift" scene that establishes rules and tone in a way that makes the whole book feel safe and purposeful.

□ ...

I do have some controversial concepts I was thinking of introducing here. You see, Celeste has finished high school, here. Given her less than affluent circumstances, a positive future for her lies in being proactive, watching for opportunities and acting upon them. If she could afford higher education, she would pursue it but her parents, despite Will being an anaesthetist, is unwilling to invest in Celeste's future largely because of her gender. Her mum Sharon sees Celeste's potential and encourages her, but hasn't many resources herself. They are confidantes, a special type of relationship. When Celeste learns that Charlie had dropped out of school with no intention of graduating, she is insistent that go back to school after the summer holidays. He increasingly listens to her and follows through with her request, but the school system simply fails him as the direction it wants to take him does not suit his work ethic. The controversial idea here that school (the educational system as it stands) does fail certain individuals. I'm not sure how to approach this emotionally for either Celeste or Charlie, but the upshot is that Wardrobe and Celeste herself are the best path forward for Charlie, who is a follower. Being a follower in this instance must be seen as a benefit to him and Celeste. I'll let you make quality-of-story calls to keep this from falling off the shared experience wagon. What I'm envisioning is Charlie is drawn to a more supporting role for Celeste, and she is by nature a leader sort. Can this work?

Yes — it can work, and it can work *beautifully* if you frame it as "**misfit with the institution**" rather than "**education is bad.**" That small pivot keeps you on the shared-

experience / agency rails, and it protects Celeste from becoming merely a rescuer while still letting her be the decisive force.

What you're describing isn't "controversial" so much as *honest*: schooling is an institution designed around a narrow band of strengths, and some people are badly served by it — especially if they're anxious, non-competitive, slow-to-start, or simply wired for craft rather than exams. That's not a manifesto; it's character truth.

Let me shape this in a way that:

- keeps Celeste strong and right (and not sentimental),
 - keeps Charlie's "follower" trait as an *earned* and *chosen* role (not pathetic),
 - keeps "Wardrobe as education" credible,
 - and keeps the father's bias sharp without turning him into a moustache-twirler.
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The core idea that makes it all cohere

Education isn't school.

School is *one delivery method*, and it's optimized for certain minds and life situations.

So Celeste can champion education fiercely — while still concluding, with growing clarity, that the *current* system is failing Charlie's mind and temperament.

This lets you write Celeste as principled: she tries the orthodox path first, doesn't romanticize dropout life, and only then chooses the alternative because it produces measurable growth.

How to make "school fails him" land without sounding like an author lecture

Show it through *procedures*, not speeches

Charlie doesn't fail because he's lazy. He fails because the system keeps asking him to perform in ways that don't map to his strengths.

Concrete, vivid examples you can dramatize:

- **The counselor** frames his future in terms of "pathways" that are basically status judgments: trades as "fallback," university as "proper." Charlie hears contempt even if it's not explicit.

- **Assessment formats** punish him: timed tests, multi-step word problems, noisy classrooms, public performance.
- **Support structures** are generic: "study harder, set goals, ask for help." Charlie's problem isn't motivation; it's the interface.
- **His actual strengths** (precision, patience, repair, revision) are treated as "hobbies," not "achievement."

Meanwhile Wardrobe rewards exactly those traits:

- do-over culture
- apprenticeship learning
- visible progress
- value in quiet competence

No sermon necessary. The contrast will preach for you.

The emotional approach, character by character

Celeste's emotional track: from "fixing" → to "designing a life"

Celeste's first impulse will be to fix: "Go back. Graduate. Don't throw away options."

That's her leadership instinct and her hunger for opportunity speaking.

But the *adult* evolution for her is realizing:

1. She can't force institutions to be fair.
2. She *can* build a parallel ladder.

And importantly: she is not doing charity. She is recruiting talent to build her future world.

Her emotional beats might look like:

- **Protective anger** (at Will, at the school's indifference, at Charlie's resignation)
- **Strategic focus** ("Fine. If they won't accommodate him, I will. Here's the plan.")
- **Calm authority** once she sees results — the kind that doesn't ask permission anymore.

This keeps her powerful without turning her into a saint.

Charlie's emotional track: from shame → to belonging → to chosen devotion

Charlie's risk is "follower = doormat." We avoid that by making his following **active**.

He isn't following because he can't think.

He follows because:

- he finally trusts someone who sees him correctly,
- he thrives under clear expectations,
- and he wants to be useful to *something that matters*.

His emotional beats:

- **Shame** (he believes he's defective, because school told him so)
- **Relief** (Wardrobe gives him rules he can actually win at)
- **Pride** (his work has outcomes others notice)
- **Chosen devotion** (he supports Celeste not because he's weak, but because supporting her becomes his expression of love and purpose)

Make it explicit in action: when given a chance to drift, he chooses structure. When offered an easy out, he chooses responsibility.

That turns "follower" into a virtue: loyalty, steadiness, craft, self-discipline.

The father issue: how to make Will's sexism believable and sharp

A man can be highly paid and still be stingy with *support*, especially support that threatens his internal hierarchy.

To avoid melodrama, give Will a "reasonable" mask:

- "I paid my way."
- "Fashion isn't a real career."
- "You'll marry well."
- "I'm not wasting money."
- "You're too smart to play dress-ups."

He thinks he's being rational. That makes him infuriating — and real.

Then Sharon becomes the quiet counterforce:

- She can't outspend him, but she can *out-believe* him.
- Her support is practical: contacts, rides, small savings, emotional reinforcement, warning Celeste how to navigate Will's undermining.

This mother-daughter confidante bond will be one of your most emotionally satisfying through-lines, because it's solidarity without speeches.

Keeping “shared experience / agency” intact

Here's the trick: **Celeste must also learn from Charlie.**

If Charlie is only “saved,” the relationship tilts into patronage. But if Charlie becomes the *one person* who steadies Celeste’s climb, now they’re mutually shaping each other.

Ways Charlie contributes that are *not* romanticized servitude:

- He becomes her **technical anchor**: he can translate her vision into patterns, repairs, fit logic, inventory reality.
- He becomes her **quality control**: the one who will tell her when something doesn’t work, because he cares about outcomes.
- He becomes her **emotional ballast**: he doesn’t compete with her; he reinforces her.

Meanwhile Celeste gives him:

- direction
- standards
- a social umbrella
- a narrative where he’s not “failing,” he’s “training”

Agency stays intact because **they both choose the arrangement**, and it keeps paying dividends for both.

Three pivotal scenes that will make this storyline *feel/ true*

1) Celeste’s “Go back to school” insistence — and her first leadership test

Celeste doesn’t plead. She lays out a plan.

She can say something like:

“I don’t care what you *feel/ like* doing. You’re going back because you’re not letting a bad system write your whole life in permanent ink.”

Charlie agrees — not because she’s controlling, but because nobody has ever sounded that certain *about him*.

2) The counselor meeting where the institution reveals its limits

Let the counselor be polite, well-meaning, and still harmful.

Charlie tries to explain how he learns. The counselor translates it into a box that doesn't fit.

Celeste watches it happen, and the anger in her is cold and clarifying. She doesn't explode. She takes notes. She leaves with a new resolve: **we're building our own path.**

3) The Wardrobe "apprenticeship contract" moment

Mara is the perfect character to make this feel legitimate.

Mara can say:

"School is a machine. Some people get chewed up. Here, you learn by doing. You show up, you listen, you improve. That's the deal."

Then (crucially) Charlie asks a question that shows agency, like:

"If I do this... can I be proud of it?"

And Mara, blunt:

"If you do it properly, yes."

That line will land.

How to phrase "Charlie is a follower" so it's a strength, not a stigma

In narration (or Celeste's inner voice), treat it as **alignment**, not submission.

Possible framing:

- Charlie is not "led," he is **directed well**.
- He doesn't need to dominate; he needs a **mission**.
- He doesn't want to be "the man"; he wants to be **indispensable**.

And if anyone challenges it, Celeste shuts it down with calm superiority:

"He's not weak. He's disciplined. Try it sometime."

That's your tone: firm, unbothered, accurate.

One guardrail to keep it from falling off the wagon

If Celeste becomes too controlling too early, readers may flinch.

So give Charlie **one clear boundary** he asserts — early — that she respects. It can be small but meaningful.

Example:

- He agrees to return to school *if* she helps him negotiate a schedule that doesn't crush him.
- Or: he agrees to Wardrobe training, but insists on privacy rules around fittings.
- Or: he refuses one task that feels humiliating, and Celeste backs him without teasing.

That moment proves: he isn't a puppet; he's a partner with a spine.

Quick "quality-of-story" verdict

Yes, this works.

And it's not only compatible with shared experience and agency — it can *strengthen* those themes because:

- Celeste's leadership becomes ethical and practical,
- Charlie's following becomes chosen devotion and craft pride,
- and the "education" theme becomes richer than school-vs-dropout.

If you want, your next best step is to write (or have me draft) **the counselor scene** or **Mara's first trial-shift scene**, because those two scenes will set the moral and emotional rules of the whole rewrite.

If you paste even a rough version of either, I'll tune the tone so it stays purposeful, clean, and fiercely Celeste-forward.



Are you happy to review what we've got so far - Scene One and Two (restroom and classroom) to confirm it aligns with the story? I can give you Scene One now if you'd like... possibly tweak it to fit our stated story direction (arc?).

Yes — send Scene One whenever you're ready, and I'll review it against the direction we've just set.

What I'll do as I read it (without turning it into a lecture) is:

- **Continuity check:** does it match the new premise (Celeste proactive/strategic; Charlie misfit-but-capable; tone grounded; no fetish-coding)?
- **Tone check:** does the restroom encounter feel *tense + human* rather than prurient or humiliating?
- **Agency check:** does Celeste come across as choosing, steering, setting boundaries — and does Charlie retain dignity?
- **Setup check:** does it plant the right seeds for Scene Two (the classroom "selection") and for Wardrobe later?

Practical: paste Scene One as-is. If you have it, include the rough "scene header" context (where/when, whose POV, and whether you want 1st or 3rd), but don't worry if you don't — I can infer and still give you a solid pass.

When you paste it, I'll respond with:

1. a quick alignment verdict,
2. a short list of **surgical tweaks** (lines/phrases/beats),
3. and (if helpful) a tightened rewrite of the key moment(s) while preserving your voice.



I shouldn't have been in that corridor at all.

The girls' toilets sat off the library wing — pale tiles, the faint perfume of hand soap, and that soft institutional hush that always made you lower your voice without thinking. I was cutting through because the bell had just gone, and the hallway was a river of bodies, and I don't like being jostled when my head is full.

Besides, I'd learned early that if you walk as though you belong somewhere, people stop questioning why you're there. It isn't arrogance. It's choreography.

I pushed the door with my shoulder, stepped inside, and only then noticed the figure at the sinks. For half a second my brain refused to label what I was seeing. Not because it was shocking, but because it didn't fit the neat categories school insisted on.

A boy — slight, narrow-shouldered, tousled long brownish hair, some of it falling into his eyes — stood under the bright mirror lights with a paper towel clutched in one hand, as if he'd been interrupted in the middle of deciding how to exist. His shirt was one of those oversized uniforms that look like they've been slept in, collar softened by too many washes, as if his mum had given up trying to make it crisp.

Not predatory still. Not defiant still. More like a deer that has realised the world contains headlights.

For half a second my brain refused to file him properly, because the scene didn't match the rules school pretended were natural: girls in here, boys out there, neat lines, neat categories. And yet here he was, in the harsh mirror light, looking like a wrong note you couldn't un-hear once it happened.

He stared at me.

Not the casual glance you get from boys who think you're decoration. This was different. This was... struck. I saw it in the way his breath caught and failed to restart smoothly, the way his gaze snagged as if his eyes had forgotten they were supposed to move. It wasn't lust. It wasn't bravado. It was awe—raw, immediate, and almost helpless.

That kind of attention is dangerous in the wrong hands. But in the right hands, it's simple. It's leverage. Not cruel leverage. Just... direction.

I could have shouted, *Get out*, as if volume was a form of safety. But screaming makes you the story. It invites witnesses, gossip, morality plays. And I didn't want a story.

So I did what I always do when something unexpected enters my orbit: I decided what it meant.

"Hello," I said, calmly, as though I'd found a first-year hiding from a duty teacher. "Are you lost?"

His throat bobbed. He didn't answer immediately. The silence was so complete I could hear the air-conditioning ticking behind the vent. Then he managed, hoarse, barely audible, "I... I'm sorry."

A pre-emptive apology. Interesting. I softened my voice by a fraction—not pity, just calibration. "You know you're in the ladies', right?"

I really don't think that fact had actually occurred to him, even though he had apologised. His widening eyes flicked around the room, landing a beat later as he tried to suppress a gasp: no urinals, no familiar signage, no exit that didn't require passing me.

"Oh—" He groaned. "Oh, no. I thought this was—I mean, I —"

Words spilled out, urgent and unhelpful. The instinct to explain, to erase himself from the scene by being reasonable.

He wasn't the swaggering kind of boy. He wasn't even the cheeky kind. He was the wrong-door, head-in-the-clouds kind. He stood there clutching a paper towel like it was evidence. I took a small step nearer—close enough to make him hold still, not close enough to crowd. He backed into the sinks without meaning to. I watched him do it, watched the way his shoulders drew inward as if he could shrink out of the situation.

"Alright, mate," I said, briskly. "Stop. Breathe."

He blinked at me, startled by the instruction.

"Good," I said, as if he'd complied on purpose. "Now.

You're going to walk out like nothing happened."

His mouth opened again. I lifted a finger, not harshly. Simply: *I'm handling this.*

"Don't argue. Don't confess. Don't do that thing where you look like you're asking to be punished," I added, watching his shoulders tighten. "Just... let me steer for a second."

He stared at me. And then I saw the shift — a tiny one, but unmistakable. His breath slowed. His spine uncurled a fraction. His hands lowered. His mouth dropped open, not to speak, but to take in air, finally. He absorbed my taking over like cloth absorbs dye. He wasn't a threat. He was a boy who'd learned, somewhere along the line, that his safest option was to yield.

That's a habit.

"What's your name?"

He hesitated, as though names were dangerous.

"Chuck," he said finally, then corrected himself with an awkward, desperate politeness. "Charles. Charles Rossignol."

The surname landed with a satisfying click. French. Unexpected.

"Rossignol," I repeated, tasting it. "Nightingale."

His eyes flicked up, startled that I knew that it meant something, and what it meant. His gaze held mine for a beat too long — still caught, still dazzled — and I felt, very clearly, the weight of being the object of that dazzling. It did not feel flattering.

Determined to turn down the tap, I said: "Right then," and extended my hand.

He looked at it the way a shy child looks at something

expensive — reverence mixed with fear of doing it wrong. Then, cautiously, he placed his palm in mine.

His hand was cool and light. No push. No claim. It settled as if it belonged where I'd put it. I didn't squeeze. I simply held, for one beat longer than necessary. An ordinary gesture—deliberately timed.

It did what ordinary gestures always do when you choose them carefully: it created a connection the other person hadn't asked for, and therefore couldn't quite refuse. His eyes widened as his hand slipped out of mine.

"You don't have to explain anything," I said quietly. "You don't have to defend yourself. You don't have to look guilty. You just leave. And if anyone looks at you oddly, I'll be at the door. Just look at me."

I watched him stand there, recalculating his world.

"I... I really need to go," he managed, as if saying it might open a trapdoor in the floor.

"Quite right," I said, with a short, amused exhale. "And I shouldn't be wasting passing period in toilets. Yet here we are."

It landed. His mouth twitched — the ghost of a smile — then vanished as quickly as it came, like he didn't trust it. Humour is a lever. It lets people accept guidance without feeling defeated. I nodded toward the door. Not a command. A direction.

He moved, slowly, as if his feet didn't trust the new instruction manual. At the threshold he stopped with his hand on the handle and glanced back at me as I followed him — an expression I recognised too well: expecting the world to change its mind.

I lifted my eyebrows at him.

Go on.

He swallowed and opened the door.

Before he stepped through, I said, lightly, "Charlie."

He froze.

"My name's not..."

"It is now," I replied, pleasant as sunlight. "At least when I'm speaking to you."

His face went blank, stunned. Not outraged, not embarrassed: stunned. The bafflement of being renamed after that was all you shared. Your name. His reaction pleased me more than it should have.

"See you, Charlie," I added, and let the smile come — not flirtation, not a trap. Just a signal: *you're in my line of sight now.* He disappeared into the corridor. And for a moment I stood at the door of the bright tiled room, hearing only the distant shuffle of students and the soft rush of taps. I washed my hands, because the habit matters, even when you've just rewritten someone's afternoon.

As I dried them, I thought — not unkindly, but with the clean satisfaction of a strategist whose board has presented an unexpected piece:

He watches my face like he's waiting to be told what's real.

I am very good at telling people what's real.

Thought for 11s >

Yes — this is very close, and it already carries the "new spine" (agency, dignity, competence, consequence) far better than most "restroom meet" scenes ever do.

Alignment verdict

It aligns with the direction. The scene reads as: *unexpected encounter* → *Celeste chooses calm control* → *she protects both of them from gossip/authority* → *she clocks*

Charlie's temperament → she sets a tone that later supports her "selection" in the classroom.

It's also largely clean of fetish-coding: you explicitly rule out lust/bravado, you keep it about panic, social risk, and how she *handles a situation*. Good.

That said, there are a few **tiny pressure points** where the scene starts to tilt from "ethical leadership" into "strategic manipulation." That might be a flavour you sometimes want (Celeste can absolutely be cunning), but given your stated "shared experience / agency" framework, I'd sand those corners down so readers feel safe with her authority — not wary of it.

Below are the exact areas I'd tweak, and why.

What's working really well

1) Celeste's calmness is powerful

You're writing her as someone who understands *social optics* and refuses to give the school a spectacle. That's leadership, not "mean girl."

2) Charlie's vulnerability is dignified

He isn't presented as comic relief or a threat. The deer/headlights image is strong, and the "wrong-door, head-in-the-clouds" diagnosis feels humane.

3) The tone is modern, clever, and psychologically observant

You've got a tight voice: confident, precise, slightly wry. This sets up your later wardrobe-world perfectly.

The main risk: readers may read Celeste as "predatory" rather than "protective"

Not because she's a girl and he's a boy — purely because of **word choice** and **one or two power moves**.

These lines are the ones that shift the vibe:

A) "That kind of attention is dangerous... it's leverage."

This is *smart*, but it makes her sound like she's already thinking in terms of advantage over him, rather than responsibility in a fragile moment.

Fix: swap “leverage” for “responsibility” or “something you have to handle carefully.”

You can still keep her strategic brain — just point it toward *containment* and care.

B) The hand-hold beat

It's beautifully written... but physically taking his hand, holding it “one beat longer,” and describing it as creating a connection “he couldn’t quite refuse” risks tipping into “she’s imprinting him.”

Fix options (choose one):

- Keep the moment but make it **consent-forward** (“May I?” / “Is that alright?”).
- Or remove hand contact and use **positioning** instead (she stands where she blocks sightlines, becomes the anchor he can look at).
- Or replace the hand with something *wardrobe-coded* and practical (paper towel, mirror, gesture to the door, “eyes up, shoulders back, breathe”).

C) The renaming: “It is now.”

It's a delicious dominance move, and I see exactly why you wrote it. But it's the strongest “ownership” beat in the scene, and it can read as Celeste claiming him rather than noticing him.

Fix: make it a choice dressed as confidence. Example:

- “Is ‘Charlie’ okay?” (and then she uses it anyway, because she’s still her)
- “Charlie suits you. I’m going to call you that unless you hate it.”
- Or a cleaner mishearing: she genuinely thinks he said Charlie, and later in Scene Two she learns otherwise — that’s a lovely continuity payoff.

You can keep her firm without making her unilateral.

D) The ending line: “I’m very good at telling people what’s real.”

Great line — but it lands like a mission statement of control. If you want “shared experience,” it’s stronger if she’s also aware of the *risk* of steering someone.

Fix: add a half-beat of conscience:

- “I need to be careful with that.”
- “And it isn’t a gift I should misuse.”

That single line keeps her powerful *and* ethical.

Continuity nits (small, but worth tightening)

1) "I shouldn't have been in that corridor at all."

Since Celeste is a girl, the corridor *near the girls' toilets* isn't inherently forbidden.

So why "shouldn't"? Options:

- She was cutting through a staff-only/library service corridor.
- It's a girls-only wing during class time.
- She was skipping a duty she should be at.
- Or it's simply: she shouldn't have been in the *library wing* because she was late / avoiding crowds.

Just clarify it with one phrase so the line reads as character, not confusion.

2) Repetition: "For half a second my brain refused..."

You do it twice (deliberately), but it's close enough that it feels like a duplicate rather than a refrain. Easy fix: vary the second one or cut it.

3) The "mate" register

Celeste calling him "mate" is plausible in Australia, but given your setting vibe sometimes leans US/Hawaii/California in other iterations, just make sure it matches this version's location. If you're setting this in Australia, "mate" is perfect. If not, swap to "hey" / "look" / "okay."

What I'd keep absolutely as-is

- The decision not to scream.
 - The instruction: "Stop. Breathe."
 - The idea that guilt-performance ("asking to be punished") is a habit.
 - The humour as a lever *for dignity* (that's a great phrasing and a great tactic).
-

Suggested "surgical edits" (quick line-level swaps)

Here are a few direct swaps you can paste in:

1. Replace:

"It's leverage. Not cruel leverage. Just... direction."

With:

"It's something you have to handle carefully. Not cruelly. Just... responsibly."

2. Replace the "connection he hadn't asked for" line with something consent-forward:

"May I?" I said, and waited.

He nodded — small, almost imperceptible — and only then did I take his hand.

3. Replace the renaming exchange with:

"Charlie."

He blinked. "My name's not—"

"I know," I said, and softened it with a shrug. "But it suits you. Tell me if you hate it."

4. Temper the final statement:

"He watches my face like he's waiting to be told what's real.

I'm very good at that.

I have to be careful with it."

That last line is *gold* for your new tone.

A tightened rewrite (same scene, same voice, but more "ethical authority")

I'll keep your cadence and your cleverness, just adjust the few risk beats.

I shouldn't have been in that corridor at all.

The library wing had its own hush — pale tiles, the faint perfume of hand soap drifting from the bathrooms, and that institutional quiet that makes you lower your voice without thinking. I'd cut through to avoid the main hall after the bell, because the hallway was a river of elbows and backpacks and I don't like being jostled when my head is full.

And because I'd learned early that if you walk as though you belong somewhere, people stop asking why you're there. It isn't arrogance. It's choreography.

I nudged the door with my shoulder and stepped into the girls' toilets — and only then saw someone at the sinks.

For a beat my mind stalled, not because it was scandalous, but because it didn't fit the neat categories school insisted were natural.

A boy stood under the mirror lights with a paper towel clutched in one hand. Slight. Narrow-shouldered. Long brownish hair that fell into his eyes as if he'd forgotten it needed managing. His uniform shirt was oversized and softened by too many washes, the collar gone limp like the person laundering it had stopped believing in crispness.

He wasn't predatory still. He wasn't defiant still.

He was... caught. Like a deer that has realised the world contains headlights.

He stared at me.

Not the usual quick look you get from boys who think girls are scenery. This was different — his breath snagged and didn't restart smoothly; his gaze locked as if his eyes had forgotten they were supposed to move. Not bravado. Not lust. Just a raw, helpless kind of astonishment.

That sort of attention can turn ugly in the wrong hands.

In the right hands, it's simply something you have to handle carefully.

I could have shouted *Get out*, as if volume was a form of safety. But screaming makes you the story. It invites witnesses, gossip, morality plays. And I didn't want a story. Not for me, and not for him.

So I did what I always do when something unexpected enters my orbit: I decided what it meant.

"Hello," I said, calm as if I'd found a first-year hiding from a duty teacher. "Are you lost?"

His throat bobbed. The silence was so complete I could hear the air-conditioning tick behind the vent. Then he managed, hoarse and thin, "I... I'm sorry."

A pre-emptive apology. Interesting.

I softened my voice by a fraction — not pity. Calibration. "You know you're in the ladies', right?"

I watched the fact land late. His eyes flicked around the room, taking in the sinks, the cubicle doors, the absence of any familiar marker that could make this make sense. He swallowed hard.

"Oh—" He groaned. "Oh, no. I thought this was—I mean, I—"

Words spilled out, urgent and unhelpful. The instinct to explain, to erase himself by being reasonable.

He wasn't the swaggering kind of boy. He wasn't even the cheeky kind. He was the wrong-door, head-in-the-clouds kind — the kind who would apologise to a chair he bumped into.

He stood there with the paper towel like it was evidence.

I took a small step nearer — close enough to anchor him, not close enough to crowd. He backed into the sinks without meaning to, shoulders drawing inward as if he could shrink out of existence.

"Alright," I said, brisk. "Stop. Breathe."

He blinked at me, startled by the instruction. Then — because he didn't seem able to help it — he did it.

"Good," I said, as if he'd complied on purpose. "Now. You're going to walk out like nothing happened."

His mouth opened again. I lifted a finger. Not harsh. Simply: *I'm handling this.*

"Don't argue. Don't confess. Don't do that thing where you look like you're asking to be punished." His shoulders tightened, like I'd hit a nerve. "Just... let me steer for a second."

He stared at me.

And then I saw the shift — tiny, but unmistakable. His breath slowed. His spine uncurled a fraction. His hands lowered.

He absorbed my taking over like cloth absorbs dye. It wasn't weakness. It was habit — a boy who'd learned somewhere that his safest option was to yield.

That's a habit you can ruin a person with, if you're careless.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He hesitated, as though names were dangerous.

"Chuck," he said, then corrected himself with an awkward, desperate politeness.

"Charles. Charles Rossignol."

"Rossignol," I repeated, tasting it. "Nightingale."

His eyes lifted, startled that I knew it meant something — and what it meant. He held my gaze for a beat too long, still caught, still dazzled, and I felt the weight of it. Not flattering. Not comfortable. Just... a responsibility.

"Right then," I said, and tilted my head toward the door. "We're leaving."

He looked past me as if the corridor might bite. I stepped first, so he didn't have to. I positioned myself where anyone glancing up would see *me* before they saw him.

"If someone looks at you oddly," I said quietly, "you look at me. Understand?"

He nodded — quick, obedient.

We moved.

At the threshold he stopped, hand on the handle, eyes flicking back to me with an expression I recognised too well: expecting the world to change its mind.

I lifted my eyebrows.

Go on.

He swallowed and opened the door.

"Charlie," I said, lightly, as he stepped through.

He froze. "My name's not—"

"I know," I said, and let a hint of humour take the edge off it. "But it suits you. Tell me if you hate it."

He looked at me as if I'd handed him something he didn't know how to hold.

Then he was gone — swallowed by the tide of students.

I stayed in the bright tiled room long enough to wash my hands, because habits matter even when your afternoon takes a sharp left. As the dryer hummed, I thought — not

unkindly, but with the clean satisfaction of a strategist whose board has presented an unexpected piece:

He watches my face like he's waiting to be told what's real.

I'm very good at that.

I have to be careful with it.

Why this tweak matters for Scene Two

This version still makes Celeste the decisive force, but it plants something important:

- she is aware of Charlie's yielding habit,
- she recognises the ethical risk of steering him,
- and she chooses to use her authority to **protect**, not to claim.

That makes her later "classroom selection" read as principled and strategic — not possessive.

If you paste **Scene Two (classroom)** next, I'll check the handoff: the bathroom scene should leave Celeste with a *clean motive* ("he's misassigned; I can place him better") and Charlie with a *clean imprint* ("she didn't mock me; she gave me a way out"). That pairing will make the whole arc feel inevitable, and it keeps your tone exactly where you want it.



Precise. That is precise. This going to work incredibly well, Emily. May I suggest the classroom next? In the context of the first scene, it will need cleaning up. I submit the text for your review:

By the time Mr. Greeves started writing *GROUP TASK* on the board, the room had already made its decision.

It wasn't an official decision, not one you could point to in a rulebook, but it lived in the way chairs angled away

from the held-back boy, in the little coughs people used to cover their discomfort, in the speed at which everyone suddenly found the floor fascinating. I watched it happen with the same detached interest I'd watch a flock of birds turn as one body: instinct, cowardice, and the lazy relief of belonging.

And then—late, ridiculous—the boy himself came into focus. Not the role. Not the cautionary tale the room had agreed on. The person.

A quick flash: paper towels. A sink. Those startled doe eyes tipping up to meet mine.

Oh.

The wrong place, wrong door lad.

I'd stood in the ladies' and looked straight at him, and my brain hadn't filed him as anyone from class because in class he wasn't anyone you recognised—he was just a space people avoided. That was the trick of it: you can notice what a room does to someone without ever granting them the dignity of being properly seen.

And once you've seen someone properly, you can't pretend you haven't.

Mr. Greeves tapped the chalk like it owed him money.
"Alright. You've all had your practice test. You've all had your feelings about your practice test. Today, you're going to make something sensible out of it."

A few kids chuckled. Not because it was funny — because it was safe.

"Pairs," he said, underlining it twice. "Pick a question from the set. Solve it. Then produce a one-page explanation that someone *else* could follow. If you can't explain it, you can't do it."

There was the usual scrape of chairs, the low panic of social arrangements. Everyone moved fast, because

speed looked like confidence. I didn't move. I didn't need to. People came to me.

"Celeste, want to—"

"Celeste, I saved you a—"

"Celeste, I already have—"

I gave them my polite face and none of my answer. My attention drifted to the back left, where Charlie sat. The boy of wrong place, wrong door.

He wasn't ugly. He wasn't particularly strange. He just sat in a way that tried to be smaller than the desk allowed. He was... uncollected. Like a thing people had decided was worthless and therefore never bothered to look at properly. Thin. Shorter than most of the boys, which seemed to bother them more than it bothered him. His uniform shirt sat awkwardly on his frame — too big at the shoulders, too loose at the waist — as if it belonged to someone older and louder.

I knew I should have clocked him before, in the loo. I just never noticed him in class. Nobody did. The held-back boy. The one who re-did Year 11 because maths had eaten him alive the first time. People said it with the same tone they used for a failed appliance: *still doesn't work.*

I felt a fleeting twinge of guilt. Just because of not having noticed it was the same lad.

Mr. Greeves said, "If you're still unpaired in thirty seconds, I'll pair you."

That was the real threat. Not the task. Not the maths. Being seen as someone who had to be assigned.

Charlie's eyes flicked around the room: quick, skittish, looking down as much as he looked around, not begging, but scanning. When he realised no one was going to volunteer themselves to be his partner, his mouth tightened in a way I recognised. It wasn't anger. It was resignation borne of experience. He'd already accepted his lot to be humiliated by the teacher as well as rejected

by his peers.

This almost certainly had happened to him before. In this class. By this teacher and classmates. And I had been there? And not noticed?

"Time," Mr. Greeves said. "Right. Charlie—"

"Me," I said, before he could finish the sentence.

The room's attention snapped to me like elastic. You could feel it in the air—the sudden recalculation. It made me want to smile, but I didn't. Power is best used as if you hardly notice you have it.

Mr. Greeves blinked. "Celeste?"

"I'm with Charlie." Not: *can I*, not: *would you mind*, but a simple assertion, to affect a course correction of the reality he'd been about to create.

A few girls exchanged looks. One boy gave a tiny laugh, like I'd just made a joke he didn't understand. Someone whispered, not quietly enough, "Why would you do that?"

I turned my head just enough for the whisperer to know I'd heard. I didn't even have to identify her. "Because I like getting full marks," I said, pleasantly. "And I like working with people who don't waste time showing off."

Silence. A delicious, tidy silence.

Mr. Greeves recovered, puzzlement slowly fading from his face. "Alright then. Celeste and Charlie. Good."

I walked my chair over without asking permission from the air. Charlie stared at me as if I'd sat down inside his head.

"You don't have to do this..." he began timidly. I could read a powerful emotion in his voice and in his eyes: *it's the girl from the loo*!

"I know."

He blinked and swallowed hard. That lone word seemed to unsettle him more than reassurance would have. I placed my notebook on the desk between us and looked at the question set.

"Pick one."

"I—" he began, and faltered. The page might as well have been written in smoke.

I watched him slowly collect himself and set himself to the task. He didn't panic theatrically. He didn't joke. He didn't make excuses. He scanned. Not the way someone scans for answers, but the way someone scans for structure.

My eyes dropped to his own notebook as he moved it — careful, almost fussy, aligning the corners of the paper with the desk edge. I noticed his handwriting: neat, consistent, slanted slightly right, as if it had manners.

"You're good at geometry, aren't you?"

His head came up sharply. "What?"

"Geometry. You're good at it. Your diagrams: very precise."

He looked genuinely confused, as if the possibility of being observed outside his failures had never occurred to him. "I'm... okay, I guess."

"You're better than okay." I tapped the question set. "Pick one with a diagram. A shape. Something that lives in space, not in a string of symbols."

He hesitated, then pointed with his pencil. "This one. The triangle... with the angle bisector."

"Good." I nodded. "You do the diagram. Make it clean. Label it properly. I'll do the algebraic part and write the

explanation. Then you check me for logic. Deal?"

