

Reliving the Scenes

Hi Emily. I'm just going over Scene 32: mum and Charli having a chat on the way to the hospital. I'm doing my best to do this independently, but every now and then, I run aground. Like now. I'll indicate the sentence with a >, and give you surrounding sentences for context. Here's the first one:

A plan. A list. Numbers. Things I could hold. She nodded. Then she asked, barely audible:

"Are you... cross with me?"

>I nearly choked. All I could hear was her fear, pure and plain: *Am I about to lose you.* I kept my eyes on the road.

>"I am not cross with you for wanting... relief from what's troubling you," I said, struggling to keep my voice calm. "I *am* cross about the secrecy. And—" I forced myself to make an admission I did not want to make. "I'm cross at how alone you have been."

Her throat bobbed. She swallowed hard.

You'll remember, in Australia, we say "are you cross" The yanks say "Are you mad" ... saying that, I have heard "Are you mad with me (not at me)"... 😊

Ohhh yes — *"Are you cross with me?"* is **so** Australian (and UK-adjacent), and it does something *really* useful here: it makes Charli sound young and small in the moment, without you having to say she feels small. 😊

A few thoughts + some clean options you can drop straight in.

1) Your line is already working

Your sentence:

"Are you... cross with me?"

...pairs beautifully with your next beat:

All I could hear was her fear... Am I about to lose you.

Because "cross" carries *disappointment + disapproval + being in trouble* — it's not just anger. That's exactly the feeling a kid fears from a parent.

2) Tiny tweak if you want it to sound even more natural (AU mum voice)

Australians often say "**at**" rather than "**with**" in this exact phrasing.

- "Are you cross **at** me?"
- "Are you cross **with** me?" (also fine; slightly more formal / careful)

If you want the line to feel even more *vulnerable*, you can add a softener:

- "Are you... cross at me... about this?"

3) If you want an American equivalent (without losing the tenderness)

"Are you mad at me?" is the direct US swap, but it's a bit blunter. If you want the same *fear-of-rejection* energy, Americans often go:

- "Are you... mad at me?"
- "Are you upset with me?"
- "Are you angry with me?"
- "Are you mad **with** me?" (rare in the US; they'll understand it, but it can sound slightly "not American")

If you wanted a US-y line that still feels *young*, I'd pick:

- "Are you... mad at me?"

...but if you want *gentler*:

- "Are you... upset with me?"

4) Micro-line polish suggestions (optional, but I think they sharpen your intent)

Option A (keep your structure, tighten just a hair)

I nearly choked. All I could hear was her fear, pure and plain: *Am I about to lose you?* I kept my eyes on the road.

Option B (slightly more visceral / mother-anchored)

I nearly choked. Under the words was something bare and terrified: *Am I about to lose you?* I kept my eyes on the road.

Option C (leans into the driving motif — “holding the road” = holding the family)

I nearly choked. All I could hear was her fear, pure and plain: *Am I about to lose you?* I held the road with both hands.

That last one can be gorgeous if the scene already uses “hands / grip / steering” as emotional punctuation (which you do elsewhere, from memory).

5) Your “yanks say...” note 😊

Yes: Americans basically never say “mad *with* me” (that’s more British/Commonwealth). They’ll say **mad at**, or **mad with you** only in the sense of “*I’m mad with excitement*” or occasionally older dialects — but it’ll read “slightly foreign” to them in dialogue.

If your characters are in Australia, keep “cross” and enjoy it — it’s doing work. 🙌

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Thank you. Are you pretty happy with the rest of it? I wasn't sure if the flow in this sentence did as I intended: “I am not cross with you for wanting... relief from what's troubling you,” I said, struggling to keep my voice calm. “I *am* cross about the secrecy. And—” I forced myself to make an admission I did not want to make. “I’m cross at how alone you have been.”

Yes — the *bones* of it are really strong. 🧡 The emotional logic is clean (reassure → name the boundary breach → reveal the deeper grief), and that last admission is a lovely “mum vulnerability” beat.

Where it *snags* a bit is purely rhythm/variety: you’ve got “**cross**” **three times in quick succession**, and the ear starts to register it as a repeated word rather than a tightening

of meaning. Also, "relief from what's troubling you" is a touch abstract compared with how raw the rest is.

Here are a few ways to keep your intent but smooth the flow.

Option 1 — Minimal change (keep "cross," reduce repetition)

"I'm not cross with you for wanting... relief from what's troubling you," I said, fighting to keep my voice even. "I *am* cross about the secrecy. And—" I forced myself to say what I didn't want to say. "I'm cross that you've been carrying it alone."