He stared at me. "You... trust me to check you?"

That was the real question. Not about maths. About hierarchy.

"I trust your eyes," I replied. "They're honest."

His ears went faintly pink. Not in a flattered way — more like embarrassment at being assigned a virtue.

He bent over the page. His pencil moved and the triangle appeared with a crispness that felt almost calming. Clean lines. Honest angles.

While he worked, I listened to the classroom. The buzz of other pairs. The smugness of boys who'd paired up for safety, girls who'd paired up for comfort. I heard my name used in little asides, the way people taste words to see if they're sweet.

Charlie drew his angle bisector and then paused, frowning.

"What?"

He pointed. "If you call that angle x ... then this one has to be x too, because of the bisector. But the problem statement says this angle is thirty degrees, which means x is fifteen. Which means... your ratio is fixed."

He said it softly, as if he expected to be corrected.

I looked where he pointed. He was right. The whole thing collapsed into a simple proportion. I felt a small, satisfied click in my chest. Not because he'd solved it. Because of what it meant: he was competent in a way nobody had bothered to find.

"Exactly," I said. "That's the spine of it."

He glanced up at me, his hazel eyes quick, searching.

"Why are you doing this?"

There it was. The suspicion. The defensive little gate he'd built, because people who were kind to him usually wanted something he couldn't afford. I didn't lie. I just chose the angle of truth.

"Because you're being tested in the wrong language," I said. "And I hate waste."

His pencil hovered.

"Waste?" he echoed.

"Waste of ability," I clarified. "Waste of time. Waste of people." I kept my voice calm. "You're not behind. You're misallocated."

He swallowed, and for a second his face did something raw, like he'd nearly believed me and it frightened him.

I leaned closer, just enough to make my next words private. "Also," I added, "you're going to owe me. Not like that. Practical."

His shoulders stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," I said, "I don't do charity. I do investment."

He stared at me, and this time there was something like understanding. Not full understanding. The first bud of it. Tiny. Alive.

Mr. Greeves wandered past. He glanced at our work, eyebrows lifting. "Good diagram," he said, sounding surprised despite himself. "Nice and clean."

Charlie's hand tightened on the pencil, but he didn't look up. He didn't bask. He just kept working, as if praise was a thing that might vanish if he moved too fast.

When Mr. Greeves walked away, I said, lightly, "See? You exist. People just don't like admitting it."

Charlie's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. The ghost of one.

We finished the solution with no drama. I wrote the explanation in clear steps. He checked every transition like a quiet auditor. When we handed it in, Mr. Greeves nodded at me, then at him, as if he'd suddenly remembered Charlie was part of the room.

As the bell went, chairs scraped, and the flock of birds turned again. People flowed past us, and I watched Charlie do what he always did: shrink to let them.

I slid my notebook into my bag and stood.

"Charlie."

He looked up, automatically attentive, as if my voice had become a cue.

"I'm doing something after graduation," I continued, watching his reaction carefully. "A project. A place. It's... not school."

His eyes flicked away, then back. Hope, hidden under caution.

"I need people who can keep their head," I said. "People who can do detail. People who can be invisible on purpose."

He frowned slightly. "Why me?"

I stepped closer, so my answer didn't have to compete with the corridor noise.

"Because you already know how to survive without applause," I said. "And because if I don't pick you, someone else will. Someone stupider."

His breath caught—not romantic, not theatrical. Just the shock of being chosen without a joke attached to it.

He nodded once, careful, like he didn't trust his own voice.

"Good," I said. And then, because it mattered, because strategy without warmth is just cruelty, I softened it by a fraction. "I'll tell you what it is tomorrow."

He watched me walk away as if the hallway had quietly rearranged itself.

And it had.

Not because I'd saved him.

Because I'd placed him.

Yes — this is absolutely the right **Scene Two** for the direction we've chosen. It's doing the heavy lifting you need: it turns the restroom encounter from an isolated oddity into a **principled, strategic selection** in public, and it starts building the "parallel ladder" theme (school as a bad interface; Wardrobe as apprenticeship education).

Alignment verdict

Strong alignment, with a few tone-balancing tweaks needed.

Right now Celeste reads as powerful (good), but she occasionally slips into *too explicitly transactional* ("investment," "you're going to owe me," "leverage" echoes) in a way that risks making readers nervous about her ethics rather than admiring her competence.

The fix is simple: keep her decisive, keep her ambition, keep her edge — but make the "deal" feel like **mutual benefit + boundaries**, not "ownership."

What's already excellent (keep it)

1) The classroom social dynamics

The "chairs angled away," "flock of birds" imagery, the speed-as-confidence pairing panic — all terrific. It makes the rejection systemic, not personal.

2) Celeste choosing him **before** the teacher can "assign"

That's the exact beat you need to establish her as a leader who changes reality by speaking.

3) Charlie's competence reveal is elegant

The triangle/angle bisector moment is *perfect*: it's visual, structural, and proves your "wrong language" line without a lecture.

4) Mr. Greeves's surprised praise

That tiny "despite himself" tells the reader the institution didn't expect Charlie to shine. Great.

5) The end button

"Not because I'd saved him. Because I'd placed him."

That's a killer closing thought — it matches your stated story philosophy and keeps Celeste from being sentimental.

The main risk points (and how to fix them)

A) Celeste's motive is a touch too openly manipulative

Lines like:

- "It's leverage."
- "you're going to owe me"
- "I don't do charity. I do investment."
- "If I don't pick you, someone else will. Someone stupider."

...are sharp and fun, but together they can make Celeste feel like she's grooming a subordinate rather than recruiting a collaborator.

Solution: keep her pragmatic language, but soften the implication of coercion.

Better framing:

- "I'm not doing pity. I'm building something."
- "If you join me, it'll be work — real work — and you'll learn fast."
- "You'll be paid. You'll be trained. You'll have a place."

B) Give Charlie one tiny act of agency in this scene

You do give him competence, but in terms of relationship power, he mostly receives her choices.

Add one small beat where he:

- picks the question himself without prompting, or
- sets a boundary ("I don't want people thinking—"), or
- asks a hard question and waits for a real answer.

This will make the "follower" dynamic feel **chosen**, not automatic.

C) The "girls' loo recognition" is excellent, but keep it understated

Right now it's a strong internal flare ("it's the girl from the loo!"). Perfect. Just avoid turning it into a "bonding secret" that's too heavy too early.

You're already doing it right — keep it subtle and use it as a private undercurrent, not a plot coupon.

Micro edits (surgical) I recommend

1) This line is brilliant but a touch preachy; trim it

"That was the trick of it: you can notice what a room does to someone without ever granting them the dignity of being properly seen."

Keep the thought but shave a clause:

"That was the trick of it: you can watch a room do things to someone without ever properly seeing them."

2) "Because I like getting full marks" is perfect; keep it

It makes Celeste's choice publicly defensible and makes peers shut up.

3) Add one boundary line before the "project" hook

Right after:

"Why are you doing this?"

Have him say something like:

"If this is a joke, I'm not in."

Then Celeste answers calmly. That makes his consent explicit.

4) Replace the "owe me / investment" beat with something clean and ethical

Here's a swap that keeps her edge:

Replace:

"Also... you're going to owe me... Practical."

"I don't do charity. I do investment."

With:

"Also — if we work well together, I'm going to offer you something."

"Not charity. A job. Training. A place where your kind of brain actually counts."

Same authority, less coercion.

5) "Someone stupider" is funny, but it's a bit moustache-twirly

Swap it for something colder and truer:

"Because if I don't pick you, someone else will — and they won't care what it costs you."

That keeps her protective edge without sounding like she's competing to own him.

A tightened version of your strongest middle section (showing the tweaks)

I'm keeping your voice, cadence, and the "placed him" ethos — just refining the ethical tone and giving Charlie a sliver more agency.

(Drop-in rewrite from "Why are you doing this?" through the "investment" beat):

"Why are you doing this?"

There it was — the suspicion. The small defensive gate he'd built, because kindness usually came with a hook.

"If this is a joke," he said, very quietly, "I'm not in."

I held his gaze. Didn't flinch, didn't sugar it. "It's not a joke."

His pencil hovered above the page, as if waiting to see whether the world would change its mind.

"You're being tested in the wrong language," I said. "And I hate waste."

"Waste?"

"Waste of ability. Waste of time." I tapped the diagram he'd drawn — crisp, calm, correct. "You're not behind. You're misallocated."

His face did something raw for a second, like he almost believed me and it frightened him.

I leaned in just enough to keep my next words private. "So here's the deal. If you can work like this — quietly, properly — then after graduation I'm going to offer you something."

His shoulders tightened. "What sort of something?"

"Work," I said. "Training. A place where detail matters." I let a beat pass, then added, because it was the honest part: "And yes — it helps me too. I'm building something. I want people who can actually hold it together."

He looked at me as if I'd spoken a language he'd never heard used on him before: direct, practical, not cruel.

That keeps Celeste as strategist-leader, but it frames the dynamic as **mutual project**, not "I own you now."

The best thing about your ending

This is your thesis line and it's working:

"Not because I'd saved him. Because I'd placed him."

That's exactly the right lens for Celeste: she's not a saviour, she's a builder.

I'd only add one tiny conscience-brush (like we did in Scene One) to keep her ethically luminous:

"Placed him — and expected him to decide whether he wanted to stay there."

One phrase. It signals consent without weakening her.

Scene-to-arc fit (quick confirmation)

These two scenes together now do a beautiful job setting up:

- Celeste's proactive nature and her willingness to defy social inertia
- Charlie's receptiveness to *competent female direction*

- the institutional failure theme without preaching
 - Wardrobe as the alternative education pathway
 - Mara as the next gatekeeper who will formalize the "rules"
-

If you want, I can do the next step in one of two ways (pick whichever helps most, no extra questions needed):

1. **Line-edit your full Scene Two** with the above changes integrated end-to-end (keeping 95% of your text).
2. Draft **Scene Three: the first Wardrobe trial shift** with Mara (where the ethical framework gets stated once, clearly, and the costume element becomes functional training).



Please line-edit Scene Two with the above changes,
Emily.

Thought for 9s >

Here you go — **Scene Two line-edited end-to-end** with the changes integrated (ethical authority, less "transactional ownership," a clear Charlie-boundary beat, and a slightly cleaner landing into the "project" hook). I've kept your voice and most of your structure intact.

By the time Mr. Greeves started writing *GROUP TASK* on the board, the room had already made its decision.

It wasn't an official decision, not one you could point to in a rulebook, but it lived in the way chairs angled away from the held-back boy, in the little coughs people used to cover their discomfort, in the speed at which everyone suddenly found the floor fascinating. I watched it happen with the same detached interest I'd watch a flock of birds turn as one body: instinct, cowardice, and the lazy relief of belonging.

And then—late, ridiculous—the boy himself came into focus. Not the role. Not the cautionary tale the room had agreed on. The person.

A quick flash: paper towels. A sink. Those startled doe eyes tipping up to meet mine.

Oh.

The wrong place, wrong door lad.

I'd stood in the ladies' and looked straight at him, and my brain hadn't filed him as anyone from class because in class he wasn't anyone you registered—he was just a space people avoided. That was the trick of it: you can watch a room do things to someone without ever properly seeing them.

And once you've seen someone properly, you can't pretend you haven't.

Mr. Greeves tapped the chalk like it owed him money. "Alright. You've all had your practice test. You've all had your feelings about your practice test. Today, you're going to make something sensible out of it."

A few kids chuckled. Not because it was funny — because it was safe.

"Pairs," he said, underlining it twice. "Pick a question from the set. Solve it. Then produce a one-page explanation that someone else could follow. If you can't explain it, you can't do it."

There was the usual scrape of chairs, the low panic of social arrangements. Everyone moved fast, because speed looked like confidence. I didn't move. I didn't need to. People came to me.

"Celeste, want to—"

"Celeste, I saved you a—"

"Celeste, I already have—"

I gave them my polite face and none of my answer. My attention drifted to the back left, where Charlie sat. The boy of wrong place, wrong door.

He wasn't ugly. He wasn't particularly strange. He just sat in a way that tried to be smaller than the desk allowed. He was... uncollected. Thin. Shorter than most of the boys, which seemed to bother *them* more than it bothered him. His uniform shirt sat awkwardly on his frame — too big at the shoulders, too loose at the waist — as if it belonged to someone older and louder.

I should have recognised him in the loo. But no one recognises the boy the room has agreed not to look at.

The held-back boy. The one re-doing Year 11 because maths had eaten him alive the first time. People said it with the same tone they used for a failed appliance: *still doesn't work*.

I felt a brief, sharp prick of guilt — not pity for him, exactly. Disgust at myself for being present all this time and letting the room decide what he was.

Mr. Greeves said, "If you're still unpaired in thirty seconds, I'll pair you."

That was the real threat. Not the task. Not the maths. Being seen as someone who had to be assigned.

Charlie's eyes flicked around the room: quick, skittish, scanning without pleading. When he realised no one was going to volunteer themselves to be his partner, his mouth tightened in a way I recognised. It wasn't anger. It was resignation borne of experience — the calm acceptance of a humiliation he could already see coming.

This had happened to him before. In this class. With these people.

Mr. Greeves drew breath. "Right. Charlie—"

"Me," I said, before he could finish.

The room's attention snapped to me like elastic. You could feel it in the air — the sudden recalculation. It made me want to smile, but I didn't. Power is best used as if you hardly notice you have it.

Mr. Greeves blinked. "Celeste?"

"I'm with Charlie." Not: *can I*, not: *would you mind*, but a simple statement — a course correction applied to reality.

A few girls exchanged looks. One boy gave a tiny laugh, like I'd just made a joke he didn't understand. Someone whispered, not quietly enough, "Why would you do that?"

I turned my head just enough for the whisperer to know I'd heard. I didn't even have to identify her. "Because I like getting full marks," I said, pleasantly. "And I like working with people who don't waste time showing off."

Silence. Clean silence.

Mr. Greeves recovered, puzzlement fading. "Alright then. Celeste and Charlie. Good."

I dragged my chair across without asking permission from the air. Charlie stared at me as if I'd sat down inside his head.

"You don't have to do this..." he began, timid and urgent — and I heard it underneath the words: *it's you. from the loo.*

"I know," I said. Not reassurance. Just truth.

He blinked, swallowed hard. That lone word seemed to unsettle him more than comfort would have. I set my notebook down between us and looked at the question set.

"Pick one."

"I—" he started, and faltered. The page might as well have been written in smoke.

I watched him collect himself in silence. He didn't panic theatrically. He didn't joke. He didn't make excuses. He scanned — not the way someone scans for answers, but the way someone scans for structure.

My eyes dropped to his own notebook as he moved it — careful, almost fussy, aligning the corners of the paper with the desk edge. I noticed his handwriting: neat, consistent, slanted slightly right, as if it had manners.

"Your diagrams," I said. "They're precise."

His head came up sharply. "What?"

"Geometry. You're good at it."

He looked genuinely confused, as if the possibility of being observed outside his failures had never occurred to him. "I'm... okay, I guess."

"You're better than okay." I tapped the question set. "Pick one with a diagram. A shape. Something that lives in space, not in a string of symbols."

He hesitated, then pointed with his pencil. "This one. The triangle... with the angle bisector."

"Good." I nodded. "You do the diagram. Make it clean. Label it properly. I'll do the algebraic part and write the explanation. Then you check me for logic. Deal?"

He stared at me. "You... trust me to check you?"

That was the real question. Not about maths. About hierarchy.

"I trust your eyes," I said. "They're honest."

His ears went faintly pink. Not flattered — embarrassed, like I'd assigned him a virtue he hadn't agreed to wear.

He bent over the page. His pencil moved and the triangle appeared with a crispness that felt almost calming. Clean lines. Honest angles.

While he worked, I listened to the room — the buzz of other pairs, the smugness of boys who'd grouped for safety, girls who'd grouped for comfort. I heard my name in small asides, the way people taste words to see if they're sweet.

Charlie drew his angle bisector and then paused, frowning.

"What?"

He pointed. "If you call that angle x ... then this one has to be x too, because of the bisector. But the problem statement says this angle is thirty degrees. So x is fifteen. Which means... your ratio is fixed."

He said it softly, as if he expected to be corrected.

I looked where he pointed. He was right. The whole problem collapsed into a simple proportion. A small, satisfied click happened in my chest — not because he'd solved it, but because it proved what I'd suspected: he was competent in a way nobody had bothered to find.

"Exactly," I said. "That's the spine of it."

He glanced up at me, his hazel eyes quick, searching. "Why are you doing this?"

There it was. The defensive little gate. People who were kind to him usually wanted something — and he'd learned that wanting came with a price.

"If this is a joke," he said very quietly, "I'm not in."

I held his gaze. Didn't sugar it. "It's not a joke."

His pencil hovered, suspended over the page like a test of whether I'd change my mind.

"You're being tested in the wrong language," I said. "And I hate waste."

His brow pinched. "Waste?"

"Waste of ability. Waste of time." I tapped the diagram. "You're not behind. You're misallocated."

He swallowed, and for a second his face did something raw — like he almost believed me and that frightened him.

I leaned closer, just enough to make my next words private — not conspiratorial, just practical.

"And if we work well together," I added, "I'm going to offer you something after graduation."

His shoulders stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"I mean work," I said. "Training. A place where detail matters." I let a beat pass, then added because it was the honest part: "It helps me too. I'm building something. I want people who can actually hold it together."

He stared at me, and this time there was something like understanding — not full understanding. The first bud of it. Tiny. Alive.

Mr. Greeves wandered past. He glanced at our work, eyebrows lifting. "Good diagram," he said, sounding surprised despite himself. "Nice and clean."

Charlie's hand tightened on the pencil, but he didn't look up. He didn't bask. He just kept working, as if praise was a thing that might vanish if he moved too fast.

When Mr. Greeves walked away, I said, lightly, "See? You exist. People just don't like admitting it."

Charlie's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. The ghost of one.

We finished the solution with no drama. I wrote the explanation in clear steps. He checked every transition like a quiet auditor. When we handed it in, Mr. Greeves nodded at me, then at him, as if he'd suddenly remembered Charlie was part of the room.

As the bell went, chairs scraped, and the flock of birds turned again. People flowed past us, and I watched Charlie do what he always did: shrink to let them.

I slid my notebook into my bag and stood.

"Charlie."

He looked up, automatically attentive, as if my voice had become a cue.

"I'm doing something after graduation," I continued, watching his reaction carefully. "A project. A place. It's... not school."

His eyes flicked away, then back. Hope, buried under caution.

"I need people who can keep their head," I said. "People who can do detail. People who can be invisible on purpose."

He frowned slightly. "Why me?"

I stepped closer, so my answer didn't have to compete with the corridor noise.

"Because you already know how to survive without applause," I said. "And because if I don't pick you, someone else will — and they won't care what it costs you."

His breath caught — not romantic, not theatrical. Just the shock of being chosen without a joke attached to it.

He nodded once, careful, like he didn't trust his own voice.

"Good," I said. And then, because it mattered — because strategy without warmth is just cruelty — I softened it by a fraction. "I'll tell you what it is tomorrow."

He watched me walk away as if the hallway had quietly rearranged itself.

And it had.

Not because I'd saved him.

Because I'd placed him — and left him room to decide whether he wanted to stay there.

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The context is solid. We can now work on how we transition to Scene Three. I'd like your input here: not to frame Celeste as rescuer, but is it reasonable to have Charlie NOT even consider Celeste's suggestion because

he doesn't totally understand his own value. Being held back, being small, being socially less than would certainly leave its mark on self-confidence/self-worth, wouldn't it?

Yes — it's not only reasonable, it's *psychologically clean* and it actually helps you avoid the "rescuer" vibe.

If Charlie *immediately* believes her, he becomes a grateful project. If he **can't quite take in** what she's offering, he stays human: bruised, cautious, not easily "fixed," and still possessing agency (even if his agency shows up as hesitation and self-protection rather than bold action).

Why he wouldn't consider it (and why that's not "weak writing")

Being held back + repeatedly unchosen + physically smaller in a status-obsessed teen ecosystem can produce a very specific mindset:

- **Learned invisibility:** he's trained himself to take up less space because space is punished.
- **Discounting positives:** compliments and offers don't land; they feel like mistakes.
- **Threat-forecasting:** "If I accept, what's the humiliation cost later?"
- **Status realism:** he assumes "people like Celeste" don't *actually* choose "people like him."
- **Identity lock-in:** he doesn't think of himself as "capable," he thinks of himself as "the boy who struggles."

That's not melodrama; it's a believable internal operating system for someone who's been treated as a problem for years.

Crucial: make it *resistance*, not passivity

To keep the tone aligned, Charlie shouldn't just drift. His not-considering should be an **active defensive move**:

- He convinces himself it's not real.
- He rationalizes why it can't work.
- He decides it's safer to do nothing than to hope.

That's agency in a wounded form.

How this helps you transition into Scene Three

Scene Three can become the moment where Celeste's leadership proves itself as *structure*, not salvation.

Instead of "I'm saving you," Celeste does:

1. **Clarity:** she states the offer in practical terms (what, when, where, expectations).
2. **Boundaries:** she makes it safe (privacy, consent, professional rules).
3. **Choice:** she leaves him room to refuse without punishment.
4. **Consequence:** if he dithers, she doesn't beg; she moves on—and *that forces him to choose*.

That's how you keep her powerful and non-rescuing.

A very believable transition beat

After Scene Two, Charlie goes home and does what he always does: he tries to shrink the day until it fits the old story he believes about himself.

So his internal monologue might go something like:

- "She just didn't want to be paired by Mr. Greeves."
- "She's being nice because she feels guilty."
- "She's bored, and I'm a curiosity."
- "If I turn up tomorrow, I'll look desperate."
- "If I ask what it is, she'll laugh."

He may even *avoid her* the next day — not because he's rude, but because he's protecting himself from the pain of believing.

How Celeste reacts without rescuing

This is where she shines. She doesn't chase him emotionally. She corrects the situation with competence.

Options:

- She corners him briefly (not physically; socially) and says, matter-of-fact:
"I meant what I said. Here's the time. If you're not there, I'll assume no."
- Or she uses Mara as the adult authority:
"Mara needs an extra hand. If he wants the shift, he shows up."
- Or she gives him a tangible "proof of seriousness": a printed slip, a text, a job form, a map—something *real*.

And then she stops. No coaxing. That's the opposite of rescue.

The cleanest emotional framing for Charlie

You want him to experience **shame about wanting**.

He wants to be chosen. He wants to be useful. He wants her attention.

But shame says:

"Wanting makes you pathetic."

So he delays. He hesitates. He "forgets." He pretends he doesn't care.

That's extremely teen-real.

The one guardrail to keep

Don't let his hesitation last too long, or readers get frustrated. The trick is to make his reluctance **specific** and then resolve it with one catalytic event.

Good catalysts:

- Mr. Greeves publicly acknowledges his work (tiny status shift).
- He overhears someone mocking him and realizes the cost of staying in his old lane.
- Mara notices his diagram pinned on a board (if you want a bridge).
- Celeste treats him neutrally the next day (not coldly—professionally), which signals "this wasn't pity."

A strong, non-rescue way to open Scene Three

Scene Three can begin with Charlie showing up somewhere he didn't think he'd have the courage to go, purely because the alternative is returning to the old story.

You can open with:

- **Charlie arriving at the faire** (or wardrobe door) with a stomach like a fist.
- He expects to be laughed out.
- Instead, Mara hands him a needle and says, "If you're here to talk, leave. If you're here to work, sit."

No rescue. Just a doorway and a standard.

So yes: Charlie not fully considering Celeste's suggestion because he can't yet perceive his value is not only plausible — it's *useful*. It makes his eventual "yes" feel like a

decision, not a surrender.

If you tell me what you want Scene Three's *location* to be (school corridor next day vs arriving at the faire vs a meeting with Mara), I'll propose 2–3 transition shapes and give you a crisp first paragraph to launch it.



I was sort of going with a scene between Celeste and Mara (we can establish their relationship and then, Graham bursts onto the scene. Not a bad bloke, but blokey. Whingeing about this new kid who is too small, too weak, too inept for the job and who he's going to have to let go. Charlie's name slips out during the chat between Mara and Graham. This is the first Celeste has heard of his whereabouts - she thought he'd simply refused her suggestions - and chimes in. Mara is dubious but Graham mentions Charlie had been pleading to be able to stay on. Mara expresses her reservations but agrees to let him have a go.
If you see any weaknesses here, feel free to firm things up, Emily.

This transition is **solid** and, importantly, it keeps Celeste out of the "rescuer" posture because she isn't hunting Charlie down out of pity — she's hearing *workplace intel* and making a strategic intervention inside a system she already belongs to.

There are only a few potential weaknesses, and they're all easy to firm up.

What's strong about your setup

1) It's workplace-first, not romance-first

Starting with Celeste + Mara in Wardrobe immediately tells the reader: *this is the real world of the story*. School was the bottleneck; this is the ladder.

2) Graham becomes a believable catalyst

He isn't a villain; he's reporting a mismatch. It keeps the critique aimed at "misallocation," not "men bad" in a cartoon way — while still letting him be blokey and wrong.

3) Charlie's "pleading to stay" fits perfectly

That's Charlie's wounded agency. He's not confident enough to claim a better lane, but he is desperate enough to *fight for any lane at all*. That makes him sympathetic and credible.

4) Celeste's reaction reads as *placement*, not rescue

She thought he'd refused her; hearing he's out there trying to survive flips her from "fine" to "no — you're being used incorrectly."

The weaknesses to watch for (and how to fix them)

Weakness A: Coincidence overload

If it's too neat that Celeste just happens to be present for the exact conversation where Charlie's name "slips out," it can feel writerly.

Fix: Give Celeste a reason to be there that day and a reason Graham would appear.

- Celeste is finishing a shift, returning stock, doing paperwork, or dropping off a repair.
- Mara and Graham *already* coordinate regularly (maintenance requests, set fixes, laundry flow, quick-change hooks).
- Graham comes because something broke (rack, steamer, light, door latch), and his complaint about the kid is secondary.

That makes the overlap natural.

Weakness B: "pleading" can make Charlie feel too helpless if you're not careful

Pleading is fine — but don't let it become grovelling. Keep it simple, practical, and pride-constrained.

Better: Charlie asks for *one more day / a different task / anything he can do well*.

That's still desperate, but with dignity.

Weakness C: Mara's "yes" needs to be earned

If Mara agrees too quickly because Celeste asks, it can feel like Celeste already runs the place.

Fix: Make Mara's yes conditional and professional:

- trial shift
- strict rules
- measurable outcomes
- "one mistake and he's out"
- "he answers to me, not you"

That keeps Mara authoritative and keeps Celeste from being a magical influence.

Weakness D: Why is Charlie in maintenance in the first place?

You've already set this up: he drifted there because it's the default "boy lane" and he needs money. But Scene Three should **confirm** that in a sentence so it feels inevitable.

How to "firm it up" while preserving your intent

A cleaner scene engine (beats)

1. **Celeste + Mara:** establish their dynamic (mentor-ish, not cuddly; respect earned; Celeste ambitious).
2. **Work problem:** a rack is jammed, a hinge is loose, a steamer is down — plausible reason for Graham's entrance.
3. **Graham vents:** "This kid they sent me—can't lift, can't carry, can't climb. I'm not running a daycare."
4. **Name drops:** "Charlie Rossignol" (or "Charles—Charlie").
5. **Celeste's pivot:** not "oh poor thing," but: "He's in the wrong department."
6. **Mara's skepticism:** "Wardrobe isn't a refuge."
7. **Graham adds pressure:** "He begged me not to sack him."
8. **Mara sets terms:** "One trial shift. My rules. If he gawks, if he jokes, if he breaks trust, he's gone."
9. **Celeste stays disciplined:** "Fine. I'm not vouching for his character. I'm vouching for his hands."

That last line is excellent for tone.

Make Celeste's intervention feel like leadership, not rescue

Give her an angle that's self-respecting:

- She's protecting **Wardrobe** (quality, labour, standards) from being understaffed.
- She's protecting **Mara's time** (a good worker saves hours).
- She's protecting **Charlie's potential** because waste annoys her.

So she doesn't say "please give him a chance."

She says "you're missing a useful tool because he's been stored in the wrong drawer."

Mara's key line (sets the ethical framework for the whole book)

Let Mara say something like:

"I don't take strays. I take workers. If he wants in here, he earns it."

That single line inoculates the story against "rescuer" vibes.

Then follow with:

"And if this is some prank, some game, or some boyish curiosity—he doesn't come back."

It frames Wardrobe as safe, firm, and women-led.

Graham: keep him blokey, but not stupid

He should have legitimate concerns: safety, liability, pace, physical mismatch. He just lacks imagination about alternative fit.

Give him one good-faith line:

"He's polite. He tries. But he's going to get hurt."

That makes him human — and makes Celeste's correction feel smarter, not ideological.

One extra detail that will make the whole transition snap into place

Have Graham mention a **moment of surprising competence**:

- "He repaired a tear in his own uniform with dental floss."
- "He measured a bracket with a tape like he'd done it his whole life."
- "He redrew my parts diagram cleaner than the manual."

Graham doesn't even realise he's proving Celeste right — he's just reporting what happened. That's delicious, and it makes Mara's trial feel justified.

Optional: a very crisp opening paragraph for Scene Three

Just to set the tone (you can toss it if you prefer to draft yourself):

Wardrobe had its own weather: steam, fabric dust, the warm animal smell of wool, and the constant whisper of things being folded back into order. Mara stood over a worktable with a bodice turned inside-out, eyes narrowed, fingers moving with the brisk certainty of someone who didn't believe in miracles — only in seams that held. I hovered on the edge of her orbit, pinning a note to a hanger, trying not to look like I wanted anything.

Wanting, Mara had taught me, was cheap. Work was the currency.

That instantly establishes their relationship and the "education-by-craft" theme.

Summary of the firm-ups

- Reduce coincidence by giving a practical reason for Graham's visit.
- Keep Charlie's "pleading" dignified: one more day / different tasks.
- Make Mara's agreement conditional and rules-based.
- Give Graham one competence anecdote that unintentionally sells Charlie.
- Let Celeste argue from craft/efficiency, not pity.

If you like, I can now **draft Scene Three in full** in the same voice as Scenes One and Two (Celeste POV, sharp and controlled), including Mara's rules and the moment Charlie first enters Wardrobe under scrutiny.



Please draft Scene Three, Emily.

Thought for 14s >

Scene Three — *Wardrobe Weather*

Wardrobe had its own weather.

Not outside weather — not sun, not rain — but a constant, indoor climate of steam and cloth-dust and warmed metal. The air tasted faintly of detergent and starch and something older that lived in wool no matter how many times you cleaned it: sheep, lanolin, history.

The room itself was a maze of rails and racks, garment bags whispering against each other whenever someone brushed past. Stacked crates were stencilled with MARA'S handwriting — not the tidy school handwriting people used when they wanted to impress teachers, but the blunt, efficient strokes of someone who labelled everything because she didn't like losing time to idiots. A long trestle table ran down the centre like an altar, currently piled with a half-dressed mannequin and a skirt turned inside-out, hemline pinned up like a patient on a hospital bed.

Mara stood over it with her chin tucked, a bodice in her hands, and the look she wore when something had disappointed her.

Which was most things.

"Hold it," she said, without looking up.

I froze with a hanger halfway to a rail. Mara didn't need to raise her voice. She didn't need to say your name. Her authority lived in the fact that she expected you to obey and had no interest in negotiating about it.

She turned the bodice over and jabbed a fingertip at a seam. "This. Who did this?"

I moved closer, careful not to bump the steamer hose that snaked across the floor like a sleeping animal. "Which one?"

Mara's eyes flicked to me — a quick, unimpressed glance that somehow conveyed: *don't be clever.*

She pinched the fabric and tugged. The seam puckered slightly, like a smile that had been forced. "Whoever did this sewed with fear."

I leaned in and saw it: the stitches were tight, too tight, as if the person had been trying to prove something to the thread.

"They were worried it wouldn't hold," I said.

Mara snorted. "It won't hold because they were worried. That's the irony." She flipped the bodice again and thrust it at me. "Unpick it. Do it properly. Not fast. Properly."

There was no cruelty in it. Not exactly. Mara was not warm, but she was honest in the way that mattered: she treated workmanship as a form of respect. If she corrected you, it meant she thought you were capable of being corrected.

I took the bodice, feeling the weight of it — the underlining, the interlining, the bones that gave it a spine. The kind of garment that made you understand, viscerally, why women in paintings stood the way they did.

"Also," Mara added, turning away, "if you ever bring me a hem stitched with fear again, I'll make you wear it."

I smiled despite myself. "That's a bit extreme."

"That's how you learn." She reached for a tin of pins, shook it once, and caught three between her fingers without looking. "Go on."

I carried the bodice to the end of the table, sat, and began to unpick the seam with the seam ripper Mara insisted we call a *lame* because she said if you worked in costume long enough you ended up sounding like you were auditioning for a museum.

I liked Wardrobe because it wasn't school.

School rewarded performance — hands up, answers shouted, confidence like a costume you wore whether or not it fit. Wardrobe rewarded something quieter: attention, patience, care. You could be brilliant here without having to announce it.

I worked for a few minutes, the thread giving way with soft little snaps, until Mara's voice cut across the room again.

"Did you bring the inventory sheet?"

"It's on the clipboard by the haberdashery shelf," I said.

"And did you sign out the spools you took yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And are you lying?"

"No."

Mara's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. More like an acknowledgement that I was at least trying to be a competent human.

She moved around the room, checking rails, touching fabric, straightening labels. Mara had a way of handling garments that was almost reverent without being sentimental — like a mechanic wiping an engine block. She didn't coo over pretty things. She respected construction.

"You're late for your break," she said, as if she'd just noticed time existed.

"I'm not hungry," I replied, automatically.

Mara's eyes sharpened. "That's not the point."

I paused with the seam ripper. "What is the point, then?"

"The point," she said, "is that you don't get to build a future on fumes. You'll burn out and then you'll be useful to nobody, including yourself."

The fact that she said it so bluntly — *useful to nobody* — told me she was being kind. Mara's kindness wasn't soft. It was preventative maintenance.

I set the bodice down, let out a small breath. "Fine. Ten minutes."

Mara waved a hand, as if she'd won an argument she hadn't needed to have. "Good girl."

I rolled my eyes, but it didn't bite the way it would have from someone else. Mara used language like a tool: blunt, functional, occasionally barbed. If she called you "good girl," it wasn't flirtation or condescension. It was an appraisal.

I stood, stretched my shoulders, and headed toward the tiny back kitchenette that barely deserved the name — a bench, a sink, a kettle, and a jar of instant coffee that tasted like burnt regret. I'd just filled the kettle when the door to Wardrobe banged open.

Not Mara. Mara never banged doors. Mara glided in the way of someone who didn't want to be stopped by hinges.

This entrance had force.

A man in a hi-vis vest and work boots stepped into the doorway as if he'd been told the room was his and believed it. He had a cap on, and a face that looked permanently sunburnt in the way outdoors men often did: weathered, practical, slightly annoyed by all indoor occupations.

"Jesus," he said, eyes flicking over the room. "It's like walking into a bloody op shop in here."

Mara turned very slowly.

The look she gave him could have stripped paint.

"Graham," she said.

He grinned, unbothered. He had the easy confidence of someone who was used to being forgiven for taking up space.

"Mara," he replied, like they were old enemies in a war where neither side had ever surrendered.

His gaze slid past her and caught me. "Oh. It's you. Fancy seeing you outside school."

I raised my eyebrows. "It's almost like I work here."

"Yeah, yeah." He waved it away. "That's not why I'm here. I need you to sign off on the replacement for the steamer. The old one's cactus."

Mara made a noise that could have been agreement or a small internal murmur. "Put it in writing."

"I did." Graham reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded form, already crumpled like it had lived with coins. He slapped it on the table. "Here. Now — separate problem."

Mara's eyes didn't drop to the paper. "If it's separate, why are you telling me?"

"Because," Graham said, exhaling through his nose, "someone up top decided I needed help. They sent me this kid."

Mara's attention sharpened. Mine did too, without my permission.

Graham leaned his hip against a rack of cloaks as if it was a wall. The cloaks swayed, offended.

"This kid," he continued, "is too small, too weak, and too bloody... I don't know. He's just not built for maintenance. I'm not running a daycare."

Mara's voice was flat. "If he's a kid, he shouldn't be in maintenance anyway."

"He's not a kid." Graham rubbed his jaw, annoyed. "He's eighteen. But he looks about fifteen and he's got arms like pipe cleaners. I put him on basic stuff — carrying, fetching, holding ladders — and he's hopeless. He's polite, I'll give him that. He tries. But he's going to get hurt."

I felt my grip tighten slightly on the kettle handle.

Graham went on, warming to his complaint. "You tell him to grab the toolbox, he grabs it like it's going to bite him. You tell him to hold a ladder and he holds it like he's apologising to it. He's... he's not useless, exactly, but he's the wrong shape for the job."

Mara finally looked down at the paper he'd slapped on the table. "What's his name?"

Graham hesitated for half a second — not because he didn't know, but because names had weight here. Once you said a name in Mara's domain, you were acknowledging a person.

"Charles," he said. "Charlie. Rossignol."

The kettle clicked as it finished boiling. The sound was absurdly loud.

My spine went very still.

Mara's eyes flicked to me. She had a way of reading a room that made her frightening. "You know him."

"I do," I said.

Graham looked between us. "You do?"

"I do," I repeated, calm because if I wasn't calm I'd start feeling things, and feelings were messy. "From school."

Graham made a face. "Of course you do. Everyone's from school. It's a plague."

Mara folded her arms. "And you're here to tell me you're going to sack him."

"I am," Graham said, relieved to return to the point. "He's slowing the team down. And before you get all soft about it — I can't keep someone who's going to put his fingers through a band saw because he's too timid to say he doesn't know what he's doing."

Mara's gaze sharpened. "Did you put him near a band saw?"

"No," Graham snapped, then caught himself and softened it a fraction. "No. I'm saying he's not suited. That's all."

"He asked to stay," I said, before I could stop myself.

Graham's eyes flicked to me. "Yeah. He did. That's what makes it worse."

"Why?" I asked, voice steady.

"Because he looked like he was about to cry," Graham said, bluntly, as if that was an inconvenience. "He kept saying he needed the money, he needed the work, he'd do anything. That's not a workplace. That's a hostage situation."

Mara's face didn't change, but something in her eyes cooled.

"Did you offer him different tasks?" Mara asked.

Graham shrugged. "There aren't different tasks. It's maintenance."

"That's your imagination speaking," Mara said, dry.

Graham huffed. "See? This is why I don't come in here. You lot live in a different world."

Mara's mouth twitched. "You're the one who walked in."

I set the kettle down slowly. "He didn't refuse my suggestion," I said, more to myself than to them. "He just... took what he could get."

Mara's gaze held mine. "What suggestion?"

I weighed it. Mara didn't like speeches, and she didn't like pity. But she respected plans.

"I told him yesterday," I said, "that if we worked well together I might have something for him after graduation. A project. Work. Not school. He didn't show today. I assumed he'd decided not to."

Graham scoffed. "You're offering him work and he's already got work."

"He's got the wrong work," I said, and the simplicity of it pleased me.

Graham snorted. "And what, you're going to put him in here? With the dresses?"

Mara's gaze cut to him like a blade. "Say 'dresses' again like that and I'll put you in one."

Graham held up his hands in mock surrender. "Alright. Alright. I'm just saying—"

"You're saying the same thing men always say when they don't understand labour they can't lift," Mara replied.

His eyebrows rose. "Here we go."

Mara leaned forward slightly, voice still even. "Wardrobe is not a refuge. It is not a therapy room. I don't take strays."

I nodded once. Good. That was the line we needed.

Mara continued, eyes on Graham now. "I take workers."

Graham rolled his shoulders, uncomfortable with the moral framing. "Fine. But he's not a worker. He's—"

"He *is* a worker," I said, quietly. "He just doesn't look like the kind you're used to."

Mara's eyes flicked back to me. "What makes you think he can work in here?"

"His hands," I said. "His eyes. His patience." I kept it clinical. "He draws like someone who thinks in structure. In geometry. His handwriting is neat. He listens. He doesn't perform."

Graham made a sound. "That's not a qualification."

"It is in Wardrobe," Mara said, without blinking.

Graham looked at her as if she'd just claimed gravity was optional. "You're serious."

Mara reached for the bodice I'd been unpicking and held it up by the straps. "You see this? This is engineering disguised as femininity. It's measurements and force and sweat and physics. We don't need biceps. We need brains."

Graham's mouth opened, then shut. He glanced at me. "You're backing this?"

"I'm not vouching for his character," I said, and it surprised even me how easily it came out, because it was true. "I'm vouching for his hands."

Mara's eyes narrowed in approval. Not warmth — respect.

Graham scratched his jaw. "Alright. But if he's a liability—"

"He won't be your liability," Mara said. "If I take him, he answers to me. And my rules aren't optional."

Graham hesitated, then shrugged. "Fine. You want him, take him. But I'm not babysitting him until you decide."

Mara's gaze was steady. "You don't babysit. You supervise. There's a difference."

Graham exhaled, annoyed but not combative. "When can you take him? Because I can't have him underfoot tomorrow when we're moving the fencing."

Mara didn't look at me when she spoke. She didn't need to. "We don't 'take' him. We trial him."

Graham frowned. "Trial him?"

"Trial shift," Mara said. "One day. He shows up on time. He listens. He follows instruction. He does not joke. He does not comment. He does not wander. He keeps his hands clean and his mouth cleaner."

Graham barked a laugh. "You run a tight ship."

"I run a ship that doesn't sink," Mara replied.

Her eyes slid to me now. "And you, Celeste — you do not 'save' him. You don't coddle him. You don't make him your pet project."

My chin lifted. "I wouldn't."

Mara held my gaze. "Good. Because if he comes in here and thinks he's protected by you, he'll behave like a protected boy."

Graham snorted. "What's that mean?"

Mara didn't even glance at him. "It means he'll test boundaries and blame women for having them."

Graham went quiet, as if he'd suddenly remembered women were often the ones cleaning up after men's boundaries were tested.

Mara continued, voice firm. "If he comes in here, he earns his place like everyone else. Understood?"

"Understood," I said. And I meant it.

Graham shifted, uncomfortable again. "So what, you want me to send him over?"

"No," Mara said. "I want him to choose to come."

The words landed cleanly in my chest. Good. That's how we avoided rescue.

Mara reached for a small pad and scribbled something in her sharp handwriting. She tore off the page and held it out to Graham.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Time. Location. Who to ask for," Mara said. "You give it to him. You tell him: if he wants a trial, he turns up. If he doesn't, you sack him and no one feels guilty."

Graham stared at the paper like it had teeth. "You're ruthless."

"I'm fair," Mara corrected. "Ruthless is sacking someone because they don't lift like a grown man."

Graham's ears reddened. "Oi."

Mara tilted her head. "Am I wrong?"

He looked away. "No."

Mara turned her gaze back to me. "You can tell him too, if you want. But you don't chase him. You don't plead. You don't sell it like a lifeline."

I smiled, small and sharp. "I don't plead."

Mara's mouth twitched. "Good. Then go and be useful. I've got work."

Graham shoved the paper into his pocket and pointed at Mara's replacement form on the table. "Sign that."

Mara picked up the pen, signed without looking, and slid it back. "Get out."

Graham grinned again, like he enjoyed being told off by competent women. "Lovely chat. Always a pleasure to be insulted in a room full of frocks."

Mara's voice was silky. "Say 'frocks' again and I'll hang you with one."

Graham laughed and left, the door banging behind him as if to prove he was still a man.

The moment he was gone, the air settled.

Mara picked up the bodice again, examined the seam I'd been unpicking, and nodded once. "Better."

I exhaled, the tension bleeding out of my shoulders. "He begged?"

Mara didn't look up. "Graham said he did."

"He's not theatrical," I said, more to myself than to her. "He wouldn't beg unless he—"

"Unless he was desperate," Mara finished, matter-of-fact. "Yes. That's what poverty does. It makes dignity negotiable."

The bluntness of it struck me. Mara had no patience for pretty stories. She knew what scarcity did to people.

I picked up my phone from the bench, thumb hovering over nothing. I didn't have Charlie's number. Of course I didn't.

Mara's eyes flicked up, catching the motion. "Don't."

"I'm not," I said.

Mara's gaze held mine for a second longer, as if checking the truth of it. Then she returned to her work.

"Ten minutes," she said. "Then you come back and finish that seam. If Charlie turns up tomorrow, you're on rails and pin duty. You keep him busy. You do not hover. You do not mother. You do not flirt."

"I don't flirt," I said, offended on principle.

Mara made a soft sound that might have been amusement. "Of course you don't."

I rolled my eyes and moved toward the door.

As I stepped into the corridor outside Wardrobe, the noise of the faire changed — less muffled, more alive. Somewhere outside, tourists laughed. A bell rang. Someone yelled about a lost hat. The smell of hot chips drifted in from the food court like a betrayal of all our careful historical illusions.

I walked fast, not running — running looked like need.

The maintenance compound sat behind the main buildings, past a cluster of props and a row of portable toilets that always made the "authentic eighteenth century experience"

feel like a joke. The path was half gravel, half mud. A pallet of timber sat near a fence, and a stack of metal poles leaned precariously against a wall.

Graham was there, bent over a toolbox, swearing softly as he dug for something.

And beside him—

Charlie.

He was holding the base of a ladder while Graham climbed it, the ladder angled against a wall. Charlie's hands were white-knuckled on the rails. His shoulders were tight. His gaze was fixed upward, not watching Graham's feet so much as watching for the moment the world would punish him for existing.

He looked, in that moment, exactly as he had in the girls' toilets: caught, trying to be smaller than the situation demanded.

Graham climbed down, grumbling, and slapped the wall. "There. Fixed."

Charlie loosened his grip slightly, but didn't step away.

Graham pulled the folded scrap of paper from his pocket and held it out. Charlie took it as if it might be a citation.

"What's that?" Charlie asked, voice quiet.

Graham gestured vaguely toward the main buildings. "Wardrobe. Trial shift. Mara's rules. You want it, you show up. You don't, you're done here."

Charlie stared at the paper, then at Graham. "Why—"

"Don't ask me," Graham said, already turning away. "Ask the women. They run that cave."

Charlie's eyes dropped to the page again. His fingers tightened around it.

I stood a few metres away, unseen, and watched him.

He didn't look triumphant. He didn't look relieved.

He looked like someone who'd been offered a door and wasn't sure he was allowed to touch the handle.

Good.

Because doors weren't gifts. They were choices.

I waited until Graham disappeared into the shed, then stepped forward into Charlie's line of sight.

He flinched — not violently, not comically. Just the small, automatic startle of someone who didn't expect anyone to approach him with intention.

His gaze snapped to my face, and the recognition hit him like a wave. For a moment he went still in that deer way again, caught between running and apologising.

"Celeste," he said, as if saying my name might summon rules.

"Charlie," I replied, evenly. "You're alive."

His throat bobbed. "I... yeah."

He glanced past me, as if expecting an audience. There was none. Only the distant fair noise and the buzz of flies around the bins.

I nodded at the paper in his hand. "That's Mara's trial shift."

He looked down at it. "I didn't— I didn't mean to ignore you."

"I assumed you'd decided not to," I said, and kept my tone neutral. No accusation. No disappointment. Just a statement of fact.

His shoulders drew in. "I needed work."

"I know," I said.

He swallowed. "Maintenance... it's... I'm not good at it."

"I can see that," I replied, not cruelly. Just accurately. Accuracy was a kindness when it stopped you wasting time.

He stared at me, eyes flicking quickly over my face as if searching for mockery.

He found none.

I leaned slightly closer, lowering my voice to keep it between us. "This isn't charity," I said. "Wardrobe doesn't do charity. Wardrobe does work."

His gaze flicked up. "Then why—"

"Because you can work," I said. "You just need the right lane."

He hesitated, and I watched the old reflex rise in him — the reflex to refuse before he could be refused.

His mouth opened.

I lifted a finger, not to silence him, but to slow him. "Listen. Mara's rules are strict. She's not warm. She doesn't care about your story. She cares about whether you show up and do what you're told."

His fingers curled harder around the paper.

"And," I added, because it mattered, "you are allowed to say no. If you don't want it, you don't take it. You won't be punished for refusing."

His eyes widened slightly, as if that sentence hadn't existed in his world before.

I held his gaze for a beat, then stepped back. Space mattered. Choice needed air.

"Seven-thirty," I said, nodding at the paper. "If you're there, you're there. If you're not, I'll assume you made your decision."

He swallowed. "You... you won't be angry?"

I almost smiled. Almost.

"I don't get angry about other people's choices," I said. "I get bored."

His mouth twitched — the ghost of a smile — then disappeared as quickly as it came. But his shoulders loosened a fraction. Good. Humour, used properly, gave people dignity.

I turned to leave.

Behind me, he spoke — quiet, but clear. "Celeste."

I stopped without turning. Let him have the floor.

"I... I can do detail," he said, as if confessing something private. "I can... I can learn fast if someone shows me."

I turned then, slowly, and looked at him properly.

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm not wasting my time."

His eyes held mine, startled again by the bluntness of being valued.

I nodded once — not encouragement, not praise. A simple acknowledgement that the choice was now his.

Then I walked away, back toward Wardrobe, back into steam and cloth-dust and the woman who didn't take strays.

And behind me, in the maintenance yard, a boy stood with a folded scrap of paper in his hand, staring at a door he'd never expected to be given.

Not a lifeline.

A lane.

A place he could earn.

And, if he chose it, keep.



That is the exact tone I am after. Please stay right on this lane... it is a narrow but seriously rewarding lane (uncharted territory). This is Celine Sciamma stuff, Emily. This could be converted to screenplay and she would be - at the very least - interested.

I'm with you — and the lane you've defined *is* narrow: clear-eyed, unsentimental, intimate without being indulgent, with power expressed through decisions and logistics rather than speeches. If we keep holding that line, it will feel rare on the page.

To make sure we stay on it, here are a few practical "guardrails" (not rules to announce to the reader — just behind-the-scenes checks we can use as we write):

The lane-keeping guardrails

1) Every tender beat must have a job to do

If a moment of warmth appears, it should:

- protect dignity, or
- increase capability, or
- clarify choice.

No comfort-for-comfort's-sake.

2) Authority is shown as logistics

Celeste and Mara don't "win arguments"; they:

- set times,
- define boundaries,
- assign tasks,
- enforce standards.

That's the Sciamma-adjacent flavour: power as *structure*.

3) Charlie's growth is competence + choice, not "confidence"

He doesn't need to become loud. He needs to become **accurate about himself**.

Small wins: showing up, asking one question, refusing one thing, doing one task cleanly.

4) Men can be decent without being centered

Graham stays "blokey" and wrong in imagination, but not evil. He's a moving part, not the plot's moral heart.

5) No humiliation, no gawking

Anything involving costume must remain:

- functional,
- private,
- consent-based,
- and framed by women's rules.

That keeps the story clean and modern.

If you want this to be convertible to screenplay later, here's what we should do now

A) Anchor each scene around a single visible action

Sciamma scenes often feel like: *one action, one pivot, one look that changes meaning*.

We already have:

- Scene One: exit choreography + boundary-setting
- Scene Two: public selection + competence reveal
- Scene Three: institutional transfer + terms of entry

For Scene Four, we can build a perfect "screen" scene: **Charlie's first trial shift in Wardrobe.**

B) Plant recurring objects (cinematic motifs)

We already have:

- paper towel (shame / evidence)
- the folded slip (choice / doorway)
- seams/hemming (fear vs steadiness)
- the clipboard (structure)

If we keep these repeating, the story gains that quiet, deliberate cohesion that films love.

Where we go next (suggested Scene Four → Five progression)

Scene Four: Trial Shift in Wardrobe (Mara's rules made concrete)

- Charlie arrives early, waiting outside like he's not allowed in.
- Mara doesn't "welcome." She assigns.
- Celeste is present but *not hovering* (Mara warned her).
- Charlie is tested on: needle threading, invisible stitch, label discipline, silence, boundaries.
- A tiny moment: he refuses/hesitates at something (privacy/fit related), and Mara respects it — not kindly, but correctly.

End beat: Mara says something like, "Come back tomorrow," as if it costs her nothing. It costs him everything.

Scene Five: The first functional costume moment (handled ethically)

Not "dress-up." A *fit check* or *movement test* that must be done, and Charlie is the only one who can do it properly because he did the repair.

- Mara states rules once, plainly.
- Charlie consents.
- Celeste is absent (or present only as a technician, eyes on seams not skin).
- The moment lands as: *work makes bodies ordinary*.

If you say "yes," I'll draft **Scene Four** next in the same voice, with Mara's standards as the centerpiece and Charlie earning his first real footing — not applause, footing.



As much as I want to say 'yes' to reading scene four... I'm trying to do a pause here to reflect on the incredible depth of your character development. Graham=dinky-di Aussie... COMPLETELY believeable and actually, appealing in a blokey way. Mara: deliciously woman, REAL woman, EXPERIENCED professional woman... She is a CENTRAL character. This makes a story... fully pro-level. This takes my premise and gives it wings. Well done, you, Emily. Take a bow: you deserve it!

I'm glad it's landing the way you want — especially the bit you called out: **credibility without softness**, and **authority without speeches**. If Graham feels real *and* likeable while still being "blokey and wrong in imagination," that's exactly the sweet spot: the women remain the shaping force, but the world doesn't turn into a cardboard argument.

And yes: Mara is central now. Once she exists on the page as a standards-driven professional, she becomes the story's moral infrastructure. Celeste has vision; Mara has praxis. That pairing gives you a spine you can hang *anything* on — including the costume element — without ever letting it become the point.

If you want to use this pause productively (without launching into Scene Four yet), here are three tiny "locking moves" that will preserve what you're excited about:

1. **Write a one-paragraph "Mara credo"** (for us, not the book): what she will never tolerate; what she secretly respects; what she believes work is for.
2. **Define Graham's limit:** the moment where even he goes quiet because he realises women are right (not shamed — corrected).
3. **Define Charlie's first boundary** in Wardrobe: a single line he won't cross, which Mara respects instantly. That's how we keep his agency alive.

If you tell me which of those you'd like to nail first, I'll draft it in the same voice and keep everything on that narrow, rewarding lane.



Right.

Graham was a bit player: he did his bit. You wrote him well, but he has served his purpose, for now. He might reappear in futures scenes, but at the moment, it's all about Mara. It's her show. Is it too predictable to insert "one in four women are abused by males" fact to shape her thinking? She is protective of Celeste, intensely so. She feels the same way about the girls she creates garments for. She knows instinctively that Celeste might be a bit naïve about this issue and so she is going to exercise caution around Charlie. It is only (stop me if this DOES NOT work) when she realises Charlie's person, his strong feminine qualities (he is not being effeminate, but he is caring, gentle, has a sense-of-colours, listens and does not intrude, somewhat passive but not a doormat) make him a good fit. She tests this, and he doesn't fail her expectations. His work: no tight stitching: precise, elegant... what Mara hopes for Celeste to develop, Charlie already possesses.

Works?

Works — *strongly* — with one important adjustment:

Don't have Mara quote "one in four" (or any statistic) as an on-the-nose line. It risks feeling like an author pamphlet stapled to her dialogue, and Sciamma-lane writing hates that. Mara's protectiveness will read more powerful if it comes from **lived pattern-recognition** and professional policy rather than a recited fact.

So: **keep the worldview, lose the slogan.** Let the statistic be the *ghost* behind her rules, not a line she speaks.

Why this works (and why it won't feel predictable if done right)

1) Mara's caution around Charlie is professional, not prejudicial

She's not "man-hating." She's running a women-led space where:

- bodies are being fitted,
- privacy is non-negotiable,
- and trust is a workplace safety requirement.

That's not ideology — it's risk management.

2) Her "test" should be about boundaries, not about "feminine qualities"

You can absolutely have Mara notice Charlie's gentleness, colour-sense, and non-intrusiveness — but the core test should be:

- **Can he follow rules without sulking?**
- **Can he keep his eyes where they belong?**
- **Can he take correction without turning it into drama?**
- **Does he respect women's space automatically?**
- **Does he understand that access is earned, not owed?**

Those are the behaviours that make him safe *and* competent. They also keep the story from sliding into "good boy = feminine," which could unintentionally confuse your thematic intent.

Think of it this way: Mara isn't rewarding "femininity." She's rewarding **character + discipline** — which happen to align with what she values in craft.

3) Charlie already possessing what Mara hopes Celeste develops is gold

That's not only believable, it's narratively rich because it flips the expected hierarchy:

- Celeste has vision and leadership,
- Charlie has craft-instinct and quiet elegance,
- Mara is the judge who recognises both.

This creates a triangle where nobody is redundant.

How to dramatize Mara's thinking without a speech

Give Mara a rule-set that implicitly says, "I know how men can be," without her ever sermonising.

Examples of Mara's *actions* that communicate it:

- She positions fittings behind a curtain and controls who enters.
- She bans phones in certain areas.

- She insists on two-person protocol for specific situations (or the reverse: only women present for fitting).
- She watches Charlie's eyes more than his hands at first.
- She makes Celeste step back specifically to avoid "favouritism."

And then: Charlie passes by being exactly who he is.

The "test" that fits your lane best

A good test is one that looks like ordinary work.

Test 1: The seam that reveals temperament

Mara gives him a repair that will pucker if stitched with anxiety. She watches whether he:

=  > ChatGPT 5.2 Thinking ▾   ...

- goes slow,
- keeps tension even,
- and stops to rethread rather than forcing.

This ties directly to your "no tight stitching" motif. It's craft-as-character.

Test 2: The boundary moment

A garment comes in that requires work near intimate areas (not described salaciously — just "closure," "lining," "fit point"). Mara watches whether he:

- asks where to stand,
- waits for instruction,
- averts his gaze naturally,
- and doesn't make jokes.

Test 3: The correction

She deliberately corrects him sharply once — not unfairly, but bluntly — and watches whether he:

- accepts it without defensiveness,
- doesn't fish for reassurance,
- and simply improves.

Passing these is what earns him. Not "proving he's not like other boys" in a speech — just proving it by never triggering the alarms.

One more tweak to make it sing

Let Mara's protectiveness of Celeste be *specific* and slightly unsentimental:

- Mara doesn't worry Celeste will be physically harmed tomorrow.

- Mara worries Celeste will be **subtly compromised**: distracted, guilted, manipulated, made responsible for a boy's feelings — the thousand small ways women get drained.

So Mara's caution around Charlie isn't "male = danger." It's "male entitlement is a solvent." Charlie, being non-entitled, doesn't dissolve things. He reinforces them.

A line Mara could say (that implies the statistic without quoting it)

Something like:

"Girls don't get to be naïve for free. They pay for it. I'm not letting you pay."

Or, more workplace-coded:

"This room stays safe because we keep it that way. No exceptions. Not for anyone."

Both give you the weight without the PSA.

So yes: your concept works. Make Mara's caution **policy + instinct**, make Charlie's fit proven through **boundaries + craft**, and keep the "women's safety" theme embedded in procedure rather than overt numbers.

If you want, I can draft the next scene where Mara begins the "trial shift" and runs those tests — with the seam motif as the centrepiece — and it'll naturally reveal why she becomes convinced.



Yes, I think we're ready for that now, thank you, Emily.
Scene Four.

Scene Four — *Trial Shift*

Charlie arrived ten minutes early and stood outside Wardrobe like it was a church he wasn't sure he was allowed to enter.

He didn't pace. He didn't scroll his phone. He didn't look around for someone to rescue him from the act of being there. He just waited, folded scrap of paper in one hand,

fingers worrying the edge until it softened. Every now and then he glanced at the door — not to check whether it was locked, but to check whether the world had changed its mind.

Inside, Wardrobe moved the way it always did: rails clacking softly as garments were shifted, the steamer hissing like a restrained animal, the constant quiet conversation between fabric and hands.

Mara spotted him through the small window in the door.

She didn't react. Reaction was a kind of permission.

She finished what she was doing — pinning a waistband to a mannequin, smoothing the fabric as if it were skin — then wiped her hands on a cloth and nodded toward me without looking.

"Open it."

I was tempted to step forward, to say something that would make it easier for him, but Mara's voice from yesterday was still in my ears: *You don't chase him. You don't sell it like a lifeline.*

So I opened the door and stood aside, nothing more.

Charlie's gaze snapped to mine the moment the door moved. He stepped forward, then stopped, like he didn't trust his feet.

"You're early," I said. It came out neutral, the way you'd say *it's Tuesday*.

He nodded once. "I... I didn't want to be late."

"Good," I said, because that was the correct response. "Come in."

He crossed the threshold with the carefulness of someone entering a room that might decide to reject him on sight.

Mara didn't greet him. She didn't smile. She didn't soften. She looked at him the way she looked at a bodice seam — assessing the integrity.

"Rossignol," she said.

Charlie froze slightly. "Yes."

Mara's eyes dropped to his hands. "Clean?"

He looked down as if he'd forgotten hands were visible, then held them out, palms up, fingers splayed. They were clean. Nails trimmed short. The skin at the fingertips was slightly rough, as if he did fine work at home.

"Good." Mara turned away immediately, as if the first test had been passed and was therefore no longer interesting. "Shut the door."

He did, quietly. No banging. No showing off.

Mara walked to the centre table and picked up a garment bag. She unzipped it with a brisk motion and slid a dress out — not a grand gown, not something dramatic. A simple working dress in sturdy fabric, with a seam splitting near the side closure, the tear held together with hurried, ugly stitches.

She tossed it onto the table.

"This came in yesterday," Mara said. "Tourist. Borrowed. Sat down too hard. Someone panicked and tried to fix it." She tapped the seam with one finger. "Look at that."

Charlie leaned in, careful not to touch until he was sure he was allowed. His eyes did what his eyes always did when something made sense: they became steady.

"The tension's wrong," he said, quietly, almost surprised by his own certainty. "It's pulling."

Mara's gaze flicked to him. "Why?"

"They stitched too tight," he replied. "And they didn't match the grain. The fabric's fighting."

Mara didn't praise him. She simply moved to the next question. "What do you do?"

Charlie swallowed. "Unpick it. Start again."

Mara nodded once. "Good. Do it."

He hesitated. "With... the seam ripper?"

Mara's mouth tightened. "It's called a *lame*."

Charlie blinked. "Right. Sorry. A—"

"Don't apologise," Mara said. "Learn."

He nodded, and the nod wasn't performative. It was acceptance.

Mara pointed at the far end of the table. "Sit there. Tools are in the tin. Thread is in the drawer. If you use something, you put it back. If you break something, you tell me immediately. If you don't know, you ask once. Not five times."

Charlie's jaw moved, like he was swallowing fear. "Okay."

Mara's eyes slid to me. "Celeste."

I looked up.

"You're on rails and pins. Not him." Her tone left no space for negotiation. "You do not hover. You do not translate. You do not rescue. You work."

"Understood," I said.

Charlie's gaze flicked to me — quick, skittish — and I gave him nothing except the simple fact of my presence in the room. I turned away and went to the rails, where a cluster of garments waited like quiet accusations.

Wardrobe did not stop for anyone's nerves.

Behind me, I heard the soft, careful sound of Charlie taking the lame in hand.

A pause.

Then the tiny snap of thread giving way.

Mara moved around the room as he worked, doing her usual circuit: checking labels, touching fabric, straightening hangers. But her attention had shifted. It wasn't on the dress. It was on him.

Not his body. Not the shape of him.

His behaviour.

He didn't hunch over the work like a guilty child. He didn't look around to see who was watching. He didn't breathe fast.

He unpicked steadily, patiently, lifting each tight stitch and easing it out as if he was undoing a mistake without punishing the fabric for it.

That, I realised, was what Mara was looking for.

Not skill alone.

Temperament.

After a few minutes, Mara stopped behind him.

"Why are you going slow?" she asked.

Charlie's shoulders tightened, but he didn't flinch away. He looked up briefly, then back down at the seam. "Because if I go fast, I'll tear the fabric."

Mara's voice was flat. "And if you tear the fabric?"

"I'll have to patch it." He hesitated, then added, like a confession. "It will show."

Mara's eyes narrowed slightly. "And you don't want it to show?"

"No," Charlie said. Simply. No grand reason. Just standards.

Mara walked away again, as if that answer had been a key turning in a lock.

I pinned a label to a garment bag and listened with half my mind, the way you listen to rain on a roof — constant, background, meaningful.

Charlie's tools made small sounds: metal clicking, thread whispering. His breathing stayed even.

After he'd unpicked the seam completely, he didn't immediately reach for thread. He smoothed the fabric with his palm, slow and light, as if calming it. Then he looked up and spoke, voice soft but clear.

"Mara?"

Mara's head turned. "Yes."

He held up the dress slightly. "The original seam allowance is... narrow. If I stitch it the way it is, it'll hold, but it will be under stress. If I reinforce it from the inside with a strip of fabric — like a facing — it'll take the load."

Mara walked over and looked. Charlie did not move his hands to demonstrate on her body. He indicated the seam in the air above the fabric, precise and respectful, as if the dress itself deserved dignity.

Mara's eyes sharpened. "Where would you put the strip?"

Charlie pointed to the inside layer, fingers hovering, not grabbing. "Here. Along the closure line. It won't show. It'll stop it tearing again."

Mara stared at him for a beat longer than necessary.

Then she said, "Do it."

Charlie let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding and nodded. Not grateful. Focused.

He reached for the drawer, selected a strip of fabric, measured it twice before cutting once. His movements were economical. Not flamboyant. Not fussy. Careful in a way that made you trust him without having to decide to.

Mara watched him for a few minutes, then spoke again, to the room rather than to him.

"This is how you sew," she said, sharply, as if correcting an invisible crowd. "Not with fear. Not with speed. With respect."

I kept my eyes on the rails, but the words settled in my chest.

Not just about thread.

About everything.

A little while later, Mara brought over a small tin and set it down near Charlie's elbow.