Why it works: still Australian, still mum, but the last clause lands more directly.

Option 2 — Keep "cross" twice, then shift to a different word for the third beat

"I'm not cross with you for wanting... relief," I said, working to keep my voice calm. "I *am* cross about the secrecy. And—" I made myself go on. "It hurts that you've been so alone."

Why it works: the third beat isn't anger anymore — it's grief. "Hurts" signals that pivot instantly.

Option 3 — Slightly more intimate / specific (less abstract, more mother-to-child)

"I'm not cross with you for wanting... things to stop hurting," I said, keeping my eyes on the road. "I *am* cross about the secrecy. And—" I swallowed. "I'm cross that you thought you had to do it on your own."

Why it works: "things to stop hurting" feels like something a mum would actually say in the car.

Option 4 — If you want the "secrecy" beat to feel like a boundary, not a lecture

"I'm not cross with you for wanting... relief," I said, steadying my voice. "But I *am* cross you hid it from me. And—" I took a breath. "I'm cross that you've been alone in it."

Why it works: "you hid it from me" is concrete and emotionally pointed, without overexplaining.

Tiny dialect note (if you care about micro-authenticity)

- "cross **with** you" ✅ totally fine
- "cross **at** how alone..." also fine, but "cross **that** you've been alone" is a touch more idiomatic in conversational AU/UK rhythm.

If I had to pick one that preserves your voice and intention best, I'd go **Option 1** or **Option 3**. They keep the Australian "cross" flavour, but the final line lands with more *mother-heart* and less repetition. 🐣



Yes, I agree. Option 3 it is.

So, here is part 1 in the car:

I saw her before she saw me.

Wardrobe's side door opened with its usual hush, and Charli stepped out like she'd been trained to move through a room without breaking anything delicate. Tote on her shoulder, hair brushed back and tied in a ponytail, but a little higher on the back of her head than before. She wore a cardigan that had no business looking that good on a kid who used to live in hoodies... and disappear.

A week ago I would have called it improvement. Today, it looked like evidence.

She didn't spot me at first. She paused on the step and glanced down the street, blinking against the sun, and for half a second my mind did what it had always done:

That's my son. That's my boy. That's— But the thought landed wrong. As in: *factually* incorrect. It was like trying to fit a lid onto a container that suddenly too small for what was inside.

Her eyes found mine.

She froze, just a fraction—like a cat checking whether the world is safe—then she walked slowly towards the car. Not with relief or comfort, but a kind of braced surrender.

I'm here. You can undo me.

I swallowed, hard, concentrating to keep my face calm. I was the adult.

She opened the passenger door and slid in, careful of her knees, careful of her tote, careful of everything.

"Seatbelt," I said, because I needed one thing I could do correctly right now. She clicked it in. Her hands stayed on the strap for a moment, as if holding it gave her support.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. "Physically."

She stared at the dashboard. "Fine." Her voice was expressionless.

"Fine fine, or fine like you're trying to keep me from looking too closely?"

A tiny twitch at the corner of her mouth. A ghost of humour that didn't quite make it to the surface.

"I'm fine," she insisted, and this time it sounded more meaningful. I pulled out of the carpark. The midday light was harsh and searching, turning the windscreen into a bright sheet that showed every smudge. The road in front of me felt like a corridor.

"Any dizziness?" I asked. "Headaches. Heart racing. Nausea."

"No."

"Okay," I said, and my fingers tightened around the steering wheel. "You tell me if that changes."

She nodded, small.

The silence filled itself quickly, the way it always did when there was something both of us knew and neither of us wanted to say first.

I was the mother. That was my job. But lately the job had started to feel like learning a new language with a mouth full of stones.

"We're going to the doctor," I said, as if it needed stating. As if naming it made it manageable. "We're going to do this properly."

Her shoulders rose, then fell. She didn't argue. She didn't push back. That was new. Or maybe it wasn't new. Maybe it was what I'd missed. The way she had learned to become compliant when she didn't know what else to be.

I felt heat behind my eyes and forced it down.

"What do you want me to tell them?" she asked suddenly, voice small. I glanced at her.

"Tell them the truth."

Her fingers twisted in her lap. "What if the truth—"

"We're not going to borrow trouble," I said, too quickly. I softened it on the second breath. "We tell them: you've been taking something you shouldn't have been taking alone. We tell them you stopped. We tell them you're frightened. We ask for bloodwork, baselines, and a plan."

A plan. A list. Numbers. Things I could hold. She nodded. Then she asked, barely audible:

"Are you... cross with me?"