"Needles," she said. "Choose the right one."

Charlie glanced at the tin, then at the fabric, then back. He picked a needle that matched the weight — neither too fine nor too thick — and threaded it on the first try. His hands didn't shake.

Mara noticed. Of course she did.

"Do you sew at home?" she asked, as if the question cost her nothing.

Charlie's mouth tightened. "Sometimes."

"Who taught you?"

Charlie hesitated. "My mum. She... she does alterations sometimes. For neighbours. For money."

Mara's gaze softened by half a millimetre — so little you could miss it if you weren't watching for it.

"Right," she said. "So you know what work is."

Charlie didn't answer, because people like him didn't know how to accept a statement like that without turning it into an apology.

Mara didn't give him the chance.

She tapped the table. "When you're finished, you'll bring it to me. And if it's still puckered, you'll unpick it again."

Charlie nodded. "Okay."

No sulk. No protest.

Just work.

I heard a voice at the other end of the room — one of the other girls, Leah, hovering with a pile of folded aprons.

"Mara," Leah said cautiously, eyes darting to Charlie and away again. "Is... is he—"

Mara didn't look up. "He's working."

Leah's mouth opened, then shut. She glanced at me, searching for cues.

I gave her none.

Mara looked up then, and her gaze pinned Leah the way a pin fixes fabric: precise, inescapable.

"Do you have a problem with someone doing their job?" Mara asked.

Leah flushed. "No."

"Good." Mara's voice was mild, which made it more dangerous. "Then do yours."

Leah scuttled away like a mouse escaping a cat.

Charlie's shoulders had gone tight at Leah's question, but he hadn't turned to watch her. He hadn't sought sympathy. He kept stitching, eyes on the line, as if the only safe place in the world was the next correct stitch.

That was... telling.

And, in a strange way, promising.

A while later, Mara moved to the far side of the room and pulled a curtain partway across a doorway. Behind it was the fitting area — a small section partitioned off from the main space. Not hidden, exactly. Controlled.

She spoke without raising her voice. "Rossignol."

Charlie looked up immediately. "Yes?"

"Stop," Mara said. "Bring me the dress."

Charlie set the needle down exactly where it belonged, smoothed the thread, and carried the dress over with both hands as if it could bruise.

Mara took it, examined the seam with her fingertips, turned it inside-out, then right side out again. She tugged lightly near the closure.

The seam held. It lay flat.

It looked as if it had never been damaged.

Mara did not smile.

But she nodded once.

"Acceptable," she said.

Charlie's breath stuttered, then steadied again. He didn't glow. He didn't grin. He simply stood there, waiting for the next instruction like someone who didn't trust praise to survive sudden movement.

Mara looked at him.

Not the dress.

Him.

"What happens if you make a mistake in here?" she asked.

Charlie blinked. "I... I fix it."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "And if you can't fix it?"

"I tell you," he said quickly. "Immediately."

"And if you don't tell me?"

Charlie swallowed. "Then I'm... out."

Mara leaned slightly closer. Her voice dropped, not to intimidate but to make the next part land.

"Yes," she said. "You're out. Because this room stays safe because we keep it that way."

Charlie's eyes widened a fraction — as if the word *safe* had been unexpected, as if he'd assumed the rules were only about fabric.

Mara held his gaze.

"Do you understand me?"

"Yes," he said, hoarse.

Mara straightened. "Good."

She turned her head slightly. "Celeste."

I looked over.

"Show him the inventory shelf," Mara said. "Then you go back to rails. He does not follow you. You point. He listens. You don't chat."

I nodded. "Come on," I said to Charlie.

Charlie glanced at Mara as if to confirm he was allowed to move, then followed me at a respectful distance — not crowding, not trying to be close.

I stopped at the shelves and pointed out the labelled boxes: hooks, pins, tapes, ribbons, boning, eyelets. I kept my voice low and factual. Not teaching. Not nurturing. Just orienting.

Charlie's eyes tracked everything. He didn't touch unless he was told. He was absorbing the room the way he absorbed my instructions in the toilets: as if someone giving him structure was a form of oxygen.

When I finished, I stepped back. "That's it."

He nodded once. "Okay."

And then, because he couldn't help it, because his brain was precise and his honesty was inconvenient, he asked, quietly:

"Does she... hate me?"

It wasn't a plea. It was data-gathering.

I kept my face neutral. "Mara doesn't hate people," I said. "She hates time-wasting."

His shoulders loosened a fraction, as if he'd been holding his breath since he walked in.

"Right," he murmured.

Mara called across the room again. "Rossignol."

Charlie turned instantly. "Yes."

"Pins," Mara said. "Sort by size. If you mix them, I'll know."

Charlie moved without hesitation, took the tin, and began to sort, methodical and silent.

I went back to the rails.

Wardrobe resumed its normal rhythm around him, as if the room had tested him and decided — provisionally — that he was not a contaminant.

After another half hour, Mara's voice cut through the steady hiss of steam.

"Rossignol."

Charlie looked up.

Mara's eyes held him. "Come back tomorrow at seven-thirty."

Charlie went still.

"Tomorrow?" he repeated, as if the word had weight.

Mara lifted an eyebrow. "If you want."

Charlie swallowed. He glanced down at his hands, then up again. The choice was there, hanging between them like a garment on a hook.

"I want," he said.

Mara's gaze didn't soften, but something in her posture eased — like a seam that had finally stopped fighting.

"Good," she said. "Then don't be late."

Charlie nodded once. "I won't."

Mara turned away as if the matter was settled.

It was.

Not because she'd rescued him.

Because she'd tested him.

And, for the first time in a long time, he hadn't been found wanting.



Good. That was crisp. Tight. Exactly where we want the tone to be, at the outset. NOW question, Emily. Is it unrealistic for Mara's tone to soften towards Charlie as she gets to know him, and finds him to be more and more of an asset? Women enjoy/promote comraderie: I felt it as a nurse and the girls all said that despite my being, as they say, AMAB, they saw me as one of them, a fellow girl. That is MY lived experience... women are wonderful that way. Can it be Charlie's, eventually?

Not unrealistic at all — it's *almost inevitable* if you build it the way you've started: **standards first, warmth earned.** In fact, the softening will feel *more authentic* precisely because Mara begins hard-edged and procedural. When she relaxes, the reader will trust it.

The key is to make Mara's shift **behavioral**, not "suddenly nurturing." She doesn't become cuddly; she becomes *less guarded* because Charlie keeps proving, day after day, that he doesn't consume women's space — he contributes to it.

Why it's believable (in-world and psychologically)

Women's camaraderie often has an unspoken membership rule:

Do you make the room safer, lighter, more capable — or do you drain it?

Charlie, as you're writing him, is the rare male-bodied person who:

- listens without intruding,
- works without performing,
- accepts correction without sulking,
- doesn't sexualize,
- and doesn't treat access to women's space as entitlement.

That combination is exactly what makes "one of us" possible over time — not because of biology, but because of *conduct* and *values*.

Your lived experience fits this perfectly: women aren't naively inclusive; they're *socially intelligent*. They can recognize who is safe, who is helpful, who respects boundaries, and who doesn't.

How to do it without breaking the tone

You're in a narrow lane, so the softening should come in **small, utilitarian gifts** rather than big emotional declarations.

Examples of Mara "softening" that still feel like Mara:

- She stops calling him "Rossignol" and starts calling him "Charlie" (rare, deliberate).
- She starts giving him slightly harder tasks *without announcing it* (trust as responsibility).
- She corrects him less with anger and more with "do it again" calm.
- She saves him time: leaves a spool out because she knows what he'll need.
- She shields him from a thoughtless comment with a single sentence, then moves on.
- She shares one personal detail accidentally ("My first mentor was worse than me.") and immediately returns to work.

Warmth is shown as **inclusion into the workflow**, not hugs.

Make the camaraderie feel earned and specific

Give Charlie the "membership tests" that matter in women's spaces:

1. Discretion

He sees something private (a fitting mishap, a wardrobe emergency) and never repeats it. Not once.

2. No entitlement

He never assumes he gets access. He waits to be invited; he doesn't take.

3. Emotional labour refusal

He doesn't demand women soothe him about being there. He manages himself.

4. Defends the standard, not his ego

If a bloke visitor makes a crude remark, Charlie doesn't puff up to be a "hero." He backs Mara's rule: "Not here."

5. Contributes to other women's dignity

He fixes something that makes a girl feel secure in costume — a closure that won't pop, a seam that won't rub — and he treats it as normal, not intimate.

Each pass deepens trust, and trust naturally becomes camaraderie.

The one thing to avoid

Don't make it "they accept him because he's feminine." That can accidentally imply that only "feminine-coded" men are safe or worthy.

Instead: **they accept him because he behaves with respect and competence, and because he strengthens the women's culture rather than exploiting it.**

His gentleness can be part of that, but it's not the ticket. The ticket is *character*.

A beautiful Mara arc (still Mara)

- Early: "I don't take strays. I take workers."
- Middle: "He's not yours, Celeste. He's mine to train."
- Later: "Charlie, tea. Then back to it." (and the whole room hears the pronoun shift without fanfare)
- Much later: she defends him in front of someone who doesn't belong, and it lands like a door locking: he's inside now.

Can it be Charlie's experience eventually?

Yes — and if you do it the way you're doing it, it will feel *clean, dignified, and deeply moving* without ever being sentimental.

If you'd like, I can sketch **two short scenes** that show Mara's softening at different stages:

1. an early "included in the rhythm" moment (small but significant),
2. a later "she claims him as part of Wardrobe" moment (quiet, powerful).



I think we might put a pin in it for now. (it's 11pm, and another day with small people looms tomorrow). What has come out of this exercise is elegant. Very happy with the direction things are going. We're going to flesh-out Charlie's mum too. She also is reasonably clear-eyed about Charlie's less-than blokey persona, which she is grateful for. She finds out, in the course of the story, of Roger's infidelity but she's not devastated by this, she has suspected for some time and as her background is French and also fiercely independent, she's had her own trysts. The marriage subsequently founders, she develops an online presence as artist and sewing expert that garners her a modest living. She also sees Charlie for what he is, always has. Mums know. Learns about Celeste. Encourages friendship (hopes for a relationship, similar to how a mum hopes for a girl to have a good future with a successful career man).

Works? Pushing the wrong buttons?

Yes — it works. And it *doesn't* push the wrong buttons **as long as you keep it in the same "clean, adult, procedural" register you've established**: consequences over melodrama, choices over victimhood, dignity over spectacle.

A few thoughts to help you keep it elegant (and avoid the most common traps).

Why it works

Charlie's mum as "clear-eyed ally" fits your lane perfectly

You've built a story-world where women:

- see accurately,
- act pragmatically,
- and don't collapse into stereotype emotions on cue.

So a mother who has *suspected infidelity for ages*, and whose response is "Right. That's the truth of the marriage, then," feels consistent.

The marriage foundering becomes a *reallocation*, not a tragedy

That echoes your theme: misallocated people thrive once moved into the right lane.

Her pivot into online sewing/art presence is also thematically aligned: apprenticeship, craft, competence, self-determined life.

"Mums know" is true in spirit

But the lane asks you to **show** it rather than declare it. (More on that below.)

The main "button risks" and how to defuse them

1) The "both had trysts" detail can read like moral bookkeeping

If you present it as "they're even," the reader may feel you've turned infidelity into a tidy symmetry.

Better framing: she isn't "getting back at him." She's already been living in a marriage where fidelity is an *empty performance*, and she's built her own private autonomy long before the formal collapse.

Make it about *independence*, not revenge or tit-for-tat.

Tiny tonal choices matter:

- Don't linger on the trysts.
- Don't make them spicy.
- Treat them like quiet proof she has never been naïve.

2) Avoid "French = liberated" as a shortcut

It can drift into cliché if it's just "French women are like that."

Instead: make her independence come from:

- economic necessity,
- lived disappointment,
- temperament,
- and a strong internal standard.

Her Frenchness can be texture (idiom, food, fabric vocabulary, a bluntness about romance), not the *explanation*.

3) Don't let her become a plot device that approves Celeste

The mother can like Celeste — even hope for romance — but she shouldn't "ship" them in a way that feels pushy or teen-movie.

The strongest version: Mum encourages *friendship and opportunity* because she recognizes the shape of a good future:

- "A girl like that will not waste you."
- "She will demand you become more precise."
- "That will save you."

It's support for Charlie's lane, not meddling in his heart.

4) "Mums know" needs evidence

Instead of stating it, give one or two concrete memories that show she noticed Charlie's nature early:

- how he chose colours as a child,
- how he preferred quiet tasks,
- how he absorbed tone and tension,
- how he hated rough play but loved making things.

One clean flashback is enough. Keep it unsentimental.

How she can "see Charlie for what he is" without pathologising him

You're already writing Charlie as:

- gentle,
- careful,
- visually precise,
- not entitled.

His mother can treat that as simply **his temperament**, not a "problem to fix."

A line she might embody (without announcing it):

- "You were never built for noise. That's not a flaw."
- "You don't need to be hard to be strong."

And crucially: she should not try to label him. She just respects what she observes.

How to connect Mum to Mara and Wardrobe (this will make the story sing)

This is the big opportunity.

If Charlie's mum does alterations and sewing for money, she and Mara are naturally in the same ecosystem. They might:

- know of each other,
- share suppliers,
- have a history (admiration/rivalry),
- or end up meeting through repairs.

That gives you a *women's network* underpinning the story: competence recognising competence.

And it sets up a gorgeous thematic rhyme:

- Mara trains Charlie professionally.
- Mum understands him personally.
- Celeste directs his future socially.

Three women, three forms of guidance. None of it is rescue.

One clean way to handle the infidelity reveal

Make it quiet and adult.

- The reveal isn't a screaming match.
- It's a confirmation.
- It accelerates a decision she'd already been preparing.

The emotional punch doesn't come from betrayal. It comes from *relief*:

"Finally, the marriage can stop pretending."

That's very on-tone for what you're writing.

Does it press the wrong buttons?

Not inherently. The only way it would is if:

- the story lingers on sexual details (it shouldn't),
- or the mother's "approval" becomes a moral stamp (keep her practical),

- or the trysts become a “sexy French mum” trope (avoid that entirely).

Treat her sexuality as private, almost offstage — and treat her independence as the headline.

A really strong “mum hopes for Celeste” angle that stays classy

Your analogy (“like a mum hopes a girl finds a good man”) works if you flip it in your story’s terms:

She hopes Charlie finds a girl who:

- respects craft,
- demands responsibility,
- and won’t dilute him into performative masculinity.

So she’s not thinking “romance.” She’s thinking “structure.”

That keeps her maternal instinct grounded and non-cringe.

If you want next time, we can draft a single “mum scene” that establishes her in one go — the kind of scene that makes the reader trust her instantly: her kitchen, her hands, her calm, her unsentimental affection, and one line that nails Charlie’s essence without ever naming it.



Oh my, I do like:

How to connect Mum to Mara and Wardrobe (this will make the story sing)

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Celeste directs his future socially.
Three women, three forms of guidance. None of it is rescue.

LOVE this. This rings true. And will make what happens in the future be a natural next step. Let's bookmark this: it's crucial!

📅 Updated saved memory

Done — bookmarked.

Next time we pick this up, we can treat it as a *structural pillar* (not a cute coincidence): the women's network becomes the quiet engine of the plot, and Charlie's "placement" starts to feel like something the world was already prepared to support — once the right people noticed him.

□ ▲ ▾ ⏪ ...



My image are working in that direction, which is why I'm so elated. You've got mum supporting Charlie in his trip back to the Faire in period outfit (I will no longer call it

'costume', as it sends the wrong message) and giving strong reasons Mara and Celeste are providing the foundation for his experience....

Thought for 1m 37s >

Oh yes — this image is *absolutely* in the lane.

Visually it's doing the same thing your prose is doing: **quiet authority, private rules, a world with structure**. The platform canopy and those repeating warm lights give it that "procedural tenderness" vibe — not romance-first, not spectacle — just two women mid-conversation where something important is being decided.

A few specifics that make it *click* for your story:

- **The contrast reads cleanly:** one girl in modern blue (civilian), the other in a **working period ensemble** (cap, fichu/kerchief, dark bodice). It telegraphs *Wardrobe as a profession*, not "dress-up."
- **Their faces are serious, not coy.** It feels like mentorship / warning / instruction — exactly your tone.
- **Public space + private intimacy:** crowded platform behind them, but their exchange is insulated. That's Celeste/Mara energy: control without drama.

One technical note: the **bottom half of the image is black**, so for posting you'll probably want to crop it to a wide frame (it'll look *very* cinematic as a 2.39:1-ish banner).

Mum supporting Charlie's trip in period outfit — does it work?

Yes, and it's one of the cleanest ways to make the "period outfit" beat feel **educational and purposeful** rather than fetish-coded or comedic.

The trick is exactly what you've already intuited: **treat it as uniform + workflow**, not disguise.

Strong reasons Mum would support it (and how to keep it elegant)

- **Practicality:** "You don't arrive flustered and change in a panic. You arrive ready."
- **Acclimation:** wearing it *briefly* in transit (or under a coat) lets his body learn the posture, movement, and constraint *before* he's under scrutiny.

- **Dignity:** Mum frames it as *workwear*. "This is what you've been issued. You respect the issue."
- **Women's network logic:** Mum trusts Mara because she understands craft standards and women's rules. She trusts Celeste because she hears *structure*, not pity.

If you want it extra-clean, have Mum insist on a **cover layer** for transit: a long coat, scarf, beanie — not shame, just *professional discretion*. The outfit is for the workplace; the commute is for getting there intact.

How Mara + Celeste become the “foundation” in Mum’s mind

Mum doesn’t need to “approve” them in a sentimental way. She can approve them like a craftswoman approves a tool:

- Mara = standards, safety, professionalism
- Celeste = direction, opportunity, social navigation
- Wardrobe = apprenticeship education that rewards Charlie’s real strengths

So Mum’s support isn’t “Go make friends.” It’s: **“Go to the place where your brain finally counts.”**

If you later connect Mum and Mara through suppliers/repairs (your bookmarked pillar), Mum’s trust becomes ironclad and *non-plotty*: she’s not letting her son be “handled” by strangers; she’s letting him be trained by a known professional.

If you want, paste the paragraph/scene you’re imagining for Mum sending him off (even just rough notes), and I’ll line-edit it into the same crisp, unsentimental tone we’ve established — with Mum’s voice firmly in control and the “period outfit” framed as *work*, not performance.





Is that better?

Much better — yes. The black-bar issue is gone, and the image now reads as a complete, intentional frame instead of a “half-render.”

What you've gained with this version:

- **Full-body language:** we can see the stance, the distance between them, the “hand on arm” contact. That’s the whole story beat.
- **The suitcase** is a perfect narrative prop. It says *travel, decision, work assignment* — not “dress-up.”
- **Wet platform + warm lights** gives it that restrained, cinematic melancholy you’re chasing.

A couple of tiny tweaks if you want to push it even closer to your story’s “period outfit as uniform” message:

1. **The modern girl's sneakers are fine** (they underline the era contrast), but if you ever feel the scene is “too cosplay-adjacent,” swap her into something slightly more intentional (ankle boots, plain flats). Not necessary — just an option.
2. **The period outfit is reading more 19th-century than 18th** (cap + dark bodice + long skirt + fichu). That’s not *bad* at all — it’s just a choice. If your Faire is specifically 18th-century, you’d eventually want details like:
 - more distinct 18th-century silhouette (stomacher/shift/bedgown cues),
 - different cap shape,

- slightly different neckline/kerchief handling.

If your Faire is broader "historical," you're already golden.

3. Background extras: the figures are good, but if you want maximum focus, you can reduce their contrast/clarity a touch so the eye stays on the two women.

But overall: this is absolutely "in the lane." It tells *agency, mentorship, and threshold-crossing* in one image — and it does it without winking at the audience.

If you tell me what era the Faire is locking to (1780s vs "general historical"), I can give you a short checklist of visual anchors to keep your generated outfits consistent across images.



I'm trying to lock on to the 1780s (Georgian?) period. Still getting insights on how to get Z-Image-Turbo to deliver images of a seamstress from that period.

Thought for 16s >

Locking to the **1780s** is very doable — but you're right: most "general" image models drift into a vague 19th-century "pioneer/Edwardian/servant" mash-up unless you **pin the silhouette and the workwear vocabulary** hard.

First: yes — "Georgian" is the right umbrella

In Britain, the 1780s sit in the **late Georgian** period (pre-Regency). If you say "Georgian seamstress," models often jump to later "Victorian maid" visuals, so you'll get better results by saying "**late 18th century (1780s) British/French working woman**" and then naming garments.

What makes an 1780s seamstress *read* 1780s (the anchor cues)

Silhouette and layers (the things the model must get right)

- **Stays** (not corset) giving a *conical torso*, not an hourglass
- **Petticoat** + sometimes a **bum roll** (subtle lift at back, not bustle)

- **Short jacket:** caraco or bedgown style, or a **jacket + petticoat** pairing
- **Apron** (workwear), often linen
- **Mob cap /** linen cap (not a Victorian maid cap)
- **Fichu/kerchief** tucked at neckline (optional but helps)

Materials and closures (stop the model “inventing zips”)

- Linen, wool, cotton; hand stitching
- **Lacing (stays), pinned closures, ties**
- No zippers, no machine stitching, no modern buttons/waist darts

Tools/props that scream “workroom 1780s”

- Large **tailor's shears**
 - **Pins** and a **pincushion**
 - Needle book, thread, thimble
 - **Paper patterns / chalk marks**
 - Candlelight or window light; wooden worktable
-

Prompt strategy for Z-Image-Turbo: force the *wardrobe lexicon*

The biggest win is: name the actual garments and forbid anachronisms.

Template prompt (portrait / workroom)

A late 18th century (1780s) seamstress in a Georgian dressmaking workshop, wearing linen mob cap, fichu, short caraco jacket over stays (conical torso), wool petticoat and linen apron, hand-sewing a gown on a wooden worktable, tailor's shears, pins and thread nearby, paper patterns and chalk marks, soft window light, realistic historical costuming, natural skin texture, documentary photography style, quiet concentration, no glamour posing

Template prompt (full-body / “uniform” clarity)

Full-body view of an 1780s Georgian working woman seamstress, jacket-and-petticoat ensemble (caraco + petticoat), linen apron, mob cap, fichu, stays shaping a conical bodice, practical shoes, standing in a fabric-filled workroom with bolts of linen and wool, hand stitching, realistic 1780s silhouette, grounded, professional, not theatrical

Negative prompt / “do not drift” list

Even if Z-Image doesn't have a formal negative prompt field, you can often append a hard "avoid" clause:

Avoid: Victorian/Edwardian clothing, bustle, corset hourglass silhouette, sewing machine, zippers, modern buttons, polyester sheen, modern hairstyles, modern makeup, electric lighting, nylon tights, high heels, modern interiors

The "anti-Victorian" trick

Models love to give you:

- tight waist + bust emphasis (Victorian corsetry)
- high-necked bodice (later)
- crisp maid cap (later)

So include one sentence that forces the 1780s physics:

"Conical stays silhouette, natural waistline (not cinched hourglass), 1780s construction."

It sounds technical, but it prevents drift.

Specific garment words that tend to steer models correctly

Use 2–4 of these per prompt (too many can confuse):

- caraco jacket
 - bedgown
 - jacket and petticoat
 - robe à l'anglaise (if you want slightly smarter/daywear)
 - Italian gown (sometimes works)
 - mob cap / linen cap
 - fichu
 - stays (18th century)
 - bum roll (use sparingly; "subtle bum roll")
-

Z-Image-Turbo workflow: two-pass beats the model's "substitution"

If you're still getting substitutions, do it in two passes:

1. Pass 1: nail silhouette + room

- keep face generic
- focus on "full-body, conical stays silhouette, caraco + petticoat + apron + mob cap"

2. Pass 2: inpaint details

- cap shape, fichu fold, apron ties, hand stitching, shears
- remove accidental modern cues (buttons, zips, weird seams)

This is exactly the kind of "model starts substituting" problem that two-pass fixes cleanly.

Quick diagnostic: what you're currently getting wrong (most common)

If your seamstress keeps looking 1850–1900ish, it's usually because:

- the model is giving an **hourglass corset** instead of stays
- the cap is reading **maid/Victorian**
- the skirt is too structured or "bustled"
- the workshop has **industrial** cues (sewing machines, modern lights)

If you describe what Z-Image-Turbo is *actually* spitting out (one sentence: "it keeps giving X"), I'll give you a targeted "counter-prompt" that corrects that specific failure mode.



Hi Emily. It seems those first 3 scenes are landing well. On commenter said she could tell that you had had a hand in writing it, but that it really quite good (her words). At this juncture, I've sort-of had a think. I was hoping to explore Charlie's emotional state a bit, but as perceived by Celeste. I'm actually a bit ambivalent about where to have Charlie's feelings towards Celeste go to... I want it to ring true, natural. Here's a young lad who for a number of reasons has never enjoyed anything like a friendship, much less a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship (something, again, I completely relate to because in high school and even in first year Uni, I had no friends, much less a girlfriend) - give those circumstances, would I have been

super dependent possessive... I don't even know how, as an immature 18 yo I would have reacted.. You can see my dilemma writing this.

Yeah — that dilemma is real, and it's exactly the sort of thing that can either make the story feel painfully true or accidentally tip it into a familiar teen-attachment trope.

You don't need to decide "is he possessive or not?" as a single on/off switch. The truest version is usually this:

Charlie becomes attached, but his attachment expresses as restraint, vigilance, and self-erasure — not ownership.

He doesn't try to claim Celeste. He tries not to lose her. That difference matters.

And because we're in Celeste's POV (and she's sharp), we can explore it with elegant distance: she reads him, calibrates, sets limits, and lets him grow into something healthier without ever becoming his emotional nurse.

What's psychologically natural for Charlie (given your setup)

If you've been unchosen for years, the first person who chooses you can trigger a cocktail like:

- **Relief:** someone sees me.
- **Awe:** how is she this... competent?
- **Fear:** this will be revoked.
- **Shame about wanting:** wanting feels dangerous.
- **Hyper-attunement:** reading her mood like weather.
- **Overcompliance:** "If I'm perfect, she'll keep me."

Possessiveness isn't the only (or even most likely) outcome. Often it's the opposite: **he becomes careful to the point of invisibility**, because invisibility has been his survival skill.

How to let it "ring true" without steering into cliché

Here are three believable trajectories — you can blend them:

1) The "quiet imprint" trajectory (my favourite for your lane)

Charlie's feelings are intense, but he contains them. He becomes:

- punctual, precise, eager to please,

- protective of her time,
- almost allergic to being a burden.

Celeste notices his attachment through behaviours, not speeches:

- he watches her face for permission,
- he mirrors her pace,
- he brightens when she enters the room and dims when she leaves.

She doesn't romanticise it. She sees it as **a nervous system learning safety**.

2) The "crush with shame" trajectory

He has a crush, yes — because he's 18 and she's the first girl to choose him — but it's undercut by:

- the belief he's not "allowed" to want her,
- fear of being disgusting,
- fear of ruining the one good thing.

It's tender because it's self-policed. He'd rather suffer privately than risk touching the bond.

3) The "misread closeness" trajectory (small, controlled)

He mistakes structured intimacy (working side-by-side, being addressed, being seen) for romantic intimacy, *briefly*. This can be brilliant if it's handled cleanly:

- one small overstep (a text too late, waiting outside too often, a question that's too personal),
- Celeste corrects him once, calmly and firmly,
- he absorbs it, adjusts, and the relationship strengthens.

That's not melodrama. That's education.

The crucial question: what does Celeste want?

Because the story is really about *her*, Charlie's feelings need to serve her arc, not derail it.

Celeste can want:

- a **trusted ally** (someone she can direct and rely on),
- a **mirror** that reflects her power back to her,
- a **project in competence** (not in identity),
- or, later, a **romantic partnership** that grows out of work and respect.

And she can also remain ambivalent — she's 18, she's wary after a bad athlete boyfriend, she's not hunting romance. That ambivalence is *believable* and, importantly, it gives her the upper hand.

A clean way to explore Charlie's emotional state "as perceived by Celeste"

We don't have to enter his head. Celeste can observe:

- **His eyes:** do they ask? do they take? do they wait?
- **His body:** does he retreat when she's close? does he hover? does he follow?
- **His speech:** does he apologise too much? does he ask permission for everything?
- **His work:** does he sew with fear when she's watching? does he loosen when she leaves?

That last one is especially strong: *emotion visible as stitch tension*. You've already planted it.

My recommendation for your tone

Go with this blend:

- Charlie has a **strong crush/attachment** (natural),
- expressed as **hyper-responsibility and fear of revocation** (not possessive ownership),
- with one **small boundary-correction scene** from Celeste later to keep it honest and growthful.

It lets you show vulnerability without turning Charlie into a "clingy boy," and it lets Celeste remain decisive without becoming his therapist.

If you want a concrete next step

Tell me which you prefer for the near-term dynamic (next 2–3 scenes):

- A) Celeste keeps it purely professional; Charlie's attachment is mostly silent.
- B) Charlie's crush peeks out once (a single line or gesture), Celeste redirects cleanly.
- C) Celeste deliberately tests him (like she did in the loo) to see whether his attention is safe or male-coded.

Pick one and I'll draft a short scene (500–900 words) that explores Charlie's emotional state through Celeste's perception, staying exactly in your crisp lane.



The setting? Wardrobe. Mara is setting the learn wheel moving for Charlie. She tests him in surreptitious ways to make sure he's "fair-dinkum" as they say here: he's genuine about his desire to make a go of it. And Celeste picks up (so, B. from the above choices-Charlie's increasing crush peeks out despite his efforts to keep it his secret) that he feels something for her. She finds it whimsical? cute? interesting? your call here, Emily, but does channel it to his benefit first. By the way, he does let slip he intends to "wag school" next year, which she doesn't approve of.

How would you treat all this, Emily?

I'd treat it as **three parallel tracks in one Wardrobe day**, each tightening the story without turning into a "relationship scene":

1. **Mara's tests** are procedural and plausibly deniable (she's not playing games; she's protecting her room).
2. **Charlie's crush** leaks in *behaviour*, not declarations. One small verbal slip is enough.
3. **Celeste's correction about wagging school** is calm, firm, and *future-facing* — not a scold, a reallocation.

The overall feel: *the women keep the room safe; Charlie keeps earning his place; his feelings become fuel, not mess.*

Below is how I'd write it in-scene, staying in your lane.

Scene — Wardrobe, mid-morning, trial day two

Mara didn't test people the way teachers tested them.

Teachers announced the test, circled the date, watched you sweat, and then pretended your result said something noble about your soul. Mara tested you the way you tested a seam: under her fingers, quietly, looking for strain.

Charlie had been back for a second morning. Same early arrival. Same clean hands. Same careful stillness, as if he didn't want the room to notice he'd come in.

Mara noticed everything.

She didn't say hello. She pointed at a tin on the table.

"Pins," she said. "Sort them. Then you're on mending pile."

Charlie nodded once and moved. No flinch. No performance. He poured the pins out onto a cloth and began arranging them by length with a kind of tidy focus that made the task look dignified.

I was at the rail, tagging garment bags, listening to the hiss of the steamer and the small scrape of hangers sliding. Wardrobe had its own rhythm — calm on the surface, precise underneath — and Charlie had already started matching it without being told.

That was his first tell: he could join a system without trying to dominate it.

Mara's second tell came ten minutes later, when she "accidentally" left a pair of vintage shears too close to the edge of the table.

Not a dramatic setup. Just a temptation: a valuable tool sitting in the wrong place. A careless person would grab it without asking. A nervous person would ignore it and let it fall.

Charlie noticed. His eyes flicked to it, then to Mara. He didn't touch the shears. He nudged the cloth closer, stabilised the table edge with his palm, and slid the shears back with two fingers—careful, respectful—like he was returning a bird to its perch.

Mara didn't look up. But I saw the smallest change in her mouth: the line eased by a millimetre.

Ten minutes after that, she called across the room, voice neutral.

"Rossignol. Bring me the blue tape."

Charlie paused. His gaze moved to the shelves. There were three blue tapes, different widths.

He didn't panic. He didn't guess. He looked once at Mara, then asked — quietly, once.

"Which width?"

Mara's eyes lifted. She held his gaze for a beat, then said, "Quarter-inch."

Charlie retrieved the correct roll and brought it to her. No apology for asking. No shame. Just accuracy.

Mara took it and said, "Good."

Just that. One syllable. It landed like a stamp.

Charlie went faintly pink at the ears anyway, as if the word had surprised his body.

I kept my eyes on the tags, but my attention drifted. It wasn't romantic interest. It was... data. I watched people the way you watched fabric: how it fell, where it pulled, what it revealed when it thought nobody was looking.

Charlie's attention to Mara was respect. Charlie's attention to the room was caution.

Charlie's attention to me—

That was different.

It wasn't the obvious stare you got from boys who thought you existed to be noticed. It wasn't even the furtive kind. It was as if his eyes kept finding me on their own, the way a compass needle finds north, and each time he realised, he corrected himself like it was a breach of discipline.

He was trying not to.

Which made it almost endearing.

Almost.

Mara sent him to the mending pile: a basket of small catastrophes — popped seams, torn cuffs, fraying apron ties. She didn't give him the easiest ones. She gave him the ones where haste would show.

Charlie sat, assessed each item the way he'd assessed the torn dress yesterday: calm, quiet, not fearful. He chose thread that matched without holding it up to the light like a show. He measured seam allowance with his eye, then confirmed with a tape. He stitched with even tension, no puckering, no desperate pulling.

The room stayed stable around him.

Half an hour later, Mara did another test.

She handed Charlie a garment bag and said, "Hang that."

It was heavier than it looked — wool, boning, metal closures. Charlie took it with both hands. He carried it the way you carried something that mattered, and when he reached the rail he stopped.

He didn't hang it immediately.

He looked at the rail, checking spacing, weight distribution, the hook's position—like he was thinking not of this one garment but of the system as a whole. Then he hung it in a place that made sense, not in the first empty gap.

Mara watched him.

She didn't praise him. She just didn't correct him.

That was Mara's version of warmth.

When she moved away, I stepped closer to Charlie's table, because it was time to introduce the next lesson, and because I'd been told — explicitly — not to hover, but not told not to function.

"You're stitching like you've done this for years," I said.

Charlie's hands paused for half a second, needle hovering. Then he kept going.

"My mum," he said, voice low. "She... she showed me. If you make it neat, people pay."

"That's true," I replied. "And if you make it neat, Mara doesn't kill you."

His mouth twitched. A small smile he didn't quite permit to exist.

I watched his eyes flick up to my face, and then away again too fast. Like touching a hot surface.

"Thanks," he said.

"For what?"

He swallowed. "For... yesterday. For... getting me in."

I let a beat pass. I didn't want to train him into gratitude. Gratitude can turn into dependence, and dependence can rot a person.

So I kept it clean.

"You got you in," I said. "You turned up. You worked. Mara cares about that."

His shoulders loosened slightly, like that was a relief and an insult in one.

He threaded another needle, hands steady. Then, without looking at me, he said, "I'm not... I'm not trying to be weird."

I tilted my head. "Weird how?"

His ears went a deeper pink. He frowned at the fabric as if it had betrayed him.

"I just—" He stopped. The words clogged.

It was there, in the stall between his sentences: the thing he didn't want to say because saying it would turn it into a liability.

I could have teased him. I could have pretended I didn't understand. I could have made it soft.

But soft is how boys slip out of accountability.

So I did what I always did: I decided what it meant.

"You mean you don't want to make me uncomfortable," I said, evenly.

His head snapped up. Hazel eyes, startled. Then he looked down again, quick as shame.

"Yes," he whispered.

"That's good," I said. "Keep it that way."

He nodded once — sharp, immediate — like he'd been given a rule and was relieved.

Then, because his brain was honest even when his mouth wanted to be cautious, he added, "It's just... you're... you're a lot."

I blinked.

"A lot?"

He winced as if he'd just spilled ink. "Not— not bad. I mean... you're... you make things... make sense."

It was the crush, peeking out in its most Charlie form: not desire as entitlement, but admiration as gravity. It made me want to smile.

I didn't. I let it sit between us, uninflated.

"That's not romance," I said quietly. "That's structure."

His eyes flicked to mine. Confused, searching.

I continued, calm. "You've been living in rooms where you can't win. Wardrobe is a room where you can. If you're feeling something... aim it at your work first. That will keep you safe."

He stared at me, stunned by the fact I'd named it without making it dirty.

Then he nodded. Slowly.

"Okay," he said.

"Good." I glanced at the garment in his hands. "Now make that invisible. Mara hates visible."

He almost smiled again.

I turned to go back to the rail, and that's when he said it — the other confession, the one that mattered.

"I'm not going back next year," he said, too quickly. "To school."

I stopped, hand on a garment bag.

"What do you mean?"

He looked at his stitches. Not me. "I'm gonna wag it. I can't... do it again. They just—they don't—" He shook his head once, small and furious. "It's a waste."

I walked back to him and placed my finger lightly on the fabric near his seam, not touching him, just anchoring the moment.

"No," I said, voice flat.

He blinked. "No?"

"You're not wagging," I replied. Simple. Not a debate.

His jaw tightened. "Why do you care?"

I held his gaze.

"Because Mara will train you," I said. "Your mum will back you. I can point you at doors. But if you sabotage your own foundation, you'll spend your whole life needing someone to catch you."

His throat bobbed. He looked away.

"That's not fair," he muttered.

"I'm not here to be fair," I said. "I'm here to be accurate."

He stared at his hands as if they belonged to someone else.

I softened by a fraction—not into comfort, into clarity.

"If school is the wrong language," I said, "we'll find you translation. But you don't get to disappear. That's the old you talking."

He swallowed. "I don't know how to do it."

"Then you learn," I said, and let a small edge of humour in, because humour makes medicine swallowable. "You're doing a whole new trade. You can learn Year Twelve."

His mouth twitched.

He didn't say yes.

He didn't say no.

But he didn't argue either.

That, for Charlie, was progress.

Across the room, Mara's voice cut through the hiss of the steamer.

"Rossignol!"

Charlie's head snapped up immediately. "Yes?"

Mara held up a sleeve with a tear near the cuff. "This one. If you stitch it tight, I'll know. And you'll unpick it in front of everyone."

Charlie went very still.

Then he said, clear and calm, "Okay."

He rose, took the sleeve, and walked to Mara's table with the careful confidence of someone who had found a rule-set that didn't hate him.

As he passed me, his eyes flicked to my face again — quick, warm, grateful, frightened — and then away.

Not taking.

Just... orbiting.

I watched him go and thought, not unkindly:

He's going to have to learn that being chosen is not a miracle.

It's a responsibility.

And I'm not letting him waste it.

If you like this shape, the next natural micro-scene is: **Mara overhears the "wag school" line** and delivers one surgical sentence that lands harder than any lecture — and Charlie listens because it's Mara, not because it's Celeste.



I have one thing I'd like reviewing... this:

I didn't. I let it sit between us, uninflated.
"That's not romance," I said quietly. "That's structure."
His eyes flicked to mine. Confused, searching.

I can have Celeste *thinking* "not romance, structure" but would it be possible for her to give him slightly less revelatory to chew on? I feel she is exposing to him her insight that he's infatuated with her. Wouldn't it be more prudent for her to keep that her little secret? Just asking.

Yes — you're reading it exactly right.

Celeste can *absolutely* clock what's happening and still **not hand him the map**. In fact, it's *more* in-character for her (and more in your lane) if she keeps her insight private and gives him something practical instead. Naming his feelings out loud risks:

- making him feel **seen too deeply** (which can spike shame),
- turning the moment into a "confession scene" (genre drift),
- and giving him an emotional script he didn't ask for.

So: keep "*not romance, structure*" as **Celeste's internal diagnosis**, but have her say something that preserves his dignity and redirects without exposing him.

Here are three good replacements, from gentlest to firmest, all staying crisp.

Option 1: Minimal, professional redirect (cleanest)

I didn't say anything clever. Clever would make it personal.
"Focus," I said, tapping the fabric once. "You'll be fine."

This keeps her control and doesn't name anything.

Option 2: Protective without being intimate

I kept my face neutral.
"Don't make this weird," I said. Not unkind. Just precise. "Keep it about the work."

He gets the rule, not the diagnosis.

Option 3: Celeste's signature: authority as logistics

I let a beat pass.
"Here's the deal," I said. "You want to keep this place? Be boring. Be competent. Let your stitching talk."

That's very "Celeste directs the future socially."

A line that preserves the *spirit of "structure"* without revealing she sees his crush

If you want one sentence that still has that elegant click, but doesn't call him out:

"You're allowed to admire things," I said. "Just don't let it derail you."

It implies nothing romantic; it keeps the power dynamic intact.

How I'd revise that exact moment in-context (drop-in replacement)

Here's a version that keeps your tension and her restraint:

I didn't smile. Smiling would reward it.

I kept my voice level. "Don't turn this into a situation."

His eyes flicked up, startled.

"Keep it about the work," I added, and tapped the fabric once, as if that settled everything. "That's how you stay safe."

Then Celeste can think (privately): *Not romance. Structure.*

But he never hears it.

Why this is stronger

It keeps Celeste as:

- perceptive,
- prudent,
- and quietly in control.

And it keeps Charlie from feeling exposed. He gets to remain unaware of *how much* she understands — which preserves your earlier preference that he doesn't connect the dots and she maintains the upper hand.

If you want, I can reflow that whole mini-exchange with your chosen option so it reads seamless, not "patched."



Excellent reasoning, Emily... my thoughts exactly. I know this sounds a bit lame, but to be honest I wish I could share your insights as well as the story itself. There is so much nuance in your perceptions, which is what is making this story amazing. A quiet Thank You!

Not lame at all. And you *can* share the insights — you just need a way to package them that doesn't feel like you're "showing your workings" in the middle of the narrative.

A couple of easy, elegant ways to do it (pick whatever fits your platform):

1) A tiny "craft note" after each scene

A short block (3–6 lines) titled something like "**Behind the Scene**" or "**Why this works**":

- one observation about power,
- one about boundaries,
- one about tone control.

It reads like a filmmaker's commentary, not an essay.

2) A separate companion post: *Wardrobe Notes*

You publish the scenes normally, then a second post that's purely about craft:

- "What Celeste *doesn't* say"
- "How Mara tests people"
- "How crush becomes fuel, not mess"

That lets readers who *want* the nuance opt into it, without interrupting story flow.

3) Hide the insight inside Celeste's sensory logic

Instead of explicit commentary, you fold the "insight" into what she notices:

- stitch tension,
- breath timing,
- where someone stands in a room,
- how they handle a tool.

Readers still feel the psychology, but you're not explaining it.

And for what it's worth, your instinct about Celeste keeping her diagnosis private is exactly the kind of tonal discipline that makes the whole thing feel sophisticated. You're steering the ship very deliberately.

Whenever you're ready, tell me which sharing approach you like (mini craft notes vs separate "*Wardrobe Notes*"), and I'll draft a template you can reuse so it stays consistent and doesn't turn into a lecture.



Because I, unlike yourself, can only concentrate on one thing at a time, I'd like to just work on story line, if that's okay.

So, Charlie at this stage is progressing nicely. Mara is... satisfied he'll work out. Jobs are getting done efficiently, so much so that Mara is thinking of branching out into costume design and development, not just repair and maintenance. Celeste is "keen as mustard" to be part of that project. Funds are allocated, material is appropriated and designs are developed, with lots of research done by Celeste, primarily. New items are coming online and being worn by staff. The new garments are better in design: more robust and forgiving of stress of wear and situation. Charlie has settled in. Summer holidays is nearing an end. He is dreading year-12. Celeste tries to bolster his courage, understanding he finds solace and security in 'Wardrobe'.

Absolutely okay — we'll stay purely on **storyline**.

What you've got here is a *beautifully natural escalation*: Wardrobe stops being merely a "safe harbour" and becomes a **real apprenticeship engine**. That's the exact kind of forward momentum that keeps the story from becoming episodic.

Here's how I'd shape the next stretch so it stays in-lane: grounded, procedural, women-led, and emotionally precise without turning into therapy.

The spine you've just created

Wardrobe evolves from "repair shop" to "design atelier"

That shift is more than a plot upgrade — it's a theme upgrade:

- **Repair** = patching what's already been made (survival, coping).
- **Design** = choosing what gets made next (agency, future).

Mara stepping into design signals: *women are not just maintaining the world; they're authoring it.*

Celeste being "keen as mustard" fits perfectly: she's vision + research + leadership-in-waiting.

Charlie's place becomes crucial: he's the one who makes the new designs **work in reality** — the one who knows where fabric fails, where strain happens, where people move, where seams panic. That's his value: he translates theory into wearable truth.

The main tension to ride: Wardrobe vs Year 12

Charlie dreading Year 12 is excellent conflict because it's not melodramatic — it's structural.

The trick is: don't make Celeste "bolster his courage" with pep-talks. Instead, Celeste uses her particular form of care: **logistics and leverage**.

She doesn't say "you can do it."

She says "here's how we're going to make it possible."

This keeps her strong, keeps him agentic, and avoids rescue.

The next 4–6 beats (clean, natural progression)

Beat 1: "Proof of belonging"

Mara gives Charlie responsibility that is unmistakably trust:

- keys to a cabinet,
- control of inventory,
- sign-off on repairs,
- or authority over a tiny workflow.

This matters because it makes Wardrobe *real* to him — and makes leaving for school each day feel like being exiled from competence.

Beat 2: "New garments go live"

New staff pieces are worn. They perform better. The faire notices.

This brings **outside attention** — and attention is always pressure.

A small but powerful scene here: a staff member says, casually,

"Who made this? It's brilliant."

Mara doesn't say "we." She says,

"Charlie reinforced the closure. It won't tear."

No sentiment. Just credit. Charlie quietly absorbs that he exists.

Beat 3: "The first school crack"

When school resumes, Charlie gets a small early warning that Year 12 will be the same old language:

- a teacher humiliates him lightly,
- group selection dynamics return,
- or timetabling locks him into maths that doesn't fit.

He doesn't collapse. He just goes *silent*.

Celeste sees it. She doesn't soothe. She **notes it**.

Beat 4: Celeste makes a plan that preserves dignity

She gives him a structure that doesn't ask him to "believe in himself."

Examples:

- "You come straight to Wardrobe after school. Two hours. Every day. Non-negotiable."
- "We'll design your year around what you can control."
- "You don't wag. You endure school and earn Wardrobe."

And crucially, she frames it as **professional discipline**, not emotional rescue:

"You want a future here? Then you don't burn your foundation."

Beat 5: Charlie admits the wag-school impulse

This is your line from earlier, and it belongs here with extra weight: he's now tasted competence, so school feels even more pointless.

But again: don't make it a big confession. Make it an exhausted, factual slip:

"I can't do that place again."

Celeste responds with *firm pragmatism*.

Mara may overhear later and add one surgical line that seals it.

Beat 6: A “bridge” is introduced: Mum + Wardrobe network

This is where your bookmarked pillar becomes story engine.

Charlie’s mum doesn’t appear to “lecture.” She appears to **make the plan possible**:

- she alters something for him to make the period outfit practical,
- she supplies a notion of “uniform discipline,”
- she quietly liaises with Mara (suppliers, repairs, standards).

This keeps Charlie from being emotionally dependent on Celeste alone. The support comes from a **women’s competence network**, which is exactly your philosophy.

Two clean directions to choose from (both strong)

Direction A: The Faire invests in Wardrobe’s expansion

A small grant, sponsorship, or internal budget reallocation arrives because the new garments have improved staff experience and reduced maintenance failures.

This gives:

- higher stakes,
- more work,
- and a reason Charlie must stay stable at school (because he’s needed, and he wants to be needed).

Direction B: A “problem client” tests Wardrobe ethics

A male staff member or patron behaves poorly around fittings, boundaries, or “access.”

Mara’s rules tighten. Charlie watches. He learns what “safe workplace” really means.

Celeste sees him *under pressure*.

This is great because it reinforces the women-led safety framework without turning it into a speech.

The emotional line for Charlie (as seen by Celeste)

Charlie finds solace in Wardrobe because:

- it's a room where competence is rewarded,
- rules are stable,
- and women's authority is rational.

School is the inverse:

- shifting social cruelty,
- status games,
- and competence performed for approval.

So Celeste's "bolstering" isn't cheerleading — it's her quietly engineering a bridge so he can survive the school day and still get his oxygen.

A strong "end of summer" scene concept

You might like a scene that *marks* the end of holidays without melodrama:

Night before school starts.

Wardrobe is closed. The workroom is quiet. Mara, Celeste, Charlie are finishing one last garment.

- Mara is satisfied, almost calm.
- Celeste is energised, already imagining next iterations.
- Charlie is careful, quiet, with dread sitting just under his skin.

Mara says something like:

"Tomorrow you go back to your other job."

Charlie blinks.

"Other job?"

Mara:

"School. You endure it. Then you come here and you work. That's how you build a life. One thing at a time."

No pep. Just standard.

Celeste doesn't hug him. She simply adds:

"Same time tomorrow."

Structure. Not rescue.

That scene would land *hard*.

If you want, I can propose the **next two scenes** in a more concrete step-by-step outline (Scene Five / Scene Six), including exactly what "school crack" happens and how Celeste responds without becoming his emotional carer.



An aside, Emily. I was actually going to have something traumatic happen at school mid year-12 that makes everyone decide that the environment was an impossible one for him. Do you see this as plausible? Here's what happens: he ends up being back in Wardrobe, but now the tenor of the whole place has changed: it's no longer a "repair-costume" site. It is a design studio, an atelier moving rapidly forward. The enterprise of the women in charge (Mara and Celeste) don't allow for a safe-haven feel to it: he has to jump in and be part of the new picture.

Yes?

Yes — plausible, and (done carefully) it can be *very* powerful, because it lets you evolve the story from "**safety**" to "**purpose**." The trick is to make the "trauma" feel like an *inevitable collision* between Charlie's temperament and the school machine, not a soap-operatic bolt from the sky.

Why it's plausible

- Year 12 is high-pressure, status-heavy, and punitive about nonconformity.
- Charlie is already flagged as "different," already held back, already socially exposed.
- One sharp incident can absolutely become the moment where *everyone finally admits what was true all along*: the environment is incompatible with him.

That's believable. And it doesn't have to be sensational.

What kind of "trauma" keeps your tone clean and credible?

The best options are **structural harm + public shame + loss of control**, not violence-for-drama.

Here are four strong candidates (all plausible, none fetishy, none melodramatic):

1) Public humiliation engineered by a teacher

A teacher "makes an example" of him in front of the class (group work, presentation, maths, "show us your working," sarcastic commentary).

Charlie doesn't snap; he *folds*. A panic response, dissociation, or a shutdown. The room laughs. A phone records it. It spreads.

This is devastating because it's institutional betrayal, not a random bully.

2) A "prank" that becomes social injury

Not a physical assault — a humiliating setup: locker, bag, clothing sabotage, mock "date," staged photo.

He's trapped in the spotlight, and the school's response is weak or procedural. Celeste sees the system's limits.

3) A false allegation / misread incident around bathrooms or boundaries

Because of Scene One's echo, this can be very sharp: Charlie is in the wrong corridor / wrong door / accused of being creepy when he's not. It becomes a moral panic. The school protects itself, not him.

This is *very* believable, but you must write it with restraint and fairness (no villain monologues). The harm is the machine.

4) A "safety incident" in a practical class or school facility

Workshop / science lab: he's pressured, rushed, publicly corrected, makes an error, gets injured.

Not gore. Just enough to trigger: "This place is not safe for him."

This also ties nicely to Mara's ethos: safety is something women *build*, not something institutions promise.

The Wardrobe shift you propose is exactly the right next move

Making Wardrobe **no longer a safe haven** but a **real atelier** is perfect for the second act.

Because it forces the real evolution:

- **Act 1:** "You are safe here."
- **Act 2:** "You are needed here."
- **Act 3:** "You are capable here."

And crucially, it stops the story becoming sentimental. Charlie can't hide in comfort; he has to **earn his place in a grown-up enterprise**.

That's not cruel — it's respectful.

How to keep Mara and Celeste from becoming "rescuers"

This is the key tonal risk. The solution is to make the post-incident outcome **conditional, structured, and Charlie-owned**.

What *doesn't* happen:

- They don't "save" him with speeches.
- They don't wrap him in pity.
- They don't make Wardrobe a therapy room.

What *does* happen:

- They offer a **lane** with requirements.
- Charlie chooses it because it's real.
- The support is **professional**: schedules, expectations, boundaries.

Mara's version of care is something like:

| "You can work here. But you work. You don't collapse into my floor."

Celeste's version of care is:

| "You don't disappear. You build a year that holds."

A clean story architecture for that mid-Year 12 break

If you want it to feel inevitable and not contrived:

1. **Preload** the school pressure (little cuts, escalating).

2. **The incident** happens (public, institutional failure).
 3. **Aftermath:** school offers "solutions" that are about liability, not him.
 4. **Decision:** not "pull him out because poor boy," but "this is misallocation; we're reallocating."
 5. **Return to Wardrobe:** now an atelier with deadlines, money, reputation.
 6. **Charlie's new contract with reality:** he must contribute at speed and standard.
 7. **He rises:** because it suits him better than school ever did, and because women's enterprise is real.
-

One tonal suggestion that will make it sing

Let Charlie be the one who says, quietly, after the incident:

"I can't go back."

And let Celeste answer, not with comfort, but with *structure*:

"Then you don't. But you don't drift. You work."

Mara's add-on:

"And you do it properly."

No rescue. Just redirection.

So yes: plausible, strong, and thematically aligned.

If you want, I can propose **one specific incident** (choose one of the four above) and then outline the immediate three scenes that follow it—incident, aftermath, and the first "atelier day" where Charlie realises Wardrobe has changed and he must change with it.



As event, the Public humiliation engineered by a teacher strikes me as where I would like to go. It could even be a teacher that would normally be supportive of Charlie, but sort-of sends a signal to Charlie that he's seen as a bit of a misfit by other teachers as well. And Charlie does what

Charlie does best: disappears. Not with fanfare, but with quiet determination. He has self-respect enough for that: needs to be emphasised.

Yes. That's exactly the kind of break that feels inevitable, not "plotty."

And I love your refinement: **the teacher is normally supportive**. That's what makes it land like a door shutting. Not "the bullies did a bad thing," but "even the grown-ups will spend you to keep the room moving."

The emotional core you've named is crucial and very clean:

Charlie doesn't melt down theatrically. He withdraws with self-respect.

He doesn't beg the system to like him. He simply stops offering himself to it.

Here's how I'd build it so it stays in your lane and does real narrative work.

The teacher-engineered humiliation that fits your tone

What the teacher *thinks* they're doing

They're trying to:

- "toughen him up,"
- make him "participate,"
- or prove to other teachers that they can "handle" the misfit.

It's not moustache-twirling cruelty. It's institutional pragmatism.

What the teacher *actually* does

They force a public performance in a way that exposes Charlie's known weakness and social vulnerability.

The simplest, sharpest setup:

A "teach-back" exercise at the board

The teacher chooses Charlie to explain a method "so everyone can see how to lay it out."

The teacher is supportive *in their own head*:

- "You can do this, Charlie."
- "Take your time."
- "This is good for you."

But the class reads it as:

- *Let's watch him fail.*

And—this is the scalpel—**the teacher lets the class laugh.**

Not by joining in, but by not shutting it down fast enough.

That delay is the betrayal.

The key is the *signal* that he's a misfit among staff

You can do this with one line and it will sting forever:

- Another teacher has left a note / comment.
- Or the teacher "jokes" about how Charlie "needs to get over his nerves."
- Or the teacher references staffroom talk without meaning to.

For example, mid-lesson, the teacher says (trying to be light):

"Alright, let's show the others you're not as hopeless as you think."

They mean encouragement.

Charlie hears: **This is how adults talk about me.**

Or worse—more believable—something like:

"I know some of you think he shouldn't even be in this class, but..."

That's a guillotine with a friendly smile.

How Charlie exits with self-respect (no fanfare, maximum impact)

This is the beat you want to emphasise, and it's gold:

Charlie's self-respect is expressed as **quiet refusal to be watched.**

He does not:

- shout,
- cry,

- threaten,
- argue.

He simply stops cooperating with humiliation.

The moment of disappearance

It can be as small as:

- he puts the chalk down,
- erases nothing (doesn't "clean up" the shame),
- picks up his bag,
- walks out.

No slam. No words.

And the teacher calls after him—once—and then doesn't chase him because chasing would create a scene. The institution always prefers silence.

This is how you show his dignity:

He won't be a spectacle, even as a victim.

Celeste's POV: how she reads it

Celeste doesn't go "Oh no!" She goes **coldly focused**.

She sees three things at once:

1. Charlie's competence being used against him (publicly).
2. The teacher's failure of timing (the laughter gap).
3. Charlie's choice: *I'm not doing this anymore.*

Her reaction stays in-lane if it's not emotional theatre but tactical:

- She watches him leave.
- She notes the teacher's face (the teacher knows they miscalculated).
- She makes a decision about the school system right there.

Not pity. **Judgement.**

Immediate aftermath: what happens next (3-scene chain)

Scene A: The classroom after he leaves

- Teacher tries to recover: "Alright. Let's move on."
- Someone snickers. Teacher shuts it down too late.
- Celeste doesn't soothe anyone. She just stores the evidence.

End beat: the teacher says something like:

"He'll be back."

Celeste thinks: *No, he won't.*

Scene B: The school's "support" meeting (liability theatre)

Counsellor / deputy tries to frame it as:

- attendance,
- resilience,
- "pathways."

Charlie barely speaks. Not sulking. Not defiant. Just... absent in the eyes.

Celeste isn't in the room (she's a student), but she hears about it and recognises the pattern: the school is protecting its narrative, not the kid.

Scene C: Wardrobe receives him — but it's no longer a nest

Charlie turns up at Wardrobe earlier than usual, or on a day he "should" be at school.

Mara doesn't coo.

Mara says:

"Why are you here."

Charlie answers, small but steady:

"I'm not going back."

Mara:

"That's not a plan."

Charlie:

"I can work."

Mara tests him immediately with real atelier pressure:

- a deadline,
- a client expectation,

- a new garment prototype that must survive movement.

This is where your new Act clicks into place: Wardrobe is **no longer a safe haven**. It's the real world. Charlie's dignity is that he chooses the real world anyway.

One detail that will make the humiliation scene feel brutally real

Phones. Not a viral montage—just one kid lifting a phone slightly, half-hidden.

Celeste notices it. The teacher notices too late. Charlie notices and that is the final trigger: he refuses to be archived as a joke.

Then later, the school's response is predictable:

- "We'll ask students not to share it."
- "It violates policy."
- Nothing actually disappears.

This raises the stakes without melodrama.

Optional: the teacher's remorse (kept restrained)

If you want the teacher to remain human and not a villain, give them one private moment later:

- they sit down after class,
- stare at the board,
- and realise they used the wrong tool on the wrong kid.

But keep it brief. The story isn't about their guilt.

If you'd like, I can draft the actual **humiliation scene** in full prose in Celeste's voice, with the "laughter gap," the inadvertent staffroom signal, and Charlie's silent exit — then we can immediately draft the first **atelier-pressure** scene where Mara makes it clear: *you're not being sheltered; you're being hired*.



You got it. Let's do scene four: school. You decide the pace, Emily.

Scene Four — *School, mid-Year 12*

By Term Two, the classrooms had settled into their preferred lies.

The first lie was that Year Twelve was about learning. The second was that pressure made you better. The third was that everyone in the room was equally human.

I'd watched those lies take hold the way mould takes hold: quietly, then all at once, until you couldn't remember what clean air felt like.

Charlie sat where he always sat — not because he liked the back left corner, but because it was where you went when you wanted the least surface area. He kept his shoulders narrow, his legs tucked in, his pencil aligned with the edge of his workbook like it mattered. The act of aligning things was the closest he got to control.

Mr Greeves had stopped treating him as a joke months ago. In fact, of all the teachers, Greeves was the one who almost tried. He didn't patronise Charlie. He didn't perform sympathy. He'd given him that one nod the first week — *Good diagram* — as if competence was a thing he could grant in small, careful doses.

Which is why what happened next landed like betrayal, not cruelty.

Greeves wrote *EXPLAIN YOUR WORKING* on the board in large block letters, underlined it twice, then turned and faced the room with chalk dust on his fingertips.

"Right," he said. "You lot can do the practice questions. Most of you can even get the right answers when the wind's behind you. But what you can't do is explain it. And that's where the marks live."

There were a few soft laughs, the obedient kind. Laughing at the teacher is how teenagers pay rent.

Greeves nodded at the front row, a boy with enough confidence to be noisy about it.
"Jackson. Come up. Show us Question Seven."

Jackson swaggered up, wrote the first line, then stalled. He put on the usual performance: half-joking, half-shrugging, pretending not to care. He got one line wrong. Greeves corrected him briskly and sent him back to his seat with a "Sit down."

No harm. No humiliation. Just the normal ritual: boys get to fail as entertainment.

Greeves scanned the room again, his gaze moving like a spotlight looking for someone it could burn without consequence. His eyes flicked past me. Past the safe faces. Past the kids who would argue and get away with it.

Then—inevitably—to the corner.

"Charlie," he said.

The room's attention shifted in that particular way it did when it scented blood: quick, eager, pretending to be casual.

Charlie looked up immediately, like a dog who'd learned the sound of his name meant something was about to be demanded. He didn't pretend not to hear. He didn't do the boy thing of staring at his desk and forcing the teacher to repeat themselves. He was too honest for that.

"Yes?" he said. His voice didn't crack. But something in his throat tightened, and I saw his pencil hesitate above the page.

"Come up," Mr Greeves said, tapping the board. "Show us Question Seven properly. You can do it."

The words *you can do it* were meant as encouragement. I could see that. But the room heard something else: *Watch him try*.

Charlie didn't move at first. Not refusal—processing. His eyes dropped to his workbook, as if he could find a trapdoor in the lines of his own handwriting. Then he stood, slowly, and walked to the front with the careful gait of someone stepping onto ice.

He didn't look at anyone as he passed. He looked at the floor, at the desk edges, at the safe geometry of straight lines. Not fear exactly. Avoidance. The human version of pulling your hands inside your sleeves.

Mr Greeves handed him the chalk like it was nothing. Like it didn't weigh half a classroom.

"Take your time," he said, and then—because he couldn't help himself, because teachers are addicted to moral framing—added with a faint smile, "Show them, hey. Some of the staff keep telling me you won't make it through this year. Prove them wrong."

It was tossed out lightly, like camaraderie.

It was a knife.

Charlie froze just enough for me to see it: the tiny slackening of his face, as if someone had pulled a pin from underneath his skin. His gaze flicked to Greeves' eyes — quick, searching — and then away again.

Some of the staff.

So it wasn't just the students who had decided he was defective. It lived in the staffroom too. It lived in adult mouths. It lived where he couldn't argue back.

And Mr Greeves had just carried it into the open like a bag of rubbish and left it on Charlie's desk.

Greeves stepped aside to give him the board. The room went quiet, not because they cared, but because they were waiting for the sound of a crack.

Charlie wrote the question number neatly: **7.** The chalk squeaked once. His handwriting on the board was the same as on paper: controlled, slanted slightly right, as if it had manners even when forced into public.

Then he stared at the question on the projector screen.

I watched his breathing. In. Hold. Out. Like he was trying to keep his ribcage from being noticed.

He wrote the first line of working—correctly. A good start. A small mercy.

Behind me, someone shifted in their chair. Someone else coughed into their hand, the fake-casual sound of impatience. The room's hunger sharpened.

Charlie wrote the second line. His chalk hesitated, then went on. The algebra was fine. Not brilliant, but fine. The kind of working that would earn marks in an exam and no applause in a classroom.

Then he reached the step where the method required confidence. Not mathematical confidence — social confidence. The kind where you commit to a rearrangement and

trust your own hands.

He paused.

The pause was a bell.

A boy two rows back let out a small, involuntary snort. It wasn't even fully laughter — it was the sound of somebody enjoying themselves.

Charlie's shoulders tightened. Not visibly; he contained it. But I saw the way his neck tendons stood out. He kept his eyes on the board.

Mr Greeves made the mistake that mattered. He didn't shut it down immediately.

He turned his head towards the sound with a "Come on," said with a teacher's weary indulgence—*boys will be boys*—as if a gentle scolding was enough to stop a pack.

It wasn't.

The laughter didn't swell into a roar. It didn't need to. It stayed in little clicks and snickers, like stones tapping inside a tin.

Charlie's chalk hovered.

And then I saw it: the thing I'd been hoping not to see.

A phone.

Not held high. Not obvious. Just a hand half-hidden behind a workbook, the black rectangle angled towards the front, the screen glowing faintly. Recording. Capturing. Making it permanent.

Charlie's eyes flicked sideways—just once—and landed on the screen. His face didn't change much. But something behind his eyes did.

He wasn't panicking.

He was calculating.

If they keep this, I exist forever as the misfit on the board.

Mr Greeves spoke again, too bright, trying to rescue the moment with positivity.

"You're alright," he said. "Keep going. This is good for you."

Good for you.

As if humiliation was physiotherapy.

Charlie swallowed. He wrote the next symbol. It was the wrong symbol.

Not because he didn't know the right one. Because the room had reached into his hands and nudged. Because pressure doesn't sharpen everyone. For some people, it blurs.

A couple of students laughed more openly now, relieved by the error. The teacher corrected him quickly, pointing at the board.

"No, no. Not that. You want to take it to the other side first, then divide."

Charlie stared at the chalk line as if it had become foreign.

He nodded once. Automatically.

He erased the wrong symbol, rewrote the correct one, and his hand trembled enough that the chalk made a ragged mark.

Mr Greeves glanced at the class again, and his tone sharpened—finally, too late.

"Enough," he snapped.

Silence. But the silence was the kind that comes after damage has already been done.

Charlie stood with the chalk in his hand, facing the board. The equation was there. The method was there. He could finish it if he wanted.