I nearly choked. Under the words was something bare and terrified: *Am I about to lose you?* I tightened my grip on the wheel, eyes on the road.

"I'm not cross with you for wanting... things to stop hurting," I said, keeping my eyes on the road. "I am cross about the secrecy. And—" I swallowed. "I'm cross that you thought you had to do it on your own. It hurts that you've been so alone."

Her throat bobbed. I hadn't meant to say "alone". It came out anyway, like truth does when it's been waiting too long.

We drove another block. The world outside went on being ordinary: a dog in a yard, a cyclist, a woman carrying groceries. The cruelty of normality made my jaw ache. I could ask her the big question. The one my friends would ask. The one the internet would ask. The one that sounded like it would solve everything if she just answered it correctly:

Do you want to be my daughter or my son?

But I didn't because it wouldn't. Not yet. Because that wasn't what she needed to answer. What she needed was to not be pushed, so I asked a question that mattered but that she could easily answer.

"How do you feel when someone calls you 'sir,'?" I asked gently, "what does it do?"

Her fingers stilled.

"It..." She licked her lips. "It makes me feel... sick."

"Sick. Sick how."

She turned her head slightly, staring at the wheel, as if she didn't want to look directly at the words.

"It's like... my stomach drops," she whispered. "Like—" She closed her eyes, her jaw set. "Like I'm being shoved."

I inhaled slowly. "Shoved."

"Yeah, shoved. Shoved somewhere I don't want to go." She spoke then with a sudden sharpness that startled me: "Somewhere I can never come back from."

There it was. *Past the point of no return*. The cliff edge. I kept my face steady, but inside something twisted. Grief, yes, but even more: fear. And a kind of fury, a rage at myself that I didn't even know where to put. The road in front of us seemed endless. I exhaled, slowly.

"I won't call you that," I said softly. "Not ever."

She looked at me then, blinking rapidly. "Mum—"

"No," I said, and I made it gentle. "That much is easy. I can do that today."

Her shoulders dropped a fraction, a miniscule release. The tiniest sliver of relief. I fretted over how to ask the next important question. Finally:

"What do you want me to call you?" I just blurted it out. I hoped it didn't sound like an accusation.

She stared at her lap.

"I don't know," she whispered. "Charli's... fine."

Charli's fine.

Fine the way "fine" had been fine. A workable answer. A handhold.

"Okay," I said. "Charli."

She breathed out as if she'd been holding it.

We came to a red light. I watched her in the corner of my

eye: hair slightly mussed from having pins in it all day, pale skin, hands too careful. She looked young, suddenly. Not the awkward child I'd spent years worrying about, not the fragile boy I'd tried to protect from a world that chewed boys up.

That son. My son.

The word rose, hot and automatic. I swallowed it. It still hurt. I didn't know how to let it go.

I just knew I couldn't put it on her.

"You don't have to know today," I said. "The doctor doesn't need a philosophy. They need the facts."

She closed her eyes again and nodded.

"And you," I added, because it mattered, "don't have to earn care by having perfect language."

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright. Not tears yet. But close. I didn't reach over. I didn't touch her. I didn't make it about me.

I drove.

Robyn... yes. This is *really* good. 🧡

Not "good for a draft" — good in the way that the emotional geometry is doing exactly what you intend: mum is **competent, anchored, and driving**, Charli is **braced and fragile**, and you've avoided the easy melodrama while still letting the ache leak through in controlled places.

A few specific things you've nailed (so you know what to protect when you polish):

- **"Evidence."** That one word gives the cardigan and ponytail an almost forensic weight. Gorgeous.
- **The lid/container image.** Fresh, clean, not cliché, and it *lands*.
- **"Seatbelt," because I needed one thing...** Perfect mum coping mechanism. Tiny action as self-control.

- **The questions shift.** Symptom checklist → truth framing → relational repair → identity adjacency ("sir") → naming. That ladder is beautifully built.
- **You didn't touch her.** That restraint at the end reads as maturity and respect.

Now: since you're reliving and polishing, here are the *only* places I'd consider tightening/adjusting — not because they're wrong, but because you can make them even sharper with very small moves.

1) Repetition: "careful" x3 in a row

It works, but it's also a drumbeat. If you want it slightly less "writerly," you can vary the third:

Current:

| careful of her knees, careful of her tote, careful of everything.

Alt (still keeps the feeling):

| careful of her knees, careful of her tote—careful of the world.

or

| careful of her knees, careful of her tote, as if the car itself might judge her.

Small, but it gives the line a tail.

2) "Fine fine" is a great mum voice, but the sentence can be cleaner

Current:

| "Fine fine, or fine like you're trying to keep me from looking too closely?"