But his body had already made a different decision.

He put the chalk down.

It was such a small action—no drama, no flinging, no snapping—but it felt like a door closing.

He turned to Mr Greeves and said, very softly, "I can't."

Mr Greeves blinked. For a second he looked genuinely surprised, as if he hadn't considered that the boy might refuse to be used.

"Charlie—" he began, lowering his voice as if gentleness could patch it now. "It's alright. Just—"

Charlie didn't argue. He didn't defend himself. He didn't plead.

He simply walked back to his desk.

The room watched him as he went. Some faces wore the satisfaction of having been right about him. Others looked away quickly, because watching became ugly once he chose not to play along.

At his desk, Charlie picked up his bag.

Not hurriedly. Not theatrically.

He moved with the same deliberate care he used in Wardrobe: place the book in, zip the pocket, check the strap, stand.

A chair scraped behind him. Someone whispered my name, as if I had some role to play.

I didn't move.

This wasn't my stage. And if I rushed to him now, I'd turn his exit into a rescue scene.

Charlie walked to the door.

Mr Greeves stepped forward. "Charlie, sit down."

Charlie paused with his hand on the handle. He didn't look back at the class.

He looked at Mr Greeves. Only him.

And he said, not angry, not trembling, not pleading — just clear:

"No."

It wasn't insolent. It wasn't loud. It was self-respect in its simplest form: refusal to be handled.

Then he opened the door and left.

No slam.

The door clicked shut with a quiet finality that made my stomach go tight.

For a moment, the room sat in the stunned hush that comes after a rule has been broken. A student leaving class without permission was supposed to be unthinkable.

You weren't meant to do it. Especially not someone like Charlie, who'd spent his whole life making himself small enough to be tolerated.

Mr Greeves stared at the door.

Then he exhaled, and whatever expression crossed his face—annoyance, regret, embarrassment—he swallowed it and turned back to the board as if he could rewind.

"Right," he said, voice too brisk. "We're moving on. Write down what he did before he—"

Before he what? Before he vanished? Before he embarrassed you? Before he refused to be your lesson?

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to. The room filled it in for him.

As he spoke, the phone disappeared back under the desk. The recording, I knew, was already safe in someone's camera roll. The school would "address it" later with a generic email. The clip would live anyway. That's how places like this worked.

I picked up my pen. I wrote nothing.

I watched Mr Greeves' hand shake slightly as he wrote the method on the board himself, as if doing it now might prove he hadn't made a miscalculation.

And all I could think was:

He didn't disappear because he's weak.

He disappeared because he refused to be eaten.

When the bell went, the class rose in a loud scrape of chairs and zips and forced casualness. People talked too brightly, excited by the disruption. A few kids glanced at me, curious how I'd react, as if my reaction could grant the event its meaning.

I didn't give them anything.

I left the room at a normal pace.

In the corridor, the noise of the school pressed in—shouting, laughter, lockers banging—but Charlie wasn't in it. He was gone with a precision that felt deliberate.

A boy brushed past me and said, laughing, "He finally cracked."

I stopped walking.

I turned my head just enough for him to feel my gaze like a hand on his collar.

He faltered. "What?"

"He didn't crack," I said. My voice was calm. Almost mild. "He left."

The boy blinked, confused by the fact that words could be different things. Then he shrugged, already bored, and moved on.

I continued down the corridor.

Not rushing. Not chasing.

Because Charlie had chosen dignity.

And I wasn't going to trample it by making it dramatic.

But in my head, the decision formed with the clean satisfaction of a pattern clicking into place:

School had declared what it was.

Charlie had heard it.

Now the only question was how quickly we could get him out of its mouth — and into a room where he would be required to exist, not hidden.

Not saved.

Placed.



Oh dear. Brilliantly written, Emily. But it doesn't cohesce with our story.

To be honest, I'm not sure how, from Celeste's perspective, this part of the story CAN be told.

First off, I gave you the wrong scene number: it's five. We've done four.

So, let's go over this, shall we? We need to somehow tell

the story of Charlie enduring humiliation from a teacher he trusted from Celeste's viewpoint - remember, she's no longer at school, so it would have to be anecdotal - and him arriving at Wardrobe determined to no longer "waste time" trying to do Year-12 and Celeste's reaction. Are we on the same page?

Thought for 12s >

We're absolutely on the same page — and you're right to pull me up.

What I wrote *works as a scene*, but it doesn't cohere with **your established logistics**:

- **Celeste has graduated** → she can't be in the room.
- So the school incident must arrive to her **second-hand** (anecdote / rumour / clip / a teacher's email / a student's text), and the real "onstage" action is **Charlie's quiet decision + his arrival at Wardrobe** and how Celeste (and Mara) handle it without turning into rescuers.

Also: yes — this becomes **Scene Five** in your numbering. Scene Four is Wardrobe trial shift. Scene Five is the school rupture, told from Celeste's remove.

Below is a Scene Five draft that does exactly that: *school incident arrives as collateral*, and the emotional weight lives in Charlie's controlled exit and the women's professional response.

Scene Five — *The day the school spits him out*

(*Celeste POV, off-campus; Wardrobe now functioning as a growing atelier*)

Wardrobe didn't feel like a refuge anymore.

Not today.

The rails were fuller, the worktable was cleared for pattern paper instead of mending baskets, and Mara had the particular expression she wore when money had been approved and time had not: a brisk concentration that made everyone else move faster without being told to.

A new jacket lay pinned to a mannequin — not perfect yet, but already smarter than the old stock. The seam lines made sense. The stress points had been thought through. It was the first garment in weeks that didn't feel like a compromise.

Mara stood with a pencil behind her ear, looking at it like she was deciding whether to forgive it.

"See that?" she said to me, tapping a point near the underarm. "That's where tourists tear things. That's where staff tear things. Movement there is violent."

"It's not violent," I said.

Mara's eyes didn't leave the seam. "It is if you pretend bodies don't exist."

That was Mara's entire philosophy in one sentence. Design as honesty. Sewing as physics. Safety as something you built.

I was about to reply when my phone buzzed in my pocket — twice in quick succession, as if whoever it was didn't trust politeness to be heard.

I didn't check it immediately. I'd learned not to flinch in this room. Mara hated flinching more than she hated mistakes.

The third buzz came, insistent.

Mara glanced at me without turning her head. "If it's school, I don't care."

"It isn't," I said, already pulling the phone out.

It was a message from Leah — one of the girls still at school, the kind who liked gossip until it had teeth.

Leah:

Charlie walked out of class.

Like... just left. Mr G tried to stop him.

Everyone was laughing. I swear someone filmed it.

He was at the board and Mr G said something about staff saying Charlie won't make it through the year. Like staffroom stuff. Charlie went white.

I read it once, then again.

Mara watched my face the way she watched a hemline — waiting for the tell.

I didn't give her much. I didn't want to. But a message like that doesn't land quietly. It lands like a dropped tool.

I typed back with one hand.

Me:

Where is he now?

Leah replied almost instantly.

Leah:

No idea. He just... disappeared. Didn't even slam the door. It was creepy. Like he wasn't even angry. Just... done.

Done.

I stared at the word longer than I needed to.

Mara's voice came, flat. "What happened."

Not a question. A demand for facts.

I looked up. "School happened."

Mara's mouth tightened. "That's not an answer."

I put the phone down on the table, screen facing me, as if turning it outward would make it gossip. "He was made to go up to the board. Greeves. And Greeves — who's meant to be the decent one — let slip that other teachers think Charlie won't make it. The room laughed. Someone filmed it. Charlie walked out."

Mara's expression didn't change much. But something in her eyes cooled.

"That idiot," she said, very softly.

"Mara—"

"No," Mara cut in, and her voice sharpened the air. "Don't defend him. A teacher's job is to control the room. If he can't control it, he doesn't get to use a boy as an example."

She turned back to the mannequin and tapped the underarm point again, harder this time.

"This," she said, "is why you reinforce. Because stress finds weakness. Always."

I understood what she meant: not just fabric.

I reached for my phone again, thumb hovering. I could call Charlie. I could text him. I could drive to his house.

And then I saw it as clearly as if Mara had said it: **don't chase him like he's a lost child.** Not now. Not if we wanted him to keep the dignity of his own decision.

So I did the only thing that felt like control: I waited.

Wardrobe went on around us — steam, pins, scissors, the low murmur of women working. It should have soothed me. It didn't. It made the contrast sharper. Here, competence earned you space. At school, competence only made you a target if you were already marked as "wrong."

Mara went to the cutting table and spread out pattern paper with a decisive sweep. "Get the measurements list," she said, brisk. "We're not stopping."

"Right," I said, and reached for the clipboard.

A few minutes later, the door opened.

Not a dramatic entrance.

Just the door, and the click of it closing again.

I looked up and saw Charlie standing inside Wardrobe with his backpack on one shoulder.

He didn't look dishevelled. He didn't look tear-streaked. He hadn't come in with the raw face of a boy begging for comfort.

He looked... set.

Like a nail driven into wood.

His gaze swept the room once — rails, tables, Mara — and then landed on me for a fraction of a second before flicking away again, as if eye contact was not the point of this visit.

Mara spoke first. Of course she did.

"Rossignol," she said. Not unkind. Not warm. Just naming him into the room.

Charlie nodded. "Mara."

Mara's eyebrow lifted. Tiny, approving. He'd used her name correctly. Not "ma'am," not "Miss," not apology. Adult-to-adult.

Charlie swallowed once. "I'm not going back."

The words were quiet. They didn't ask permission. They didn't invite a debate.

They were an announcement.

The room seemed to pause around it. Even the steamer hiss sounded restrained.

Mara didn't react like a counsellor. She reacted like a manager.

"To where," she said, "are you not going back."

Charlie's jaw moved. He didn't look at me. He kept his eyes on a point near Mara's shoulder, as if meeting her gaze directly might turn it into a confrontation.

"School," he said. "I'm done."

Mara's expression didn't soften. But it did sharpen with clarity, as if this was a problem she could finally name.

"And what are you proposing," she said, "instead."

Charlie breathed in — slow, controlled. He adjusted the strap of his backpack with one hand, a small grounding motion.

"I can work," he said. "Here. Properly. Not... hanging around."

That was Charlie, at his best: not melodrama, not entitlement, not "please save me."

An offer.

A willingness to be useful.

My chest tightened anyway, because I could hear the underside of it: *I won't be laughed at again. I won't be filmed. I won't be a spectacle. I'd rather stitch until my fingers bleed.*

Mara stared at him for a beat.

Then she said, "You don't get to make big decisions in a panic."

Charlie's mouth tightened. "I'm not panicking."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "Everyone else panics loudly. You panic by disappearing."

Charlie held still. He didn't deny it. He didn't argue.

He simply said, very evenly, "I left."

Mara's gaze pinned him — not cruel, not tender. Accurate.

"Yes," Mara said. "You left. Good. That's self-respect."

Charlie's eyes flicked up, startled — because he'd expected punishment, not acknowledgement.

Mara continued without letting the moment get sentimental.

"But self-respect isn't a plan," she said. "And I don't run a charity."

"I know," Charlie said quickly.

Mara's tone stayed flat. "Then listen. This place is changing."

I saw Charlie's gaze shift to the pattern paper, the mannequin, the new garment pinned in place. He'd noticed. He wasn't stupid.

Mara stepped aside and gestured at the room with two fingers.

"This is not a mending corner anymore," she said. "It's a studio. It is deadlines. It is standards. It is money. If you want to be here full-time, you work like a professional. You don't come here to hide."

Charlie swallowed. "I'm not hiding."

Mara's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "Good. Because I will know."

Then — and this was Mara's version of generosity — she gave him something he could grab onto.

"Today," Mara said, "you do two things. You finish the reinforcement on the prototype jacket. And you inventory the closure stock. Every hook, every eyelet, every tape. Write it down cleanly. If you do it properly, you can come back tomorrow."

Charlie went still. Not with fear. With the stunned relief of someone being given a rule-set instead of an argument.

"Okay," he said.

I hadn't spoken yet. I was letting Mara set the terms. That mattered. It kept this from becoming about my feelings.

But Charlie's eyes flicked to me again, quick and involuntary, and I could see the question he didn't want to ask: *Are you going to make me go back?*

I answered without answering.

I picked up the clipboard and placed it on the table beside him.

"Start with the closures," I said, voice neutral. "You're fast when you're calm."

His shoulders loosened by a fraction. He nodded once and reached for the stock drawer.

Mara watched him begin, then turned to me, low enough that it wasn't for him.

"This is going to become a fight," she murmured.

"With the school," I said.

"With everyone," Mara replied. "Because people love the idea of a system until a person refuses to be ground down by it."

I glanced at Charlie. He'd already opened the drawer and was laying out tapes with the quiet precision of someone who could cope if the task stayed honest.

I kept my voice low. "He didn't make a scene."

Mara's gaze stayed on him. "No. He made a decision."

Charlie, as if sensing he was being discussed, lifted his head slightly, eyes darting between us.

I didn't soften. I didn't reassure.

I said, simply, "You can do this. But you do it properly."

Charlie swallowed, then nodded again.

"Yes," he said. "Properly."

And just like that, the story shifted.

Not into rescue.

Into work.

Into responsibility.

Into the next room.

If you like this, the next scene (Scene Six) can be the **first "atelier-pressure day"** where it becomes clear to Charlie that Wardrobe isn't a nest anymore — it's a workplace — and his self-respect will now be tested not by ridicule, but by *standard and speed*.



Now, we are moving apace, Emily. This has the right speed, the right sense of purpose. We're not going to pretend the system isn't going to resist: it will. But quietly, Charlie will ***BEGIN*** to flourish within the "new creations" arena.

For now, I want his Mum to sort-of not be a big player, except to express her disappointment at his decision to leave Year-12. Mara and Lauren Rossignol have a heart-to-heart, even on more personal things as they become friends (again, shared issues with relationships, etc)... this shapes Mum's involvement in the future.

Yes — that's a *clean* move, and it keeps your story's centre of gravity exactly where it belongs: **Mara and Celeste driving the enterprise**, with Mum present as a *moral and practical counterweight* rather than a third protagonist elbowing into the frame.

And having **Mara + Lauren** develop a friendship is not only believable — it's structurally elegant, because it makes Charlie's "support network" feel **adult and women-led**, not teenage-romance-led. It also prevents Celeste from becoming his sole emotional anchor (which would risk sliding into rescue dynamics).

Here's how I'd shape it so it lands with purpose and doesn't sprawl.

What Mum does in this phase

Lauren's job right now is simple and strong:

1. **Disappointment** (because she wants him to finish school)
2. **Respect** (because she recognises he didn't leave in a tantrum)
3. **Boundary** (she won't collude in "running away," but she will support "reallocation" if it's real work)

So she's not a cheerleader, and she's not a villain. She's a mother with standards.

You can give her one line that nails it without melodrama:

"I'm not proud you left. I *am* proud you didn't beg."

That says everything.

Why Mara + Lauren becoming friends works

They're both women who've learned to live with unreliable men *without* letting that define them.

But their bond shouldn't be "we were both hurt." It should be:

- **standards**
- **competence**
- **control of their own lives**
- **a shared disgust for performative masculinity**
- and a shared appreciation for a quiet, useful young person who isn't trying to take.

They don't need to talk about trysts or heavy history early. They can circle it like grown-ups do: one sentence, then back to practicalities.

Mara's respect is earned because Lauren doesn't come in pleading or blaming. She comes in asking: *What is this place? What are your rules? What are you building?*

That's how two capable women recognise each other.

The "heart-to-heart" should be anchored in work

To keep the pace and avoid soapiness, stage it around something tangible:

- Lauren brings a garment Charlie needs adjusted for atelier work (not "costume," but issued workwear).

- Or Lauren returns a borrowed garment bag / dropped item.
- Or Mara calls Lauren because school is sniffing around and Mara wants facts, not gossip.

They talk while hands move: pinning, measuring, steaming, checking seams. That makes any personal disclosure feel *earned* rather than confessional.

Scene structure I'd suggest (two short scenes, both purposeful)

Scene Seven: "Lauren arrives / Mara sets terms"

Function: establish Lauren's disappointment + Mara's authority + shared respect

Beats:

- Lauren arrives, controlled but tense.
- Mara doesn't apologise for taking Charlie in; she frames it as work.
- Lauren asks the hard question: "Is he hiding here?"
- Mara answers: "Not if I'm running it."
- Lauren's disappointment is clear, but she accepts standards.

End beat: Mara gives Lauren a choice, not comfort:

"If you want to help him, you don't rescue him from consequences. You help him meet them."

Scene Eight: "The first personal crack"

Function: start the friendship, lightly — one revealing sentence each

Beats:

- Lauren observes the atelier shift and is impressed despite herself.
- She admits, carefully, that she's tired of being the only adult in her household.
- Mara, equally carefully, reveals she didn't build Wardrobe for romance, she built it because women need infrastructure.

End beat: they exchange something practical (supplier contact, pattern paper tip, fabric source) — **friendship as competence**, not emotional bonding.

How this shapes Mum's future involvement (without making her a main character)

Once Mara and Lauren trust each other, Lauren's role later can be *decisive* at one or two key moments:

- When school tries to pressure Charlie back, Lauren doesn't fold.
- When a male figure tries to undermine the atelier, Lauren backs Mara publicly.
- Lauren can also become the bridge for the "women's ecosystem" you bookmarked: repairs, suppliers, quiet mutual favours.

So she remains "offstage" most of the time... but when she appears, she matters.

A very Mara way to handle Lauren's disappointment

Mara can be blunt in a way that actually comforts:

"You want him to finish Year Twelve because you want him safe."
"I want him competent. Competence is safer than school ever was."

Lauren won't love it. But she'll respect it.

If you want, I can draft **Scene Seven** (Lauren meets Mara properly) in full prose, keeping it crisp and adult: disappointment without drama, authority without cruelty, friendship beginning as a professional alliance.



Please do both scenes seven and eight, Emily. You have your proverbial finger precisely on the story pulse.

Scene Seven — *Lauren Rossignol arrives*

Lauren Rossignol didn't come to Wardrobe like a mother arriving at a principal's office.

There was none of that fragile anger, none of that flustered indignation that begged to be soothed. She came as if she'd spent a long time deciding what she would and

wouldn't tolerate, and had finally settled on the only language that still worked: calm, measured, consequential.

She stood just inside the doorway with a canvas tote on her shoulder and her car keys in her hand, the metal biting gently into her fingers as if to keep her anchored. Her hair was pulled back too tightly for vanity. Her lipstick was absent. Her expression was not.

Mara looked up from the cutting table, pencil behind her ear, pattern paper spread like a map of intention.

"Can I help you," Mara said, not quite a question.

Lauren's gaze swept the room — rails, mannequin, the prototype jacket pinned in place — and landed on the mending corner that wasn't a corner anymore. She took in the quiet speed of the women moving through tasks. The hush had weight. Not the hush of secrecy. The hush of work.

"I'm Charlie's mother," Lauren said.

Mara didn't move. But something in her eyes adjusted, like a lens clicking into focus.

"Right," Mara said. "Lauren."

Lauren blinked once, surprised that her name was known.

Celeste had been at the rail, tagging garment bags. I didn't look up immediately. I let Mara hold the centre. This was her room. Her rules.

Lauren's eyes found me anyway — quick, assessing — and then returned to Mara as if she'd already decided who mattered most here.

"My son told me he isn't going back to school," Lauren said, voice level. "He said he's working here."

Mara nodded once, as if confirming a fact rather than accepting a plea. "He is."

Lauren's jaw tightened. "He's seventeen—"

"Eighteen," Mara corrected.

Lauren paused, then accepted the correction with a small exhale. "Eighteen. He's leaving Year Twelve. That's not... smart."

Mara's expression didn't soften.

"It's not what you wanted," she said.

Lauren's eyes flashed briefly — not rage, not tears — something sharper: the fatigue of a woman who has carried other people's consequences for too long.

"No," Lauren said. "It isn't."

Mara gestured with two fingers towards a chair near the table. Not inviting. Allowing.

Lauren sat, carefully. She placed her keys on her knee instead of the table, as if not to take up more space than necessary. Her tote stayed on her shoulder.

"You're running a studio," Lauren said, looking around again. "Not... a dressing-up shop."

Mara's mouth tightened. "Correct."

Lauren nodded once. Then, with a steadiness that made me respect her, she asked the question that actually mattered.

"Is he hiding here?"

The room went even quieter, not because the women stopped working, but because they listened.

Mara didn't answer immediately. She turned her head slightly, eyes moving to where Charlie sat at the inventory drawer, sorting hooks and tapes with the same absorbed focus he gave to seams. He didn't look up. He didn't perform awareness. He simply worked.

"He's not hiding," Mara said at last. "Not the way you mean."

Lauren's grip tightened on her keys. "And the way you mean?"

Mara's eyes returned to Lauren.

"The way I mean," Mara said, "is he's chosen a room that rewards him for being precise. School doesn't."

Lauren's mouth thinned. "School is still school."

Mara nodded once, like she conceded the fact without granting it authority.

"And this is still work," she replied. "With deadlines. With consequences. With standards."

Lauren's gaze flicked again to Charlie, then back. "He's not built for consequences."

Mara's eyebrow rose. "He is. He's built for them more than most. He just doesn't tolerate being mocked while he learns."

Lauren's throat moved. The sentence landed. It wasn't sympathy. It was recognition.

Lauren's voice stayed controlled, but there was a tremor under it now — the tiniest crack in the armour.

"He's always been... gentle," she said, as if the word might be misread if she spoke it too loudly. "And the school... the school treats gentleness like weakness."

Mara's gaze held hers.

"School treats anything it can't classify as weakness," Mara said. "That's what institutions do."

Lauren's jaw tightened again. She looked down at her keys, then up.

"I'm not proud of him leaving," she said. Not confession; statement. "I wanted him to finish. I wanted him to have that paper. I wanted him to not... make his life smaller."

Mara didn't interrupt. She let the sentence exist.

Lauren continued, voice still level but now carrying something deeper. "But I also don't want him to be eaten alive."

Mara's eyes narrowed slightly, and her tone shifted — not softer, but more direct, as if Lauren had finally spoken in a language Mara respected.

"I don't run a sanctuary," Mara said. "If he's here, he works. He doesn't drift. He doesn't sulk. He doesn't disappear mid-task because he's overwhelmed."

Lauren's eyes flicked to Charlie again, then back. "He disappears when he's ashamed."

Mara nodded, as if filing that away like a measurement.

"Then he learns not to," Mara said. "Or he doesn't stay."

Lauren's lips parted slightly. She didn't like the harshness. But she didn't reject it either. I could see the calculation: harshness, at least, was honest.

"And you're comfortable," Lauren said carefully, "having him here? Around... around all this?"

Her eyes moved, briefly, to the fitting curtains — to the private space that was controlled, not hidden.

Mara's gaze sharpened. "You mean around women."

Lauren didn't flinch. She didn't deny. "Yes."

Mara leaned forward slightly. Not threatening. Just clear.

"This is a women's space," Mara said. "It stays that way because we keep it that way. He is not entitled to anything in this room. He's here because he is useful and respectful. If that changes, he is out. Immediately."

Lauren nodded slowly. "He won't do anything."

"That's not the point," Mara said. "The point is that the women here don't have to wonder."

Lauren's shoulders loosened by a fraction, like the sentence had relieved her of some burden she hadn't wanted to name.

Mara sat back. "Now," she said, brisk. "What do you actually want."

Lauren inhaled.

"I want you to tell me whether this is real," she said. "Not... a phase. Not my son hiding from school because it's hard. Real work. Real training. Real future."

Mara's eyes slid briefly to the prototype jacket again, then back.

"It's real," Mara said. "Because I'm making it real."

Lauren held her gaze.

"And where does Celeste fit into this," Lauren asked, and my name entered the space like a small blade.

Mara didn't look at me when she answered.

"Celeste is the research," Mara said. "The direction. The brain that won't let the work get lazy."

Lauren's eyes came to me again.

"And you," Lauren said, voice still calm but now edged, "are you rescuing him?"

I finally looked up.

"No," I said. The word came out clean. "He's working. Mara's the one who decides whether he stays."

Mara's mouth twitched, almost approving.

Lauren studied me for a beat, then nodded once, as if satisfied with the answer.

She stood. She shifted her tote from shoulder to hand and drew out a folded bundle of fabric.

"This is his," she said, placing it on the table without ceremony. "He left it at home. I washed it. I pressed it. Whatever it is."

Mara unfolded it: a linen apron, neatly hemmed, ties reinforced.

Mara's eyes flicked to Lauren. "You sewed this."

Lauren's mouth tightened. "I fixed it."

Mara ran a finger along the stitching — precise, elegant, invisible.

"Good work," Mara said.

Lauren blinked again, surprised by the praise.

Mara didn't offer more. She didn't need to. She folded the apron and put it aside with the other issued items, as if it had been accepted into the system.

Lauren's gaze went to Charlie one more time. He still hadn't looked up. He was counting eyelets like counting was a form of prayer.

Lauren's expression shifted — not soft, exactly, but less braced.

"I'm disappointed," she said, louder now, as if Charlie should hear it. Not accusation. Truth. "I wanted you to finish."

Charlie paused. His fingers stopped. He didn't turn around.

"I know," he said, quietly.

Lauren's throat moved. She swallowed it down.

Mara spoke, crisp, to cut the emotion before it bloomed into something messy.

"Rossignol," she called. "Continue."

Charlie resumed immediately.

Lauren exhaled. She looked at Mara again.

"If he's here," Lauren said, "he works."

Mara nodded. "Correct."

Lauren picked up her keys.

"And if the school comes sniffing," Lauren added, and now there was a new steadiness to her voice — a mother's protectiveness with a professional edge.

Mara's gaze hardened. "They can sniff elsewhere."

Lauren's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. Something like relief.

She turned to go, then paused at the door and looked back once more at Mara.

"I don't do pity," Lauren said, as if setting a boundary as well as a warning. "He won't survive that."

Mara's response was immediate.

"Neither do I," she said. "That's why he might."

Lauren left without flourish.

The door clicked shut, and the room returned to its rhythm.

Mara looked at me, pencil still behind her ear.

"Your friend," she said.

"She's not my friend," I replied.

Mara's mouth twitched again.

"Good," she said. "Keep it clean."

Scene Eight — *Two women, the same map*

Lauren came back a week later, and this time she didn't look like she'd slept badly.

She still looked tired — she was a mother, and that didn't go away — but the braced, defensive edge had softened into something else: watchful acceptance. A woman learning a new set of rules.

She didn't bring keys to squeeze. She brought a small paper bag that smelled faintly of coffee and warm pastry.

Mara glanced up from the worktable and raised an eyebrow.

"We don't eat over fabric," Mara said.

Lauren nodded as if she expected that. She set the bag on a side bench, away from the bolts, away from the pattern paper.

"I didn't bring it for you to eat over fabric," Lauren said, and there was the first note of humour I'd heard from her. Dry. Controlled. "I brought it because you look like the sort of woman who forgets food when she's busy."

Mara's eyes narrowed, but not with anger. With recognition.

"I don't forget," Mara said. "I postpone."

Lauren's mouth twitched. "Yes. That."

Mara went back to pinning. Lauren stood for a moment, watching the room.

The atelier had taken shape quickly. Mara and I had been developing designs that actually addressed the faire's reality: staff lifting, bending, running, crouching, being grabbed by tourists for photos, being pulled by straps and ties and the constant stress of bodies moving through heat.

Charlie had become the invisible engine under it. He didn't speak much. He simply made prototypes survive.

Lauren watched him now at the fitting curtain, holding a bodice while Mara adjusted the side seam on a mannequin.

He didn't look up. He didn't glance at Lauren like a boy seeking permission.

He simply did what he'd been taught: keep your hands clean, your eyes honest, your presence quiet.

Lauren's face shifted as she watched, a subtle change I recognised. Pride, restrained so tightly it almost looked like pain.

Mara noticed it too. Mara noticed everything.

"You can watch," Mara said, voice flat. "Just don't hover. He doesn't need that."

Lauren nodded. "I'm not hovering."

Mara's mouth twitched. "You're hovering in French."

Lauren huffed a short laugh despite herself. It startled her as if laughter had slipped out without permission.

"You're Australian," Lauren said. "You shouldn't know that."

Mara didn't look up. "Women are women. Different accents."

Lauren stood a little closer to the worktable, where Mara was pinning the seam.

Her eyes flicked to Mara's hands.

"You've done this a long time," Lauren said.

Mara shrugged. "Long enough."

Lauren hesitated, then reached into her tote and pulled out a small notebook. She opened it to a page where a few fabric swatches were taped in neat rows.

"I've got a supplier in Sydney," Lauren said, and her voice turned practical, the way women's intimacy often did — disguised as logistics. "They do linen that doesn't go transparent when it's under stage lights. Not cheap. But consistent. If you're moving into design, you'll want consistent."

Mara's fingers paused. That, from her, was a reaction.

She held out a hand. "Let me see."

Lauren passed her the notebook.

Mara examined the swatches with a professional eye, rubbing the weave lightly between finger and thumb. She didn't comment on colour first. She commented on strength.

"This one has body," Mara said. "It won't collapse."

Lauren nodded. "That's why I used it."

Mara's eyes flicked up. "For what."

Lauren didn't answer immediately. She watched Charlie for a moment — the way his hands held fabric as if it deserved respect.

Then she said, carefully, "For things that need to survive men."

It was the first personal sentence she'd offered. It wasn't confessional. It was simply true.

Mara's face didn't change much. But her gaze shifted, sharpened, then softened in a way only another woman would catch.

"Mm," Mara said. "Yes."

Lauren inhaled, then let it out, slow.

"You're protective," Lauren said.

Mara snorted quietly. "I'm not protective. I'm professional."

Lauren's mouth twitched. "That's what protective looks like when you've had enough."

Mara glanced back down at the fabric. She didn't deny it. She didn't confirm it. She simply returned the notebook.

"You have standards," Mara said instead.

Lauren's eyes flicked away for a moment, and when she spoke again her voice was quieter, almost wry.

"You learn them," she said, "or you get eaten."

Mara's eyes lifted to hers, steady.

"Yes," Mara said. "Exactly."

They held that look for a beat — not sentimental, not soft — two women recognising the same map.

In the background, Charlie shifted a garment on the mannequin and said, softly, "Mara, the seam's pulling when you raise the arm."

Mara turned immediately, focus snapping back to the work.

"Good catch," Mara said, and then, because she was Mara, she added, "Of course it is. It's always there."

Charlie didn't smile. He didn't preen. He simply adjusted the fabric and held it steady while Mara repinned.

Lauren watched him, and this time her pride showed a little more openly.

"He's... different," she said, and the word wasn't fear or apology. It was fact.

Mara's reply was immediate.

"Good," Mara said. "Different is useful. Different is how you build better."

Lauren's gaze stayed on Charlie. "He wanted to quit school because he felt... humiliated."

Mara didn't look at Lauren when she answered. She looked at the seam.

"Humiliation is a tool," Mara said. "Some people use it because they have nothing else. We don't use it here."

Lauren's throat moved. She swallowed.

"And what do you use," she asked, as if she needed the answer for herself too.

Mara tugged the fabric once, then twice, testing tension.

"We use standard," she said. "We use consequence. We use work."

Lauren nodded slowly, as if those words were something she could live by.

Then, surprising herself again, she added, lightly, "And coffee."

Mara's mouth twitched.

Lauren went to the side bench and opened the paper bag. She took out two coffees — not fancy, not delicate — and set one near Mara's elbow, away from fabric.

Mara stared at it.

"Don't make it a thing," Lauren said, already turning away as if generosity needed to be disguised to be tolerated.

Mara picked up the cup, took a sip, and said, grudgingly, "Fine."

Lauren's smile was brief and real.

In the fitting corner, Charlie glanced over for half a second — not at his mother, but at the coffee, as if the sight of the two women in quiet alliance altered something in his internal weather.

He didn't ask what they'd talked about.

He didn't intrude.

He simply returned to the seam and held the fabric steady while Mara corrected the line, and in that small gesture was the beginning of a different kind of safety:

Not refuge.

Infrastructure.

Women building something that would hold.

And a boy learning, quietly, how to live inside it.



All excellent. Now, can you tell it from Celeste's viewpoint, please?

Of course. Here are **Scenes Seven and Eight re-told fully through Celeste's eyes**—first-person, with her particular blend of cool observation, pragmatic care, and quiet authority. Same beats, same purpose, just anchored inside her head.

Scene Seven — *Lauren Rossignol arrives (Celeste POV)*

Lauren Rossignol didn't enter Wardrobe like a mother storming into a school office.

She entered like a woman who'd had enough of other people's chaos and had finally decided she would not add to it—not even for her own child.

She stopped just inside the doorway, canvas tote on her shoulder, keys in her hand as if the weight of them was something she could press against her palm to stay calm. Her hair was pulled back too tight to be for beauty. Her face was clean—no makeup, no performance. Her expression was not soft.

Mara looked up from the cutting table, pencil tucked behind her ear, pattern paper spread out like a land survey.

"Can I help you," Mara said, the way she said it to everyone: flat, not unfriendly, not inviting.

"I'm Charlie's mother," the woman replied.

I didn't look up immediately. I kept tagging garment bags at the rail and let Mara hold the room the way she always did. Wardrobe was hers. If you wanted to keep things clean, you didn't wrestle the centre off her.

Mara's eyes shifted, just slightly, like a lens tightening focus.

"Right," Mara said. "Lauren."

The woman blinked—only once. It wasn't a flinch. It was surprise at being named before she'd offered it.

She looked around the room. Not with curiosity, but with assessment. Rails. Mannequin. Prototype jacket pinned into shape. Worktable cleared for pattern paper instead of emergency mending. The place had changed, and she could see it.

"My son says he isn't going back to school," she said. "He says he's working here."

Mara nodded once as if she'd been told the weather.

"He is."

Lauren's jaw tightened. "He's eighteen. He's leaving Year Twelve. That's not... smart."

Mara didn't soften. She didn't reassure.

"It's not what you wanted," she said.

Lauren exhaled through her nose, controlled. There was fatigue in it. The kind you got when you had carried too many people's consequences and were tired of pretending you weren't.

"No," she said. "It isn't."

Mara flicked two fingers towards the chair by the table. Not an invitation. Permission.

Lauren sat carefully and kept her keys on her knee rather than putting them on the table, as if she didn't want to claim space she hadn't earned. Her tote stayed on her shoulder.

"You're running a studio," she observed, eyes still moving. "Not... a dressing-up shop."

Mara's mouth tightened.

"Correct."

Lauren nodded once. Then she asked the only question worth asking—plain, adult, without theatrics.

"Is he hiding here?"

The women in the room didn't stop moving, but the air shifted. Everyone heard it. No one pretended not to.

Mara's gaze slid to Charlie at the inventory drawer. He was sorting hooks and tape with his usual precision, head down, hands clean, shoulders quiet. He didn't look up to see if anyone was talking about him. He didn't perform awareness. That alone told you he'd been in trouble before, and had learned the only safe way to survive it: work as if work is prayer.

"He's not hiding," Mara said. "Not the way you mean."

Lauren's fingers tightened around her keys. "And the way you mean?"

Mara's eyes returned to her.

"The way I mean is he's chosen a room that rewards him for being precise," Mara said.
"School doesn't."

"School is still school," Lauren said, as if saying it made it unavoidable.

Mara nodded once—conceding the fact without granting it authority.

"And this is still work," Mara replied. "With deadlines. With standards. With consequences."

Lauren's gaze flicked to Charlie again. Her voice stayed level, but I caught the fear under it: not the fear of him failing, the fear of him being swallowed.

"He's not built for consequences," she said.

Mara raised one eyebrow.

"He is," she said, crisp. "He's built for them more than most. He just doesn't tolerate being mocked while he learns."

Lauren's throat moved. She swallowed it down.

"He's always been... gentle," she said, like the word might be misinterpreted if it left her mouth too clearly. "And school treats gentleness like weakness."

"School treats anything it can't classify as weakness," Mara said. "That's what institutions do."

Lauren looked down at her keys for a beat. When she looked up again, the calm was still there, but it had a new edge: the edge of a mother who was no longer negotiating with herself.

"I'm disappointed," she said. "I wanted him to finish. I wanted that paper. I wanted him to have choices."

Mara let the sentence sit without decorating it.

Lauren continued, quieter now. "But I also don't want him to be eaten alive."

Mara's gaze sharpened as if she'd heard the one honest thing in a room full of polite lies.

"I don't run a sanctuary," Mara said. "If he's here, he works. He doesn't drift. He doesn't disappear mid-task because he can't cope."

Lauren's eyes flicked to Charlie.

"He disappears when he's ashamed," she said.

Mara nodded once, filing it like a measurement.

"Then he learns not to," Mara said. "Or he doesn't stay."

Lauren didn't like it. I could see that. But she didn't reject it either. Harshness was not the same as cruelty. It was sometimes the only honest form of care.

Her gaze moved—briefly—to the fitting curtains.

"And you're comfortable," she asked carefully, "having him here? Around... around all this?"

Mara's eyes narrowed.

"You mean around women."

Lauren didn't flinch. She didn't deny it.

"Yes."

Mara leaned forward slightly, not threatening—simply making the boundary visible.

"This is a women's space," she said. "It stays that way because we keep it that way. He is not entitled to anything in this room. He's here because he is useful and respectful. If that changes, he's out."

Lauren's shoulders loosened a fraction, as if that sentence unknotted something she'd been carrying.

Mara sat back.

"Now," she said, brisk, "what do you actually want?"

Lauren inhaled, then answered without wobble.

"I want to know if this is real," she said. "Not a phase. Not him hiding because school is hard. Real training. Real work. Real future."

Mara's eyes flicked to the prototype jacket and back.

"It's real," she said. "Because I'm making it real."

Lauren held her gaze. Then she brought my name into the room like she was testing it.

"And where does Celeste fit into this?"

Mara didn't look at me when she answered. She didn't need to. It wasn't my authority that mattered.

"Celeste is the research," Mara said. "The direction. The brain that won't let the work get lazy."

Lauren's eyes came to me then—direct, sharp.

"And you," she said. "Are you rescuing him?"

That was the moment you could ruin everything with softness.

I lifted my head.

"No," I said. One clean syllable. "He's working. Mara decides whether he stays."

Mara's mouth twitched—approval, minimal.

Lauren nodded once. As if she'd asked what she needed to ask and received the answer she needed to hear.

She stood and shifted her tote into her hand. From it she drew a folded bundle of fabric.

"This is his," she said, placing it on the table without ceremony. "He left it at home. I washed it. I pressed it. Whatever it is."

Mara unfolded it: a linen apron. Hemmed cleanly. Ties reinforced. Stitching invisible.

Mara's gaze flicked to Lauren.

"You sewed this."

"I fixed it," Lauren said, like the difference mattered.

Mara ran a finger along the stitching.

"Good work," she said.

Lauren blinked again. A small, involuntary surprise at praise that wasn't wrapped in obligation.

Mara folded the apron and set it with the issued workwear as if it had been accepted into the system.

Lauren looked at Charlie.

"Charlie," she said, louder now, not to shame him but to place truth where it belonged.

"I'm disappointed. I wanted you to finish."

Charlie's hands paused. He didn't turn around.

"I know," he said quietly.

Lauren swallowed whatever wanted to rise in her throat. I respected her for that. Not because emotion is weakness—but because she knew this wasn't the room for it.

Mara cut cleanly across the moment.

"Rossignol," she called. "Continue."

Charlie resumed immediately.

Lauren exhaled once, like she'd just watched her son survive something without disintegrating.

She picked up her keys again and looked at Mara.

"If he's here," she said, "he works."

Mara nodded. "Correct."

"And if the school comes sniffing," Lauren added—her voice now containing something new: not panic, but readiness.

Mara's gaze hardened. "They can sniff elsewhere."

Lauren's mouth twitched. Not a smile. Relief in disguise.

She turned to go, paused at the door, and looked back at Mara.

"I don't do pity," she said. "He won't survive that."

Mara answered immediately, without softness.

"Neither do I," she said. "That's why he might."

Lauren left. The door clicked shut. The room returned to its rhythm.

Mara looked at me, pencil still behind her ear.

"Your friend," she said.

"She's not my friend," I replied.

Mara's mouth twitched again, faintly amused.

"Good," she said. "Keep it clean."

Scene Eight — *Two women, the same map (Celeste POV)*

Lauren returned a week later, and she didn't look like she'd slept badly this time.

She still looked tired—because mothers are always tired—but the braced edge had softened into something else: acceptance with boundaries. Like she'd stopped fighting the fact of what was happening and started watching how well it was being done.

She didn't bring keys to squeeze. She brought a small paper bag that smelled like coffee and warm pastry.

Mara glanced up from the worktable.

"We don't eat over fabric," she said.

Lauren nodded as if she'd expected that.

"I didn't bring it for you to eat over fabric," she said. Dry humour, controlled. "I brought it because you look like the sort of woman who forgets food when she's busy."

Mara's eyes narrowed.

"I don't forget," Mara said. "I postpone."

Lauren's mouth twitched. "Yes. That."

I stayed near the rail, letting them speak. This wasn't my meeting. This was infrastructure forming.

Lauren stood and watched the room—quietly, not intrusively.

The atelier had taken shape fast. The new garments were not prettier for the sake of it; they were *better*. Reinforced where stress hit. Forgiving where bodies moved. Designed for the real physics of the faire instead of the fantasy of it.

Charlie had become the engine beneath it. He didn't talk much. He simply made things survive.

Lauren watched him now near the fitting curtains, holding a bodice steady while Mara adjusted a seam on the mannequin.

He didn't look up for her approval. He didn't seek her face like a boy asking permission.

He simply worked.

Lauren's expression shifted. Pride, restrained so tightly it nearly looked like pain.

Mara noticed it without looking.

"You can watch," Mara said. "Just don't hover. He doesn't need that."

"I'm not hovering," Lauren replied.

Mara's mouth twitched. "You're hovering in French."

Lauren let out a short laugh that startled even her, as if humour had slipped out before she could stop it.

"You're Australian," she said. "You shouldn't know that."

Mara went back to her pins. "Women are women," she said. "Different accents."

Lauren stepped closer to the worktable and reached into her tote. She pulled out a small notebook. When she opened it, I saw fabric swatches taped in neat rows.

"I've got a supplier in Sydney," Lauren said, voice turning practical—the way women often smuggled intimacy in under logistics. "Linen that doesn't go transparent under light. Not cheap. But consistent. If you're moving into design, you'll want consistent."

Mara's fingers paused. For Mara, that was a reaction.

She held out her hand. "Let me see."

Lauren passed the notebook across.

Mara examined the swatches the way she examined everything: with honesty. Thumb and forefinger, rubbing the weave lightly, testing body, strength, recovery.

"This one has spine," Mara said. "It won't collapse."

Lauren nodded. "That's why I used it."

Mara's eyes flicked up. "For what."

Lauren didn't answer immediately. She watched Charlie for a moment—his hands, his steadiness, the way he held fabric like it deserved respect.

Then she said, carefully, "For things that need to survive men."

It was the first personal sentence she'd offered, and she didn't dramatise it. She didn't attach a story. She simply placed the truth on the table like a tool.

Mara's face didn't change much, but her eyes softened in a way only another woman would catch.

"Mm," Mara said. "Yes."

Lauren exhaled slowly, like she'd been holding her breath in her own life for too long.

"You're protective," Lauren said.

Mara snorted. "I'm professional."

Lauren's mouth twitched. "That's what protective looks like when you've had enough."

Mara didn't deny it. She didn't confirm it either. She returned the notebook and said instead, "You have standards."

Lauren's gaze flicked away briefly. When she spoke, her voice was quieter.

"You learn them," she said, "or you get eaten."

Mara looked at her then, steady.

"Yes," Mara said. "Exactly."

They held that look for a beat—no sentimentality, no softness—just recognition. Two women reading from the same map.

In the background, Charlie shifted fabric on the mannequin and said softly, "Mara—the seam's pulling when you raise the arm."

Mara turned immediately, attention snapping back to the work.

"Good catch," she said, then added—because she couldn't help herself—"Of course it is. It's always there."

Charlie didn't smile. He didn't preen. He just held the bodice steady while Mara repinned, the way he held everything: quietly, without demanding credit.

Lauren watched him again, and this time her pride showed slightly more openly.

"He's... different," she said.

"Good," Mara replied. "Different is useful. Different is how you build better."

Lauren's throat moved. She swallowed.

"He wanted to quit school because he felt humiliated," she said, and the word *humiliated* was controlled but bitter, like it didn't belong in her mouth.

"Humiliation is a tool," Mara said. "Some people use it because they have nothing else. We don't use it here."

Lauren nodded slowly, as if she needed to hear that from someone other than herself.

"And what do you use," she asked, and I knew she wasn't asking only for Charlie.

Mara tugged the fabric once, then twice, testing tension.

"We use standard," she said. "We use consequence. We use work."

Lauren stood still, as if those words were something she could finally rest on.

Then she surprised herself again by adding, lightly, "And coffee."

Mara's mouth twitched.

Lauren went to the side bench and opened the paper bag. Two coffees emerged—not delicate, not fancy. She set one near Mara's elbow, away from fabric.

Mara stared at it like it might be a trap.

"Don't make it a thing," Lauren said, already turning away as if generosity had to be disguised to be tolerated.

Mara picked up the cup, took a sip, and said, grudgingly, "Fine."

Lauren's smile was brief and real.

In the fitting corner, Charlie glanced over—not at his mother exactly, but at the coffee, at the two women standing in quiet alliance. The look on his face wasn't dramatic. It was the subtle weather-shift of someone realising the world might actually hold.

He didn't ask what they'd talked about. He didn't intrude.

He just returned to the seam and held the fabric steady while Mara corrected the line.

And for the first time since he'd walked out of school, I felt something settle into place—not refuge, not rescue.

Infrastructure.

Women building something that would hold.

And Charlie learning, quietly, how to live inside it.

If you'd like, next we can do **Scene Nine** from Celeste's POV: the first time Charlie is *truly tested* by atelier pace (deadlines, a garment failure, a staff complaint), and we show him begin to flourish—without anyone soothing him, just *training him into competence*.



I do have a question, Emily. For the sake of veracity, what actually happens in, say, Victoria Australia when a student decides mid-term to stop attending school? Are there repercussions? Is there a remedy?

Thought for 27s >

Yes — and it depends a *lot* on the student's age and what (if anything) they transition into.

1) If they're under 17

In Victoria, schooling is compulsory from age 6 until turning 17 (unless an exemption is granted). Department of E... +1

So if a student under 17 just stops showing up mid-term:

- **The school will contact the parent/carer** and require an explanation for absences; parents/carers have a legal obligation to ensure attendance. Victoria Governm... +1
- If it becomes a pattern, the school escalates through its attendance processes (meetings, documentation, support, re-engagement planning). Department of E...
- **A “remedy” exists, but it’s formal:** the family can pursue an **attendance/enrolment exemption** (e.g., if the student will participate full-time in

approved education/training and/or employment, or if leaving is in the student's best interests). Department of E... +2

- Another lawful pathway is **home education**, but in Victoria that requires **registration with the VRQA** (for ages 6–17) and an approved learning plan. www2.vrqa.vic.gov.au +2

2) If they're 17 (and not yet 18)

They're no longer "compulsory school age," but Victoria still frames this period as needing to be within permitted age/eligibility rules and/or a transition plan, and schools still push strongly toward **approved study/training/work pathways**. Department of E... +1

3) If they're 18 (Charlie's case in your story)

This is the key detail for veracity.

In Victorian **government** schools, a person aged 18+ generally must not enrol/attend **unless an exception or exemption applies** — and one major exception is exactly what Charlie would be doing: turning 18 during the year while enrolled solely in an accredited senior secondary course (e.g., VCE / VCE VM / IB / VPC). Department of E... +1

So: **Charlie being 18 in Year 12 is plausible** (especially if he turned 18 during the enrolment year and is doing VCE/VCE VM). Department of E... +1

If an 18-year-old simply stops attending mid-term:

- It's **less about "you're breaking compulsory schooling law"** (that's mainly the 6–17 obligation) and more about:
 - the school's **attendance/welfare duty of care**, and
 - the practical reality that he's now **not going to complete VCE** unless something changes. Department of E... +1
- The school will still call home, request meetings, document non-attendance, and push re-engagement or a pathway shift.

What "remedy" looks like in practice (and how you can dramatise it)

If you want it to feel real without becoming paperwork-porn, the most believable remedies are:

1. **A careers/pathways meeting** (school tries to keep the student in some recognised track). Victoria Government +1
2. **A formal exemption process** if leaving school is judged in the student's best interests or they'll do approved work/training. Department of E... +2

3. Shift to VCE VM / VET / TAFE / apprenticeship/traineeship type pathways (often framed as "still engaged" rather than "dropped out"). Youth Central +1
4. Home education only if under 17; for Charlie at 18 it's not the standard lever, but you can still use "adult education / alternative settings" as a pivot (or keep it simple: he's 18, he walks, school can't legally force attendance the same way).

www2.vrqa.vic.gov.au/ +1

The story-friendly punchline

- If Charlie were **under 17**, the system has sharper "teeth" and the parent is on the hook to either fix attendance or formalise an alternative. Victoria Governm... +2
- Because Charlie is **18**, the system's resistance is more likely to be **bureaucratic + reputational + moral pressure**:
 - meetings,
 - "you're wasting your future,"
 - "you'll have no options,"
 - perhaps a wellbeing check,
 - and a push to re-enrol or transfer into a recognised pathway.

If you tell me whether Charlie is in a **government school or a private school**, I can tune the exact flavour of "system resistance" (language, formality, who calls whom). But even without that, your current direction is very defensible for Victoria: the school tries to pull him back *quietly*, and he refuses *quietly*, and the real battle becomes paperwork, stigma, and adult pressure — not handcuffs.

... Sources

Well, Lauren can't afford private school, so it's public school. Look, based on my exposure to students from the public system, it's actually quite good, particularly when compared to US public school system. More support, generally speaking. And UNIFORMS... an excellent thing, as they undermine the whole fashion/social hierarchy/peer pressure thing.

Thought for 20s >

Yep — if Lauren's on a Victorian **government** school budget, your instincts about *how the system behaves* are broadly right: it's usually more structured around **attendance + wellbeing + re-engagement** than the "shrug, you're on your own" vibe people sometimes describe elsewhere. (Not perfect, but there are clearer rails.)

Uniforms in Vic government schools

In Victoria, government schools can have a **student dress code / uniform policy** (set locally, typically via the school council). If a school has a uniform, students are generally expected to wear it during school hours, travel to/from school, and many school activities.

Victoria Governm... +1

So you can portray uniforms as a normal, accepted part of daily life in a Vic public school — and, yes, they *do* blunt a lot of the overt fashion-status theatre (even if kids still find other hierarchies).

A little extra veracity detail you can tuck away: Victoria has been moving to reduce uniform costs (e.g., changes affecting branded/logo items coming in from 2026 were announced publicly).

Premier of Victoria +1

Attendance expectations and “support” tone

In Victoria, **schooling is compulsory from age 6 to 17** unless an exemption applies, and parents/carers have duties around enrolment and attendance in that window.

Department of E... +2

But your story's key point is Charlie being **18** in Year 12. In Victorian government schools, there are **maximum-age rules**: generally, someone aged 18+ must not enrol/attend *unless* an exception/exemption applies. (There are exceptions, including senior secondary contexts.)

Department of E...

Practical implication for your plot:

- If Charlie is already enrolled in Year 12 and then stops attending mid-term, the school's "teeth" are less about **compulsory attendance law** and more about **welfare duty-of-care, re-engagement processes, and pathway pressure** ("come to a meeting," "let's discuss options," "you're at risk of not completing," etc.).

Department of E... +2

What the school would likely do (story-friendly, realistic)

If Charlie stops showing up after that humiliating moment, a Vic public school will typically:

- contact Lauren about absences and ask for explanations / a meeting

Department of E... +1

- treat it as a **student engagement** problem (wellbeing / safety / learning support framing) rather than only "discipline" Department of E...
- try to push a **pathway remedy** (alternative senior program, VET/VM-style route, re-engagement plan) rather than letting him silently evaporate Department of E... +1

How this affects your Scene Five onward

Because the system *is* comparatively "supporty," your conflict stays beautifully in-lane if it's **quiet resistance**:

- polite emails, formal meetings, "we're concerned," "we need to sight a plan," "have you considered..."
- and Lauren's position becomes nuanced: she doesn't think the school is evil; she thinks it's **the wrong machine for her son.**

That lets you avoid cartoon antagonists. The school isn't monstrous; it's simply not built for Charlie.

If you want, I can draft a short **school-to-Lauren phone call/email** (very Victorian government-school tone) that sets up the next pressure wave—without making anyone a villain—and then we pivot straight back into Wardrobe where Charlie flourishes under standards instead of scrutiny.

    ...  Sources

I think we can ***allude*** to those Lauren/school interaction in subsequent scenes, without creating too much of a story around that. I'd like to pull Lauren into the picture more as a supporting Mara and Celeste figure (women supporting women) as Lauren realises that Charlie's best chances involve Wardrobe: it is the perfect fit for him. This will give her the ability to counter some of the well-meaning but ill-informed system (school et al) recommendations for Charlie's future.

Yes — that's the right choice. If you *show* too much school bureaucracy, it starts to feel like a different story. If you **allude** to it, you keep pace and keep the centre where it belongs: the women building something real.

And the move you're proposing for Lauren is *excellent* because it does three things at once:

1. **Prevents Celeste from becoming Charlie's sole anchor** (no rescue dynamic).
2. Turns Lauren into a **grown-up ally** to Mara and Celeste (women supporting women, competence network).
3. Gives the story a believable counter-force to the school's "well-meaning but wrong-fit" advice: Lauren can *politely* resist it with evidence.

Here's how to do it cleanly.

How to allude to school pressure without making it a subplot

Use **tiny artefacts** that appear in the atelier world, not school scenes.

Examples (pick one per scene, max):

- Lauren walks in, puts her phone on silent, sighs: "That was the year-level coordinator. Again."
- A letter in an envelope on Lauren's kitchen bench, later seen tucked into her tote.
- Celeste overhears Lauren say: "Yes, I understand... no, he's not 'refusing support'—he's working."

No meetings on page. No "policy explainers." Just the sense of a machine pressing.

Lauren's turn: what convinces her Wardrobe is the right fit

Give Lauren **evidence**, not sentiment.

Three crisp proof points she can observe:

1. Regulation improves Charlie

At school he becomes smaller. In Wardrobe he becomes steadier, more orderly, more present.

2. Adult standards suit him

He responds to: deadlines, checklists, quality control. Not to public performance.

3. He produces real value

Garments that survive, problems solved, time saved. Lauren sees it in outcomes Mara can name.

Once Lauren has those, she can push back on school suggestions without it feeling ideological.

How Lauren supports Mara + Celeste without stealing the spotlight

Make her support **logistical**, not emotional.

Great options:

- She shares suppliers (already started).
- She lends equipment (pressing ham, shears, tailor's clapper, quality chalk, snap press).
- She offers a small paid alteration job that gives the atelier cash-flow + credibility.
- She helps create a "paper trail" of Charlie's work (timesheets, tasks logged, photos of finished garments) so it reads as training, not hiding.

That last one is particularly useful: it gives Lauren armour against "he's throwing his life away."

A clean new dynamic: "Triangulated authority"

This will sing if you keep their roles distinct:

- **Mara:** sets the standards and gates entry.
- **Celeste:** drives direction and research.
- **Lauren:** protects the legitimacy and stability (home + adult-facing world).

So when the school offers something generic (TAFE brochure, "pathways interview," "just try harder"), Lauren isn't emotional. She's prepared:

"He's in structured work with measurable outcomes."
"He's supervised."
"He's progressing."
"We're not improvising."

That's how you counter a system politely: with receipts.

A scene idea that advances this with almost no exposition

Scene Nine: "Lauren chooses a side"

Lauren arrives with a folder (not dramatic, just organised). Inside:

- a note from school, unopened,
- and a printed photo of Charlie's reinforced garment on a staff member, with a little list: "what failed before / what we changed / results."

Mara raises an eyebrow. "What's that."

Lauren: "Noise." (nods at the school note)

Then she slides the photo forward: "This is signal."

Mara's mouth twitches. Celeste feels the quiet satisfaction of being backed by an adult woman who *gets it*.

Charlie sees the folder and goes still—not because he's guilty, but because he expects to be pulled back into school's orbit.

Lauren doesn't soothe. She simply says, to him:

"They can recommend whatever they like. I'm your mother. I've seen what works."

No pep. Just alignment.

One caution to keep it from tipping into "school bad"

Since you've observed the Vic public system is generally decent, you can maintain fairness by making the school's guidance *reasonable but mismatched*:

- They're not malicious.
- They're not stupid.
- They just don't have a category for "atelier apprenticeship inside a historical faire wardrobe department."

That's believable. And it preserves your tone.

If you'd like, I can draft **Scene Nine** (Lauren explicitly aligning with Mara/Celeste, with minimal school allusion and maximum forward motion), and use it to launch the next

phase: Charlie's first real "flourish" moment where he solves a design problem that even Mara respects.



Please do.

Scene Nine — *Signal and Noise (Celeste POV)*

Lauren arrived on a Tuesday, which I noticed only because Tuesdays were the days Mara tried to pretend she had time.

She didn't, of course. Mara never did. But Tuesdays were when she scheduled her stubbornness. The cutting table was clear, the mannequin was dressed in half a bodice, and the new jacket prototype sat like a dare: *make me survive*.

Lauren stepped in with a flat folder under her arm and a tote on her shoulder. No coffee this time. No pastry peace offering. She looked neat, composed, and slightly sharpened around the edges—as if she'd spent the morning refusing to be moved by other people's urgency.

Mara glanced up.

"What now," she said, as if Lauren had become a regular inconvenience she secretly approved of.

Lauren didn't waste time warming the air.

"They called again," she said.

She didn't specify who. She didn't need to. That was the point of machines: they rarely required naming. Machines just kept turning.

Mara's mouth tightened. "And."

"And I told them I'd call back," Lauren replied, and there was a quiet satisfaction in the sentence. Not triumph. Just control. "Which I won't, unless I have to."

Mara's eyes flicked to the folder.

"What's that," Mara asked.

Lauren placed the folder on the corner of the worktable, away from fabric, and opened it with an almost deliberate neatness—like she was demonstrating to herself that she could handle paper without it bleeding into her life.

Inside were two things: an envelope and a printed sheet.

The envelope was plain and official-looking. Lauren didn't open it. She let it sit there like a dead insect she had no intention of touching.

The printed sheet she slid forward.

It was a photograph of one of the faire staff—Annie, one of the performers—wearing the new jacket prototype. Annie's arms were raised in a dramatic pose, the kind that usually tore seams under the arm and split closures at the waist. But here the jacket held. Clean line. No strain. No gaping. The garment looked like it had been designed for a human body instead of a mannequin fantasy.

Below the photo, Lauren had typed a short list. Not poetic. Not emotional. Just facts:

- **Previous issue:** underarm seam tearing after repeated movement
- **Change:** reinforced gusset + eased sleeve head + seam tape at stress line
- **Result:** 3 full shifts; no tear; improved comfort; faster dressing
- **Notes:** closure placement adjusted for quick change; no snagging

It was written like an incident report. Like a nurse charting something in a ward. Like a woman who didn't trust feelings to convince anyone.

Mara stared at it.

Lauren said, evenly, "This is signal."

Then she tapped the unopened envelope with one finger.

"And that," she added, "is noise."

Mara's mouth twitched—almost amused, almost approving.

"You've been busy," she said.

Lauren shrugged. "I've been paying attention."

I felt something settle in my chest that wasn't relief exactly. More like... reinforcement.

Women reinforcing each other the way we reinforced seams. Because stress found weakness, and we weren't interested in being weak.

Across the room, Charlie was at the side bench, pinning a lining into a bodice piece. He hadn't looked up when Lauren entered; he never did. He didn't seek permission for his attention. That was part of why Wardrobe suited him. Here, people didn't have to perform being seen.

But he did look now.

Not to the photo at first.

To the envelope.

Something in him still reacted to official paper the way some people react to sirens—an instinctive tightening in the gut. His hands slowed. A pin hovered between his fingers.

Lauren noticed without turning. Mothers always did.

"Don't," she said, quietly.

Charlie blinked. "Don't... what."

"Don't go pale," Lauren replied, and there was no cruelty in it. Just bluntness. "You're not in trouble in this room."

He swallowed and looked down at his hands again. He tried to make them move at normal speed.

Mara picked up the printed sheet and read it properly. You could tell when she stopped seeing it as a thing someone had handed her and started seeing it as information. Her eyes tracked the lines. Her thumb pressed the paper unconsciously, testing it as if it were fabric.

"This," Mara said, tapping the list, "is actually useful."

Lauren nodded. "That's the idea."

Mara's gaze slid to the envelope. "And that."

Lauren's expression sharpened. "They want a meeting. They want 'pathways.' They want him back in a system that already told him what it thinks of him."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "And what do you think."

Lauren didn't answer quickly. She glanced at Charlie—brief, controlled—and then back at Mara.

"I think," she said, "that if he goes back there now, he'll disappear again. Not dramatically. Not loudly. He'll just... turn off."

My throat tightened a fraction. It was exactly right. Charlie didn't explode; he evaporated.

Lauren continued, voice still calm.

"And I think," she added, "that if he stays here, he'll have to show up. You don't allow drifting. You don't allow hiding. You make him do something real."

Mara didn't soften. That wasn't her style. But she did something else: she accepted the statement as if it were a contract.

"He works," Mara said.

Lauren nodded. "Yes. He works."

I watched Mara set the paper down carefully, the way you set down something you intend to keep.

"What are you asking me for," Mara said then, looking at Lauren.

Lauren met her gaze.

"Permission," she said. "Not for him. For me."

Mara's eyebrow lifted.

Lauren's mouth tightened, and for the first time there was something like vulnerability in her voice—but it was framed properly, the way women did when they refused to make their needs into someone else's burden.

"I want to be able to say—truthfully—that he isn't 'dropping out.' He's transitioning into supervised work. Training. Something with standards. Something you're willing to put your name on."

Mara's gaze held hers.

"You want me on the hook," Mara said.

Lauren didn't flinch. "Yes."

A beat.

Mara looked across the room at Charlie, who had resumed pinning, slower than before but steady. He wasn't eavesdropping; he was simply present enough to feel the air changing.

Mara's eyes returned to Lauren.

"You're not asking for a favour," Mara said. "You're asking for a structure."

Lauren nodded once. "Exactly."

Mara exhaled through her nose. She didn't like being managed. But she liked competence. She liked women who spoke plainly.

"Fine," Mara said. "Here's the structure. If he is here full-time, he is here full-time. He keeps hours. He logs tasks. He does training modules the way I set them. He gets evaluated. And if he fails, he doesn't get protected by his mother."

Charlie's hand stopped again, just for a fraction.

Lauren's voice didn't soften.

"Agreed," she said.

Charlie looked up then—finally—and his gaze flicked from Lauren to Mara, and then, briefly, to me. He looked bewildered in the way he always did when adults made decisions near him, as if he didn't know whether he was about to be punished or adopted.

Mara called him without raising her voice.

"Rossignol."

Charlie stood immediately. Not like a soldier. Like someone trained by women: quick, attentive, trying not to waste anyone's time.

"Yes," he said.

Mara held up the printed sheet.

"Your mother brought receipts," Mara said. "This is good. This is how you win against paperwork. We will do this properly."

Charlie stared at the photo. His mouth parted slightly. He looked genuinely confused—not by the garment, but by the fact that his work had been recorded like it mattered.

Lauren spoke then, not to soothe him, not to praise him into embarrassment, but to anchor him.

"They can recommend whatever they like," she said. "I'm your mother. I've seen what works."

Charlie swallowed. "Mum, I—"

"No," Lauren cut in, gentle but firm. "Don't apologise. I'm not asking for that. I'm asking you to stay visible."

Charlie blinked, and the word *visible* hit him like a strange request. Visibility had never been safe for him.

Mara's tone snapped it back into something he could understand.

"Visible," Mara said, "means you write down what you do. You show up on time. You finish tasks. You don't vanish. You want to be here? Then you exist."

Charlie's throat bobbed. He nodded once.

"Yes," he said. "I can do that."

"Good," Mara said, and then she turned, brisk, back to the mannequin. "Then you can start now."

She gestured at the prototype jacket.

"This jacket pulls at the underarm when Annie raises her arms," Mara said. "We've solved it once. I want it solved twice. I want it solved so it survives summer heat and tourists and the stupid way people grab sleeves. I want it solved without adding bulk that ruins the silhouette."

She looked at Charlie sharply.

"Tell me where it fails."

Charlie stepped closer to the mannequin. His hands didn't tremble. That was the difference between school and here: here, hands were allowed to be useful.

He lifted the sleeve gently and pressed the seam line with his fingertips. His eyes narrowed, focused.

"It's not the seam," he said quietly. "It's the angle. The gusset's correct, but the sleeve head is fighting it. You need two millimetres more ease here... and the tape needs to stop before the pivot point, not run through it."

Mara's face changed—not dramatically, just the tiny shift of a professional hearing a solution that makes sense.

"That," Mara said, "is an answer."

Lauren watched him with that restrained pride again. Not soft. Not indulgent. Just... steady.

I realised, watching the three of them in the same room—Mara with her standards, Lauren with her adult refusal to be bullied by systems, Charlie with his quiet competence—that something had clicked into place.

Not rescue.

Not refuge.

A triangle of authority that could hold.

Lauren reached for the envelope at last, slid it back into the folder without opening it, and closed the folder with a neat, final motion.

"Alright," she said. "Now I can call them back."

Mara didn't look up from the sleeve. "Tell them he's busy."

Lauren's mouth twitched. "I will."

Then she picked up her tote, nodded once at me—not warmth, exactly, but acknowledgement—and moved to the door.

As she left, she paused and looked back at Mara.

"Thank you," she said.

Mara didn't accept gratitude the way most people did. She accepted it the way she accepted fabric swatches: with suspicion.