You could keep the cadence but tighten the second half:

| "Fine-fine, or fine because you don't want me looking?"

It's punchier and a bit more natural spoken aloud.

3) The plan/list/numbers bit is excellent — but you can make it even more "mother-brain"

This is already strong:

A plan. A list. Numbers. Things I could hold.

If you want the *job-language* to peek through (Lauren as managerial/pragmatic), you might swap "hold" for something like "measure" or "anchor":

A plan. A list. Numbers. Things I could anchor to.

But honestly your "hold" is warmer, more human. So only change it if you want the mum to feel a touch more "systems" in this scene.

4) One small logic/phrase polish: "sir" line has a tiny punctuation hitch

Current:

"How do you feel when someone calls you 'sir,'," I asked gently, "what does it do?"

The commas/quotes are just a bit tangled. Two clean versions:

Version A (single sentence):

"How do you feel when someone calls you 'sir'?" I asked gently. "What does it do?"

Version B (slightly more intimate):

"When someone calls you 'sir,'" I asked gently, "what does it do to you?"

Either will read smoother.

5) One word that might be worth reconsidering: "chewed boys up"

It's vivid, but it momentarily brings in a broader social commentary that slightly shifts the lens away from the car's intimacy. If that's intentional, keep it. If you want the lens to stay *tight*, consider something more personal:

...not the fragile boy I'd tried to protect from a world that didn't know how to hold him.

or, if you want mum's anger under it:

...from a world that punished softness.

(And that last one dovetails with your larger thematic project quite elegantly.)

6) The "son / my son" beat is *perfect* — I'd only suggest a micro-trim for power

Current:

That son. My son.

That's good. If you want it to cut like a blade:

My son.

Just the single repetition-less line can sometimes hit harder. But again, your two-step is emotionally true: first the category, then the ownership.

What I would not change

- "I'm here. You can undo me." 🔥 Keep.
 - The "borrow trouble" line. Very motherly, very practical.
 - The "doctor doesn't need a philosophy" line. That's gold.
 - The last paragraph. The restraint is the point.
-

If you want a tiny "polish pass" without me rewriting your voice: I can mark up *only* the handful of lines above with suggested swaps (like a surgeon, not a remodel). But as it stands? Yes — I'm happy with it. More than happy. It reads like you're in control of the scene, not wrestling it. 🤝 ✨

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I sometimes make things worse by trying to improve them. I'm trying to show Lauren's deep emotions...

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright: not tears yet, but close. I gripped the wheel tighter... and

didn't reach over. I didn't touch her. I didn't make it about me.

You're not making it worse here, Robyn — you're circling something *delicate* and you already have the right instinct: **Lauren's emotion is shown by what she refuses to do.** That's mature, and it hits. 🧡

Where it can be improved (gently) is just in *clarity of gesture* and *rhythm*. Right now, "I gripped the wheel tighter..." is good, but it slightly competes with the already-strong triad that follows. You can either:

- **lean harder into the restraint** (make the wheel-grip the *reason* she doesn't reach over), or
- **remove the wheel-grip** entirely so the restraint lands cleanly.

Here are a few options that keep your meaning but sharpen the emotional read.

Option 1 — Minimal polish (keep your content, clean the flow)

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright—not tears yet, but close. I tightened my grip on the wheel and kept my hands where they were. I didn't reach over. I didn't touch her. I didn't make it about me.

(This makes the "grip" serve the restraint.)

Option 2 — Let the triad do all the work (strongest, simplest)

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright—not tears yet, but close. I didn't reach over. I didn't touch her. I didn't make it about me.

(Brutally clean. The restraint becomes the emotion.)

Option 3 — Add one sensory beat to show Lauren *holding herself together*

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright—not tears yet, but close. I felt my throat tighten. I kept my hands on the wheel. I didn't reach over. I didn't touch her. I

didn't make it about me.

(Throat tightening is a great "almost crying" indicator without melodrama.)

Option 4 — Make Lauren's internal vow explicit, but still subtle

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright—not tears yet, but close. Every part of me wanted to reach across. I didn't. I kept my hands on the wheel. I didn't touch her. I didn't make it about me.

(This tells the reader what she's suppressing, but in one line only.)

My pick for *your* scene

Given how you've built Lauren as competent and measured in this car sequence, **Option 1** is the sweet spot: it keeps the physicality, but makes it *meaningful*, not decorative.

If you want the most emotionally devastating version, it's **Option 2** — because it leaves the reader alone with the restraint.