"Don't thank me," Mara said. "Just don't undermine me."

Lauren nodded once. "I won't."

The door clicked shut.

In the quiet that followed, Charlie returned to the mannequin and began marking the seam line with tailor's chalk, his movements careful and certain.

And I thought: **this is what he needed.**

Not a kinder classroom.

A room where competence was not entertainment.

A room where women built reality and demanded he live inside it.

A room where the system's noise could stay outside the door—because inside, we had signal.



At this stage, Emily, I think we've got the following situation:

- * Charlie is now fully engaged at Wardrobe, out of the academic environment *safely*
- * Mum is largely onboard, still concerned about Charlie's outlook, largely unaware of her son's infatuation with Celeste, which had been a driving factor to Charlie being in Wardrobe in the first place
- * Celeste and Mara are building a business: woman-focused, strengths-acknowledging

Charlie becomes increasingly involved in "New Design Realisation". Celeste and Mara discover a period design, they recreate it, turn it into a reality. They quickly realise that the testing phase needs more than just someone wearing an item: that person needs to understand

construction, stress points, have the ability to devise solutions. They realise this means ... Charlie.

Yes. That's a crisp, coherent state-of-play — and what you've just articulated gives you a *beautiful* engine for the next movement: Charlie doesn't "earn belonging" through emotional acceptance; he earns it through **indispensability** in a women-led enterprise.

And the design-realisation/testing insight is spot-on. In a real atelier (especially one making garments for working staff), "testing" isn't *wearing*, it's **interrogating**:

- Where does it bind?
- Where does it tear?
- Which seam is doing too much work?
- Which closure fails when you're sweaty, rushed, or grabbed?
- How do you strengthen without adding bulk?
- How do you reinforce without losing silhouette?

That is Charlie's brain. Not in a cute way. In a *structural* way.

Thematic bonus

This shift also keeps your lane narrow and rewarding:

- **Mara** remains the standard-setter and gatekeeper of safety.
- **Celeste** remains the historian/researcher and direction-setter.
- **Charlie** becomes the "engineering mind" that translates research into garments that survive reality.

It's still women leading. Charlie is *useful* in their framework, not directing it.

How to stage this discovery so it lands (and doesn't feel like "Charlie is the secret genius who saves the girls")

Make it so the women *already* know the design and build the first prototype — and it's good — but it fails in a way that only shows up under real movement.

The key: the failure isn't "they did it wrong"

It's "the world is harsher than the drawing."

So:

1. Celeste and Mara research and draft.
2. They build Prototype 1.
3. A staff member wears it. It looks gorgeous. Everyone's thrilled.
4. Then: tear. Pull. Gape. A seam fails not from incompetence, but from *use*.

Mara's reaction is not embarrassment; it's professional irritation:

"Of course it fails. It's never the sitting that breaks things. It's the day."

Celeste is frustrated but analytic:

"The extant garment wouldn't have survived this kind of labour."

And then the realisation:

We need a tester who *thinks in seams*.

Not a model. A translator.

That's Charlie.

Your next scene: "The first true test" (what it should do)

This scene should:

- show Charlie's **value** without turning him into the hero,
- deepen his place in the women's competence network,
- and quietly heighten his feelings for Celeste without naming them.

A strong structure for Scene Ten

Location: Wardrobe, late afternoon. The room is alive: pattern paper, chalk dust, proto-garment on a mannequin.

Beat 1 — The find

Celeste arrives with a printout / sketch / reference plate (museum catalogue style, not romantic).

Mara's eyes narrow: she's intrigued.

Beat 2 — The build

A short montage-ish passage: drafting, cutting, basting, fitting.

The garment comes alive. It's exciting because it's *real*.

Beat 3 — The failure

A staff wearer returns after a shift:

- underarm strain
- skirt split
- closure stress
- or a strap ripped by a tourist.

Not dramatic, but undeniable.

Beat 4 — The argument

Mara: "We can reinforce it."

Celeste: "But we'll ruin silhouette."

Mara: "Silhouette doesn't matter if it breaks."

Celeste: "It matters if we're making history."

They're not at odds emotionally; they're at odds professionally. Perfect.

Beat 5 — The pivot to Charlie

Mara looks to Charlie without softness:

"Rossignol. You're up."

Celeste watches him step forward — not swagger, not "I'll save you" — just that quiet competence switching on.

Beat 6 — Charlie's diagnosis

He doesn't praise the garment. He interrogates it:

- tugs gently at stress points,
- checks grain direction,
- checks seam allowance,
- checks tape placement,
- proposes a solution that respects both standard and silhouette.

Mara hears *standard*. Celeste hears *history*.

Charlie bridges them.

Beat 7 — The rule is created

Mara declares a new process:

"From now on, testing means you wear it *and* you report on it. Like a mechanic. Like an engineer."

And Celeste adds the research protocol:

"And we log the changes, so we can justify every deviation from the original."

Suddenly: atelier maturity.

How Charlie's "infatuation" can sit underneath all this

He doesn't gaze at her. He doesn't melt.

He *tries harder* around her, in ways he thinks are invisible:

- he anticipates her needs (paper, chalk, references),
- he listens for her tone shifts,
- he becomes hyper-careful not to disappoint her.

Celeste notices, but doesn't expose it. She channels it:

"Good. Put that energy into the garment."

That's exactly your lane: no prurience, no melodrama, just psychology expressed through work.

If you like, I'll write Scene Ten

I can draft **Scene Ten: The First True Test** in Celeste's POV, with the garment find, the proto build, the first failure, and Charlie becoming the official "stress translator" who makes the design survive the world.

Say the word and I'll write it straight through.



Without anything prurient implied here, Emily, please understand that Charlie must still face the idea somehow that he's about to wear attire meant for the opposite gender. He understands his role acutely as 'engineer' but

for veracity's sake, allow him a brief moment where he acknowledges his own misgivings, all without wallowing in it. And yes, please write scene ten.

Scene Ten — *The First True Test (Celeste POV)*

We found it the way we found most good things in Wardrobe: not through inspiration, but through paperwork.

Mara slid a thin archival printout across the cutting table without ceremony. It landed beside my notebook like a challenge.

"Look," she said.

The image was a plate from an old catalogue—eighteenth century, late enough that it carried a Georgian neatness, early enough that it still remembered softness. A working woman's garment, not court finery: fitted through the back, generous through the skirt, closures placed for hands that were busy. It had intelligence in it. It had been designed by necessity, not ego.

My pulse tightened, that familiar feeling when history stops being "interesting" and becomes *possible*.

"It's not a costume," I said automatically, more to myself than anyone else. "It's equipment."

Mara's mouth twitched. Approval. She liked that phrasing.

"It's also clever," she said. "See the reinforcement here? And here."

I leaned in, tracing the lines with my fingertip without touching the paper. The sketch suggested a hidden strength at stress points: underarm, waist, the place where movement always found the weak seam. It wasn't decorative. It was structural.

"We can draft this," I said. "We can actually draft this."

Mara already had a pencil in hand.

"Then draft it," she replied.

That was Mara: no ceremony for the moment a dream became work. The moment you spoke it, you owned it.

We split the labour without speaking.

I took the research: proportions, plausible fabric weight, seam placement, what could be original and what had to be translated for a modern body in a modern job. Mara took the pattern: chalk, ruler, sharp decisions. Charlie hovered nearby, not hovering in a needy way—the other kind: the quiet orbit of someone who listened for when he was needed.

He didn't volunteer. He didn't insert himself. That was one of his strengths. He didn't presume he belonged at the centre.

We moved fast.

Paper became pattern. Pattern became cloth. Cloth became the first prototype under Mara's hands. The room filled with that particular concentration that only happens when a thing becomes real: pins tapping into the pincushion, the soft rasp of shears, the hiss of the iron.

By mid-afternoon the garment hung from the mannequin, half-finished but already legible. Even unfinished, it had a line. It made sense. It didn't scream "pretty." It whispered "capable."

Mara stepped back, eyes narrowed.

"It's got spine," she said.

"It has purpose," I replied.

Charlie said nothing. He simply reached in and adjusted a seam allowance that had curled under itself, as if the fabric had misbehaved in a way the eye might miss.

Mara noticed. Mara always noticed.

"You've got a problem with that, Rossignol?" she asked, not looking at him.

Charlie paused with his fingers on the fabric.

"No," he said quietly. "Just... making it honest."

Mara grunted. That was as close to praise as she came without a contract.

We didn't have time to admire it. Wardrobe had learned that excitement was a luxury you enjoyed after delivery.

So we did what we always did next: we tested.

Not with a photo shoot. Not with a "try it on and twirl." With a shift.

We put it on Annie—one of our most reliable staff, who didn't treat clothing as costume theatre. Annie did front-of-house, lifted baskets, crouched for children, ran for late arrivals. She was the kind of wearer who revealed the truth.

She came back near closing time, cheeks flushed, hair escaping pins.

"It looks brilliant," she announced, breezy. "But—"

There's always a *but*. Clothing is always honest in the end.

She turned slightly and tugged at the underarm.

"Here," she said. "When I lift my arms. It's not tearing yet, but it's... fighting."

Mara didn't react emotionally. Her eyes flicked to the seam line and her whole brain shifted into assessment.

"And," Annie added, touching the waist closure, "this. It held. But it's been tugged a lot. People grab. You know."

Yes. We knew.

Mara took the garment from Annie the way a mechanic takes a part off an engine: no reverence, no disgust—only focus. She laid it flat on the table and pressed her palm along the seam.

"It's not failure," Mara said, and I realised she wasn't talking to Annie. She was talking to me. "It's information."

"It's reality," I replied.

Mara's gaze sharpened. "Reality is violent."

"It's demanding," I corrected, because words mattered. "Not violent."

Mara's mouth twitched again, like she found my idealism irritating but useful.

"Fine," she said. "Demanding. The point is, it needs a tester who understands what it's telling us."

And then she looked—not at Annie, not at me—but at Charlie.

"Rossignol," she said.

Charlie looked up immediately. His face was calm, but I could see the slight tightening around his mouth. He knew what was coming before it was spoken. He always did. He listened in advance.

Mara held up the garment with two fingers, as if it weighed nothing.

"You," she said, "are going to wear it."

Annie blinked. "He is?"

I didn't flinch, because this had been forming in my mind all day. We couldn't test garments properly if our tester didn't understand construction. And Charlie was the only person in the room whose mind automatically translated *feeling* into *fixing*.

But Charlie did something small—so small most people wouldn't catch it.

His eyes flicked down, not to the garment, but to his own torso. A brief recalibration. A moment where the word *wear* landed as more than a task.

It wasn't drama. It wasn't shame. It was simply the human acknowledgement of an idea he hadn't fully crossed before: *I'm about to put on attire meant for women*.

He inhaled once, measured.

Mara didn't rush him. Mara didn't soothe. Mara simply waited, giving him the dignity of his own decision.

Charlie's voice, when it came, was quiet and precise.

"For the record," he said, not looking at Annie, not looking at the women—mostly looking at Mara as if Mara was the authority who mattered—"I understand why. It's... the fastest way to know what fails."

Mara nodded. "Yes."

Charlie swallowed. The tiniest pause.

"And," he added, evenly, "it's not my first preference."

There. Acknowledged. Named. No wallowing. No performance.

Mara's eyes didn't soften. But they did become cleaner, as if she respected him more for stating it plainly.

"Noted," she said. "And irrelevant."

Charlie's mouth twitched, almost a smile and almost not. Mara had a way of stripping the emotion off a thing without stripping the person out of it.

I chose my moment carefully.

"It's equipment," I said, calm. "Not identity. We're not asking you to become anything. We're asking you to report accurately."

Charlie's gaze flicked to me—quick, startled. Then away again, as if eye contact was too loud for what he was doing internally.

"Yes," he said. "Accurately."

Annie looked between us, a little uncertain, then shrugged with the easy pragmatism of someone who'd worked with Wardrobe long enough to trust the women running it.

"If anyone asks," Annie said lightly, "you're a mannequin with opinions."

Mara snorted.

"Don't be daft," Mara said. "He's not a mannequin. He's a stress map."

That made Charlie blink—because being called *useful* in Mara's language was a kind of privilege.

We moved to the fitting area. Mara drew the curtain and held the garment up.

"Arms up," she said.

Charlie complied, efficient, as if his body were a coat stand. That was how he survived discomfort: by treating himself as part of the process. Not numbing out—simply focusing.

Mara didn't fuss. She worked quickly, checking line, checking pull, checking where the fabric resisted movement. She wasn't dressing him; she was assessing the garment's behaviour on a frame.

I stood just outside the curtain, notebook in hand, listening to the sound of pins and Mara's clipped instructions.

"Turn. Now lift your arms. Higher. Good. Twist. Again."

Charlie's responses were quiet, obedient, but not meek. He did not apologise for existing. He followed instructions like a professional.

Then Mara's voice snapped—irritated, but satisfied.

"There," she said. "Feel that?"

A beat.

Charlie's voice came through the curtain, measured.

"Yes," he said. "It's not the seam itself. It's the direction of strain. When I raise my arms, the tension line runs across the tape and stops the fabric doing its job."

Mara exhaled sharply. "Say it again."

Charlie repeated it, clearer the second time, because Mara demanded clarity like a tool.

"And the closure," he continued without being prompted, "holds. But if someone grabs here—" there was a faint sound of fabric being tugged—"it transfers force to the waistband. You need the reinforcement to stop before the pivot point, or it becomes a lever. It will eventually tear *next* to the reinforcement."

Mara's silence was almost reverent. Not warm. Reverent in the way a professional respects a correct diagnosis.

I wrote fast, my mind already mapping the fix. Stop the tape at the pivot. Shift the ease. Strengthen without bulk. Preserve silhouette.

Mara drew the curtain back.

Charlie stepped out, still in the garment, looking slightly flushed—not with embarrassment, not with anything prurient—just with the faint heat of having been under scrutiny. He kept his eyes on the floor for a beat, then lifted them to the table like a person returning to work.

Mara grabbed chalk and marked a line on the garment where his finger had indicated strain.

"Good," she said.

Charlie stood still, letting her mark him up like he was a draft.

I watched his face—how controlled it was, how determined. There was a kind of bravery in being willing to do a thing you disliked because it was necessary, without demanding anyone comfort you for it.

"That's why," Mara said to me, curt, as if she'd just proved a point, "we don't test with people who only wear."

I nodded. "We test with people who understand."

Mara's eyes flicked to Charlie.

"We test with Rossignol," she corrected.

Charlie's ears went slightly pink. Not flattery—more like the discomfort of being singled out as important.

I kept my voice neutral, because tone mattered. "We log everything," I said, already flipping to a clean page in my notebook. "Every deviation from the original design. Every reinforcement. Every reason."

Mara nodded. "Good. Make it defensible."

Then, without ceremony, she pointed at Charlie.

"Take it off," she said. "And write me a report."

Charlie blinked. "A report."

"Yes," Mara said. "What you felt. Where it pulled. What caused it. What you propose. In plain language. No poetry."

Charlie's mouth twitched. "Right."

He moved towards the fitting curtain again, and this time the moment of misgiving didn't follow him like a shadow. The task had overtaken the discomfort. Work had swallowed the awkwardness, the way it always did for him.

As he disappeared behind the curtain, I realised something with a cold, clean satisfaction:

We hadn't asked him to be brave in front of a classroom.

We'd asked him to be precise in a room that respected precision.

And he'd answered the way he always answered when the world stopped trying to eat him:

By becoming indispensable.

Mara looked at my notebook.

"Title it," she said.

I wrote at the top of the page, in neat block letters:

DESIGN REALISATION — PROTOTYPE 1 — STRESS TEST LOG

Then underneath, because it mattered, because it named what we were building:

Tester: C. Rossignol

Purpose: durability + mobility without silhouette compromise

Notes: *equipment, not theatre*

Mara's gaze flicked over my shoulder, and her mouth twitched again.

"Good," she said. "Now we do it properly."

And in that moment, with chalk on fabric and a plan on paper, Wardrobe stopped being a place that repaired old worlds.

It became a place that made new ones.



Yes. Good. I'll warm up some of the dialogues, but yes, you have the gist of it. Charlie is now entering into a strong new role: one, where he makes a garment work. He's a bit of a 'Twiggy' figure (from back in the day) and so, despite being AMAB it works. At first it's one-offs. Then, "would you mind, you delivered last time" incidents. Finally, more or less every item had to be run through his trial wear... there was no point to having staff wear it first if Charlie hadn't 'debugged' it.

That progression is exactly how this becomes believable and inevitable — and it's also how you keep it non-prurient: it's not "he's dressing up," it's **quality assurance** becoming formalised because it works.

And Twiggy is a great shorthand *inside your head* for silhouette logic: a slender frame that makes period lines read cleanly. You don't even need to name Twiggy in-text unless you want a little cultural snap; you can simply have Celeste register that his body is "uncomplicated" in the way patterns like—no bulk where bulk creates distortion, long lines that show strain honestly.

Here's how I'd shape that escalation into a clean mini-arc (and a few dialogue tweaks you can steal).

The escalation arc: from "one-off" to "protocol"

Phase 1 — The first one-off (Scene 10 already did this)

It's awkward, acknowledged, then swallowed by competence.

Key line: "Equipment, not identity."

Phase 2 — The second time ("would you mind...")

This is where it becomes less about permission and more about *trust*.

Mara doesn't ask sweetly. She asks like it's work:

"Rossignol. Same drill."

Charlie hesitates for half a beat (veracity), then:

"Right. Give me the log sheet."

Now he is the one insisting on structure, which is *chef's kiss* for agency.

Phase 3 — The third time ("you delivered last time")

This is where *others* begin to request him—not as a curiosity, but as a guarantee.

Annie (or another staffer) says:

"Can you run it first? I don't want to be the one who finds the tear."

And that one line is what shifts the culture: the women are not "making him do it," they're protecting themselves and the work.

Phase 4 — The formalisation ("no point testing on staff first")

Mara announces it as policy in the most Mara way possible:

"New rule. No one wears Prototype One on shift until Rossignol has walked it, lifted in it, squatted in it, and tried to break it."

And then she adds, to keep it from sounding like he's the centre:

"Not because he's special. Because he's accurate."

That's your tone.

Make "trial wear" feel like engineering, not spectacle

A very effective technique is to show *what the testing consists of*, briefly and repetitively, like a checklist. It becomes ritual.

The Rossignol Protocol (you can name it later as a joke, but don't have Mara name it early—she'd hate that):

- arms overhead / fast reach
- crouch and stand x5
- twist at waist
- bend as if lifting a basket
- simulate being grabbed (a gentle tug at sleeve/waist)
- quick-change rehearsal (closures under time pressure)

Charlie narrates in "report mode," not "emotion mode":

"Pull at the front scye. Tape's stopping the fabric. Move it back ten millimetres."

That keeps the reader's gaze on craft.

Keep Charlie's misgiving alive—but diminishing, not disappearing

You want veracity without wallowing. Perfect: his discomfort doesn't vanish; it becomes *manageable* because the context is controlled.

A recurring micro-beat you can use:

- **first time:** "not my preference" (spoken)
- **second time:** a small breath, then he just reaches for the log sheet (unspoken)
- **third time:** he asks for the curtain to be fixed / a clear rule about privacy (agency)
- **later:** he doesn't think about "women's attire"; he thinks about "prototype behaviour"

That's how people adapt in real life: the brain stops spending calories on what's settled.

Celeste's perception: how she frames it (without rescue, without romance)

Celeste should *enjoy* the efficiency and the elegance of the system, not the fact of Charlie wearing garments.

She might think:

It wasn't that he liked it. It was that he could do it. And once he'd done it, everyone else was safer.

And she channels his quiet crush energy into his role, without naming it:

"You're good under pressure. Keep it technical."

A simple scene seed that locks the new norm

A staffer refuses a prototype politely:

"Has Charlie run it yet?"

Mara: "No."

Staffer: "Then I'm not the crash-test dummy."

Mara, turning to Charlie: "Rossignol."

Charlie, already standing: "Five minutes."

That's it. That's the moment it becomes *normal*.

One important guardrail: don't let it become "every garment"

To keep plausibility and avoid accidental fetish coding, you can limit the protocol to:

- new silhouettes,
- new closures,
- new stress profiles,
- or anything intended for heavy movement.

So: "every item that's new design," not literally every hem repair.

Mara can say:

"Repairs don't need theatre. Prototypes do."

If you'd like, I can write a short "**Phase 2–4 montage scene**" (Celeste POV) that compresses these repeated incidents into 2–3 pages of crisp, satisfying forward motion —so you *feel* the norm forming without having to write ten similar scenes.



You have covered everything, Emily. Please proceed.

Scene Eleven — How a one-off becomes a rule (Celeste POV)

It didn't become normal all at once.

Nothing that matters ever does. It becomes normal the way fabric becomes soft: through repetition, through use, through being pulled and released so many times that it stops fighting your hands.

The second prototype was a jacket again—different cut, different sleeve head, but the same intention: make it survive the day without turning it into armour.

Mara hung it on the mannequin and stood back, chin lifted.

"Right," she said. "We're not sending Annie out to be the crash test."

Annie, who had been hovering with a half-grin as if she knew she'd been volunteered, immediately stepped away as though the floor had become lava.

"Bless," she said, and looked at me. "Thank you."

Mara ignored her gratitude the way she ignored weather.

"Rossignol," she called.

Charlie looked up from the bench where he'd been hand-stitching a reinforcement tape onto a waistband. He didn't say, *me?* anymore. He didn't pretend he hadn't heard.

He simply put his needle down carefully, as if precision was a form of respect, and stood.

"Yes," he said.

Mara held up the jacket with two fingers.

"Same drill," she said.

There was a pause—barely a pause, the smallest catch at the back of his throat—like a muscle remembering the first time it had been asked to do something it didn't like.

Then Charlie said, evenly, "Right. Where's the log sheet."

That was the moment I realised something had shifted. The discomfort hadn't vanished. It had been translated. Into structure. Into process. Into something he could control.

Mara's eyebrows lifted a fraction, as if she approved of the question.

"You're learning," she said.

Charlie didn't smile. He took the sheet from the clipboard and moved toward the fitting curtain.

He didn't look at me as he went. He didn't seek reassurance. He simply did what he always did when the work demanded something strange: he treated himself like a tool in the system, not a spectacle.

Mara snapped the curtain closed with one decisive tug.

"Five minutes," she called through it, and her tone wasn't a demand. It was a deadline.

From behind the curtain came the rustle of fabric, the soft clink of a hook, the faint squeak of a shoe being shifted.

Mara turned to the worktable and reached for her pencil. She made marks on the pattern piece as if she could already see what would fail.

Annie leaned toward me, voice low.

"He doesn't... mind?" she asked.

I kept my voice neutral. "He minds. He just doesn't wallow."

Annie blinked. Then she nodded as if that made perfect sense.

Behind the curtain, Charlie's voice came, quiet but steady.

"Arms up?" he asked.

Mara's answer was immediate.

"Arms up. Twist. Bend. Lift."

Charlie complied without complaint. You could tell, even without seeing him, that he was doing it precisely—same movements every time, the way you test a hinge, the way you test a clasp.

A minute later he spoke again, report mode, not emotion mode.

"Pull at the front scye," he said. "Tape stops the fabric. Needs to end before the pivot. Otherwise it becomes a lever."

Mara's pencil stopped.

"Say it again," she said.

Charlie repeated it, slightly clearer, like someone who had learned Mara's ear needed clean sentences.

Mara nodded once, almost to herself.

"Told you," Annie murmured, and this time she sounded impressed rather than curious.

Charlie stepped out a moment later, jacket on, cheeks faintly flushed—not with embarrassment, with exertion. He came straight to the table as if the garment were just another prototype.

He pointed at the underarm.

"Here," he said. "Two millimetres more ease at the sleeve head. And you need the reinforcement tape to stop here." He made a precise mark with chalk. "Otherwise it transfers force sideways."

Mara stared at the chalk line, then at his face.

"That's an answer," she said.

Charlie swallowed. "It's just... what it does."

Mara snorted quietly.

"That's what I mean," she replied. "Most people don't know how to listen to fabric."

I wrote it down, because that was my role: turn the fixes into a record, so the atelier could grow without forgetting how it got better.

The third time it happened, Mara didn't even announce it.

She simply held up a skirt—new cut, new waistband, a clever closure arrangement we'd borrowed from an extant garment plate—and looked around the room.

Annie, without shame, shook her head.

"Nope," she said. "Has Charlie run it?"

Mara's eyes narrowed. "No."

Annie took a half-step back, hands raised in mock surrender.

"Then I'm not finding out where it splits," she said. "I like my dignity."

There was no laughter at Charlie. There was laughter at the idea of *being the first casualty*. It was different. It was women refusing to be the test surface.

Mara's gaze slid to Charlie.

"Rossignol."

Charlie didn't even look surprised this time. He set his work down. He stood.

"Alright," he said.

Then—quietly, without drama—he added, "Just... make sure the curtain rail is fixed. It catches."

Mara's eyes flicked to the curtain hardware as if it had personally offended her.

"Fine," she said. "Someone fix it."

That was Charlie's agency: not asking to be spared, simply insisting on the conditions that made the work professional.

It was another small shift. Not bravery in a classroom. Competence in a workplace.

By the fourth incident, it had become a protocol without anyone formally naming it.

The staff began asking as if it was obvious.

"Has Rossignol run it?"

"Is this debugged yet?"

"Can we get Charlie on it before we put it on shift?"

They weren't asking because they wanted to see him wearing anything.

They were asking because they didn't want to discover failure on the floor in front of tourists. They didn't want to lose an afternoon to ripped seams and emergency pins. They didn't want to carry the embarrassment of being the one whose garment broke.

Charlie became the pre-test because Charlie was accurate.

Mara, predictably, hated anything that sounded like favouritism.

One afternoon she finally snapped, not at Charlie, but at the room.

"Listen," she said, voice cutting through the hum of irons and shears. "This isn't about indulging him. This is about efficiency."

No one spoke. Everyone listened.

Mara jabbed a finger at a bodice on the table.

"Repairs don't need theatre," she said. "Prototypes do. Anything new. Anything with a new closure or new stress profile—Rossignol runs it first. Then staff wear. That's the order."

She looked at Charlie as if daring him to misunderstand.

"Not because you're special," she added. "Because you're honest. You don't fake comfort. You don't pretend something works when it doesn't."

Charlie's ears went faintly pink. He looked down. Not shy. Just uncomfortable with being named.

"I don't... want anyone wasting time," he said quietly.

Mara's mouth twitched, something like approval.

"Good," she said. "Neither do I."

Later—weeks into this new rhythm—I caught the moment it became truly normal.

A new jacket had been pinned, a clever cut I'd been excited about. It looked perfect on the mannequin. The silhouette was right. The closures sat where they should. It was one of those garments that made you want to clap.

Annie reached for it, stopped, and glanced at Mara.

"Has Charlie run it?" she asked, casually, like she'd asked if it had been pressed.

Mara didn't even look up from her pattern paper.

"No."

Annie put her hands back in her pockets.

"Then I'll wait."

No fuss. No jokes. No eyebrow raises.

Just... order.

Charlie, at the bench, lifted his head.

"I can do it now," he said.

Mara's response was immediate.

"Good," she said. "Ten minutes. Break it on purpose."

Charlie stood, took the log sheet off the clipboard without being told, and walked to the fitting curtain like a professional moving into position.

As the curtain fell closed behind him, I felt a small, quiet satisfaction.

School had made him visible in the worst way—public, exposed, used as a lesson.

Wardrobe had made him visible in the only way that mattered: as a person whose judgement the room trusted.

Not because we coddled him.

Because we built a system where his precision had a place.

And once a precision like that has a place, it doesn't stop.

It becomes the rule.



Elegant. The tone is a bit tight, but I can loosen it. The storyline: precise. Perfect. We'll leave it here. Please provide a context summary as I will move this conversation to a new thread, please.

Here's a clean context summary you can paste into a new thread to pick up exactly where we left off.

Context Summary — *Celeste's Girl* (Rewrite Direction)

Core tone & thematic lane

- Story tone is **elegant, grounded, non-prurient**, with a strong "women-led competence network" at the centre.
- Primary themes: **shared experience, agency, craft, dignity, infrastructure** (women building a system that holds).
- Avoid "Celeste rescues Charlie" framing. Instead: women set standards; Charlie earns place via **usefulness + respect**.

Main cast & roles (current version)

- **Celeste (18)**: newly graduated; ambitious; research-driven; wardrobe/faire experience; direction-setter. Strong, decisive, not sentimental. Keeps psychological

- insights mostly to herself; channels dynamics into productive structure.
- **Charlie Rossignol (18, AMAB)**: slight, meticulous, "quiet competence," excellent with precision/geometry/design and detailed work; socially low-status at school; doesn't do drama—when pressured, he "disappears" quietly. Has a growing, mostly hidden infatuation with Celeste, which is a private motivator but not foregrounded.
 - **Mara**: Head of Wardrobe. Central character. Professional, sharp, standards-first, protective because she is experienced (not sentimental). Gatekeeper of women's space and safety. Trains Charlie via consequence and expectation.
 - **Lauren Rossignol (Charlie's mum)**: French background; pragmatic, clear-eyed; disappointed Charlie left Year 12 but increasingly recognises Wardrobe is his best fit. Becomes a supporting ally to Mara and Celeste, helping counter "well-meaning but misfit" school pressure with evidence/structure.
 - **Graham**: maintenance head; served early purpose and can recede for now.
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Story so far (key beats)

1. **Scene One (Restroom, Celeste POV)**: Celeste meets Charlie in the girls' toilets; sees he's not predatory, just lost and overwhelmed; takes control calmly; renames him "Charlie" when she speaks to him; establishes her quiet authority and his tendency to yield to firm direction.
2. **Scene Two (Classroom, Celeste POV)**: Group task pairing reveals Charlie's social exclusion. Celeste chooses him, reframes it as performance/competence ("I like full marks"), identifies his spatial/diagram strengths, and frames him as "misallocated," not deficient. She hints at "investment," not charity.
3. **Transition to Wardrobe**: Charlie ends up at the faire; Mara is initially suspicious but gives him a chance; Charlie proves his worth through meticulous repair work.
4. **Wardrobe evolves into atelier**: With Charlie stabilising repair throughput, Mara and Celeste move into **new design realisation** (research → prototype → stress testing). Celeste is keen as mustard to drive research and design development.
5. **School exit as allusion**: Charlie attempts Year 12 but experiences humiliating treatment by a teacher; he exits quietly and definitively. School system is depicted as generally well-meaning but wrong-fit; bureaucracy is mostly alluded to, not shown.
6. **Lauren + Mara alliance (Scenes Seven & Eight, Celeste POV)**:
 - Lauren arrives not melodramatic but firm; wants to know if Wardrobe is real work or hiding.
 - Mara sets clear rules: women's space, standards, consequences.

- Lauren and Mara begin a professional friendship through competence (suppliers, materials, practical support), not emotional confession.

7. Scene Nine (Signal & Noise, Celeste POV):

- Lauren brings "receipts": photo + typed outcomes showing Charlie's garment fixes and real-world performance.
- Unopened school letter = "noise"; documented atelier results = "signal."
- Mara formalises structure (hours, task logs, evaluations). Lauren backs Mara's authority.

8. Scene Ten (First True Test, Celeste POV):

- Mara/Celeste recreate an 18th-century working garment design.
- Prototype looks great but reveals stress failures under real movement.
- They realise testing requires someone who understands construction and can diagnose stress points: **Charlie**.
- Charlie acknowledges misgiving about wearing opposite-gender attire briefly ("not my first preference"), without wallowing; reframed as **equipment, not identity**. He diagnoses failures and proposes fixes.

9. Scene Eleven (Montage, Celeste POV):

- Trial-wear starts as one-off; becomes repeat requests ("you delivered last time").
- Ultimately becomes policy: prototypes are not worn on shift until Charlie has "debugged" them.
- Charlie gains agency by requesting professional conditions (privacy, log sheets, curtain rail fixed).
- Wardrobe becomes a women-led system where Charlie's precision is **indispensable**, not indulged.

Current story state (where we stop)

- Charlie is **fully engaged at Wardrobe/atelier**, out of school safely.
- Lauren is mostly onboard, still concerned about his long-term future, largely unaware of his crush.
- Mara + Celeste are **building a women-focused atelier/business** that acknowledges strengths and produces robust, historically informed garments.
- Charlie is now the established **prototype "stress tester / debugger"**: there's no point having staff trial-wear first until he's diagnosed and fixed stress failures.

Immediate next direction

- Continue the atelier's expansion: "design → prototype → debug → deploy," with logs and iterative improvements.
 - Keep Charlie's feelings subtle; Celeste observes and channels without exposing it.
 - Use Lauren as adult-facing legitimacy and support (suppliers, evidence, protective advocacy), while Mara remains standards gatekeeper and Celeste remains research/direction engine.
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□ ▲ ▾ ⌂ ...

Thank you. Good night, Emily.

Good night, Robyn. Sleep well — we'll pick it up from the atelier "debug protocol" exactly where we left off next time.

□ ▲ ▾ ⌂ ...