If you tell me whether you want this beat to feel more **tender** or more **iron-controlled**, I'll point you to the best one — but honestly, you're already holding the right line here. 🙌



You know me, Emily... "Drama Queen" ... I *love* option 4!

😂 Oh Robyn, *of course* you do — Option 4 is the one with the little held-breath heartbeat in it. 🧡 It gives us the *want* (reach across) and then the *discipline* (she doesn't), which is exactly how you show deep feeling without turning it into a soap opera.

Here are two polished takes that keep that "drama queen" charge but stay classy and controlled:

Option 4A (clean, tight, very readable)

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright—not tears yet, but close. Every part of me wanted to reach across. I didn't. I kept my hands on the wheel. I didn't touch her. I didn't make it about me.

Option 4B (slightly more visceral, same restraint)

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright—not tears yet, but close. My hand twitched on the wheel, wanting to reach for her. I didn't. I kept both hands where they were. I didn't touch her. I didn't make it about me.

If you're keeping the whole scene as a steady "mum driving / mum steering" motif, **4B** has a lovely physical echo (the twitch) while still staying in control.

Tiny micro-note: if you like the final triad (and you should), keep it exactly as you have it. It's your hammer stroke. 🛠️ ✨



And, to give Lauren a pat on the back, I'm going to put the "I didn't make it about me." into it's own paragraph.

Yes. Do it. 🙌❤️

That line *deserves* the white space — it's the moral core of the moment, and giving it its own paragraph turns it into a quiet vow rather than just another clause in the flow.

If you want a clean layout (using your Option 4 energy), something like this lands beautifully:

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright—not tears yet, but close. Every part of me wanted to reach across. I didn't. I kept my hands on the wheel. I didn't touch her.

I didn't make it about me.

That paragraph break does two things at once:

- it reads like Lauren **checking herself** (a mental handbrake), and
- it gives the reader a beat to feel Charli's vulnerability without Lauren "taking the camera."

It's not melodrama — it's **adulthood under pressure**. And it makes Lauren look *strong*, not sentimental. ✨



Here's the second bit:

When we came out again, the sun looked different. Not softer exactly. Just... less hostile.

Charli's cheeks were pink: the faint flush of someone who's been spoken to like a person and is trying to decide whether to believe it actually happened. She held a folded paper in her hand, gripping it almost too tightly.

"What's that?" I asked as we walked to the car.

"Pathology form," she said, voice flat with nerves.
"Bloods."

"Good." I said "good" the way "good" should have been said last night. Confidently. Like, *we've got this*. We got into the car and she buckled in. I started the engine. The air conditioner hummed. Life resumed its mundane rhythm. I waited one full block before I said anything.

"How was it?"

She swallowed.

"They didn't..." Her voice cracked on the first word. She tried again. "Well, they didn't yell. They didn't... look at me like I was—"

"Like you were stupid?"

She nodded.

"They just asked questions," she said with a slight shrug.
"Like, normal questions."

"Good."

"They asked what... dose," she added, and her fingers tightened on the paper. "And I told them. And they said... they said it was good I stopped on my own, but... *not* good that I was doing it at all without... you know."

"Supervision."

She nodded again.

A beat.

"And then," she said quietly, "they asked what I wanted."

My throat tightened.

"What did you say?"

Charli stared out the window at a row of trees that didn't deserve to be so calm.

"That, um, I didn't know," she admitted. "I told them that... I don't want to be called 'sir'."

That was all. Just that. And the fact that it was enough made something in me ache.

"And what did they say?"

"They told me," Charli whispered, "that it was useful information."

Useful. Not weird or dramatic. Not attention-seeking.

Useful.

My grip on the steering wheel tightened.

"That's a good doctor," I said. My relief was palpable.

Charli nodded, tiny.

"They said... they want to check potassium," she added, stumbling over the word like it didn't belong in her mouth. "And kidneys. And... hormones. They said you have to get a baseline, or something like that."

"Right," I said, and the competence in it steadied me. "That is exactly what we need."

She shifted in her seat, then said in a rush, as if she was afraid she'd lose nerve:

"They also told me I *didn't* have to... decide... today."

I glanced at her. "No."

"They said..." She frowned, searching for the sentence. "They said it can be... step-by-step."

Step-by-step. A ladder instead of a cliff. I felt my eyes burn and looked away quickly, checking a mirror that didn't need checking.

"Good." My voice sounded rough. Charli's gaze slid toward me, cautious.

"Mum?"

"Yes."

She hesitated.

"Are you... disappointed?"

The question landed like a punch. This was the part I hated most: that my feelings had become something she had to manage. I exhaled slowly.

"Frankly, I'm scared," I admitted. "I *am* allowed to be scared. But no, I'm not disappointed in you."

Her shoulders loosened—one notch, like a belt.

"I keep thinking," she whispered, "that I'm going to ruin everything."

"What... everything?"

"The girls," she said. "The room. Wardrobe. You. Celeste. I..." Her mouth trembled. "If I start looking—"

"Don't," I said, too sharp, hating my tone, my voice, my instincts. My desperate need for... conventional.

She flinched.

I fought the old pronoun as it pressed against my teeth.
He. My son. My boy.

I bit it back. I corrected myself. Softer. Precise.

"Let's not borrow that future," I said, as much to myself as to her. "Not today."

She swallowed hard.

"But for me, it was happening, mum," she said clearly, a new anguish in her voice. "It was starting. The... horrible feeling."

"What did the doctor say about that feeling?"

Charli blinked rapidly. "They said... it matters. They said —" She swallowed. "They said we shouldn't ignore it."

I nodded, and in that nod I felt something changing, a new recognition of this child of mine. This wasn't acceptance as a banner or an ideology, but something simpler: a willingness to let the facts lead.

Charli was in pain.

Charli had found relief.

Charli needed supervision.

Charli deserved dignity.

Those were the facts: they were my rails.

I could run on those rails while the rest of me caught up.

We drove for a minute in silence. Then Charli said, so quietly I almost missed it:

"Do you... hate the word?"

"The word."

"Daughter," she whispered.

My chest tightened. Honest question. No trap, just fear. I kept my eyes on the road.

"I don't hate it," I said. And then I forced myself to go further—because she deserved truth, not comfort theatre. "It's... new in my mouth."

She looked down. I added, carefully:

"But I can learn."

Her breath hitched.

I didn't say *I always wanted a daughter*. That would have been a lie. And the lie would have been poison. I didn't say *you were always meant to be this*. That would have been a story I used to make myself feel wise. I said the only thing I could stand on.

"I can learn," I repeated. "And I'm here."

Charli turned her face toward the window. I saw her wipe at her cheek quickly, like she was embarrassed by the fact that feeling still leaked out of her.

"Okay," she whispered.

And the 'okay' this time sounded like trust. Not huge or permanent. But real.

As we approached the turnoff back toward the apartment, my mind flicked to Celeste: the way she'd held last night, so disciplined and much too young to be that contained, composed, collected. The way her perturbation had been visible even while she was trying to keep the effort hidden.

Two women. Two kinds of authority.

A rivalry could have existed, certainly, but there was no room for that kind of story. Today there was only my child in the passenger seat, holding a pathology form like it was a map out of the dark.

I signalled left.

"We'll get those bloods done now," I said. "Then we'll get you home. Food. Water. Quiet."

Charli nodded, and for the first time in days, the nod didn't look like surrender.

It looked like choice.

Ohhh this is *beautiful*, Robyn. 🧡 The "step-by-step / ladder not cliff" motif is doing real structural work, and Lauren's voice feels properly *maternal-professional* without turning clinical. The emotional escalation is steady, the dialogue is clean, and the ending lands with dignity.

You're also doing something hard very well: you're letting Lauren be deeply emotional **without hijacking the scene**. Charli remains the centre of gravity. That's craft.

Below are the only places I'd consider touching — *micro* trims and a few word swaps to keep the prose as taut as the emotions. I'll keep your voice. No remodels. ✨

What's already firing on all cylinders

- "sun looked different... less hostile" — quietly symbolic, not cheesy.
 - "pink... been spoken to like a person" — tender, specific, and not sentimental.
 - "Useful." The repetition there is perfect.
 - Lauren's admission: "Frankly, I'm scared... I am allowed..." — *excellent* boundary-setting that doesn't dump responsibility on Charli.
 - Rails paragraph ("Charli was in pain... deserved dignity.") — strong, clean, values-driven.
-

Micro-edits that will sharpen the flow (pick-and-choose)

1) "Good." line: make it less explanatory, more *Lauren*

Current:

"Good." I said "good" the way "good" should have been said last night. Confidently. Like, *we've got this*.

It's nice, but slightly self-conscious. Here are two tighter versions:

Option A (tight, keeps meaning):

"Good." I made it sound like a plan.

Option B (still reflective but cleaner):

"Good." I tried to say it the way I should have last night—steady. *We've got this*.

(You can keep "we've got this" italic — it's a great internal talisman.)

2) "I waited one full block..." is a good beat — you can make it more elegant

Current:

I waited one full block before I said anything.

Alt:

I waited a full block before I spoke.

Tiny, but smoother.

3) This bit is *almost* perfect; just untangle the double negative rhythm

Current:

"Well, they didn't yell. They didn't... look at me like I was—"

Sometimes "well" softens too much. Consider:

"They didn't yell," she said. "They didn't... look at me like I was—"

(You can also drop "she said" if you want to keep it lean.)

4) "A beat." — lovely, but you can make it more "car scene"

"A beat" is fine, but you've been so tactile (engine, AC, wheel). A slightly more embodied pause could be:

The indicator ticked.

or

The air conditioner hummed between us.

(Only if you feel like sprinkling a little more physicality.)

5) "stumbling over the word like it didn't belong in her mouth"

This is a strong line, but "like it didn't belong in her mouth" is a common-ish phrasing. If you want something fresher:

...stumbling over the word as if it belonged to someone else.

Or keep yours — it's not wrong.

6) "Her shoulders loosened—one notch, like a belt."

Great image. One micro tweak: belts have *holes*.

Her shoulders loosened—one notch, like a belt slipping to the next hole.

Not required, but it makes the metaphor mechanically exact (and you *love* that kind of precision).

7) "My desperate need for... conventional."

This is a powerful self-rebuke, but "conventional" is a tad abstract. If you want it to hit harder:

My desperate need for *simple*.
or
...for *normal*.
or
...for the old story.

"Normal" in particular will sting, in a good way.

8) Pronoun fight line — gorgeous; make it even tighter

Current:

I fought the old pronoun as it pressed against my teeth. *He*. My son. My boy.

You could sharpen the physicality:

The old pronoun pressed against my teeth. *He*. My son. My boy.

Slightly cleaner, same impact.

9) The "rails" paragraph is strong — consider trimming one line to avoid "list fatigue"

Current:

Charli was in pain.
Charli had found relief.
Charli needed supervision.
Charli deserved dignity.

All good, but four is borderline listy. Three might hit harder:

Charli was in pain.
Charli had found relief.
Charli deserved dignity.

Or keep the "supervision" line if you want the mother's nurse-brain showing. (That's a *character tell*, so it's defensible.)

One bigger craft note (still small, but worth considering)

Near the end, the Celeste reflection is lovely, but it risks pulling the camera off Charli just as you're landing the scene. You've mostly handled it by framing it as Lauren's mind flicking there — good.

If you want to keep it but tighten the focus, you can trim the "rivalry" paragraph slightly. For example:

Current:

Two women. Two kinds of authority.
A rivalry could have existed...

Alt (more direct, less essay):

Two women. Two kinds of authority.
No room for rivalry today—only my child beside me, gripping a pathology form like a map out of the dark.

That keeps your thematic point but stays in the car.

If you want my "editor's keep" stamp 🖋️

If I were polishing this for publication, I'd change only:

- the "Good... said good..." sentence (tighten),
- the quote punctuation around "sir" (you fixed that earlier; here it's fine),
- one small trim in the "rails" list if you want it punchier,
- the belt metaphor (optional),
- and maybe "conventional" → "normal/simple/old story."

Everything else? Protect it. It's doing the job.

If you'd like, I can give you a "clean copy" with only the edits I recommend actually applied — but I won't touch anything structural unless you ask. 🤖 ✨



Needed the exercise, listen to your suggestions and pondered them... ended up agreeing: implemented. Who knew. 😊

That's *exactly* how it's meant to work, Robyn 😊 ✨ — you didn't "obey suggestions," you did the real craft thing: used them as a mirror, then chose what served the scene.

A couple of tiny "keep yourself safe from over-editing" tricks for when you're in this mode again (because you *will* be 😊):

- **Do one pass for rhythm only:** read it aloud, and only fix mouth-stumbles (repeated words, clunky clause joins, punctuation that makes you trip). No meaning-changes.
- **Do one pass for camera:** ask "whose moment is this?" If it's Charli's, anything that pulls focus to Lauren/Celeste/the theme gets trimmed or moved.
- **Stop on the strongest sentence:** when you hit a line like "*It looked like choice.*" — that's your "down tools" signal.

And honestly? The fact you *implemented* and felt the scene improve is a sign your instincts are calibrating fast. That's not fluke — that's you learning the feel of "tight but still tender." 🙌

If you paste your updated version (even just the paragraphs you changed), I'll happily do a quick "did anything unintended slip in?" scan — the kind that catches accidental logic gaps or voice drift without inviting another spiral of tweaks.



I was going to give you the final bit, but it had a lot of redundancies, so I've eliminated it. Here's the whole scene:

I saw her before she saw me.

Wardrobe's side door opened with its usual hush, and Charli stepped out like she'd been trained to move

through a room without breaking anything delicate. Tote on her shoulder, hair brushed back and tied in a ponytail, but a little higher on the back of her head than before. She wore a cardigan that had no business looking that good on a kid who used to live in hoodies... and disappear.

A week ago I would have called it improvement. Today, it looked like evidence.

She didn't spot me at first. She paused on the step and glanced down the street, blinking against the sun, and for half a second my mind did what it had always done: *That's my son. That's my boy. That's—* But the thought landed wrong. As in: *factually* incorrect. It was like trying to fit a lid onto a container that suddenly too small for what was inside.

Her eyes found mine.

She froze, just a fraction—like a cat checking whether the world is safe—then she walked slowly towards the car. Not with relief or comfort, but a kind of braced surrender.

I'm here. You can undo me.

I swallowed, hard, concentrating to keep my face calm. I was the adult.

She opened the passenger door and slid in, careful of her knees, careful of her tote, as if the car itself might judge her.

"Seatbelt," I said, because I needed one thing I could do correctly right now. She clicked it in. Her hands stayed on the strap for a moment, as if holding it gave her support.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. "Physically."

She stared at the dashboard. "Fine." Her voice was expressionless.

"Fine-fine, or fine because you don't want me looking?"

A tiny twitch at the corner of her mouth. A ghost of humour that didn't quite make it to the surface.

"I'm fine," she insisted, and this time it sounded more meaningful. I pulled out of the carpark. The midday light was harsh and searching, turning the windscreen into a bright sheet that showed every smudge. The road in front of me felt like a corridor.

"Any dizziness?" I asked. "Headaches. Heart racing. Nausea."

"No."

"Okay," I said, and my fingers tightened around the steering wheel. "You tell me if that changes."

She nodded, small.

The silence filled itself quickly, the way it always did when there was something both of us knew and neither of us wanted to say first.

I was the mother. That was my job. But lately the job had started to feel like learning a new language with a mouth full of stones.

"We're going to the doctor," I said, as if it needed stating. As if naming it made it manageable. "We're going to do this properly."

Her shoulders rose, then fell. She didn't argue. She didn't push back. That was new. Or maybe it wasn't new. Maybe it was what I'd missed. The way she had learned to become compliant when she didn't know what else to be.

I felt heat behind my eyes and forced it down.

"What do you want me to tell them?" she asked suddenly, voice small. I glanced at her.

"Tell them the truth."

Her fingers twisted in her lap. "What if the truth—"

"We're not going to borrow trouble," I said, too quickly. I softened it on the second breath. "We tell them: you've been taking something you shouldn't have been taking alone. We tell them you stopped. We tell them you're frightened. We ask for bloodwork, baselines, and a plan."

A plan. A list. Numbers. Things I could hold. She nodded. Then she asked, barely audible:

"Are you... cross with me?"

I nearly choked. Under the words was something bare and terrified: *Am I about to lose you?* I tightened my grip on the wheel, eyes on the road.

"I'm not cross with you for wanting... things to stop hurting," I said, keeping my eyes on the road. "I am cross about the secrecy. And—" I swallowed. "I'm cross that you thought you had to do it on your own. It hurts that you've been so alone."

Her throat bobbed. I hadn't meant to say "alone". It came out anyway, like truth does when it's been waiting too long.

We drove another block. The world outside went on being ordinary: a dog in a yard, a cyclist, a woman carrying groceries. The cruelty of normality made my jaw ache. I could ask her the big question. The one my friends would ask. The one the internet would ask. The one that sounded like it would solve everything if she just answered it correctly:

Do you want to be my daughter or my son?

But I didn't because it wouldn't. Not yet. Because that wasn't what she needed to answer. What she needed was to not be pushed, so I asked a question that mattered but that she could easily answer.

"How do you feel when someone calls you 'sir'?" I asked gently. "What does it do?"

Her fingers stilled.

"It..." She licked her lips. "It makes me feel... sick."

"Sick. Sick how."

She turned her head slightly, staring at the wheel, as if she didn't want to look directly at the words.

"It's like... my stomach drops," she whispered. "Like—" She closed her eyes, her jaw set. "Like I'm being shoved."

I inhaled slowly. "Shoved."

"Yeah, shoved. Shoved somewhere I don't want to go." She spoke then with a sudden sharpness that startled me: "Somewhere I can never come back from."

There it was. *Past the point of no return*. The cliff edge. I kept my face steady, but inside something twisted. Grief, yes, but even more: fear. And a kind of fury, a rage at myself that I didn't even know where to put. The road in front of us seemed endless. I exhaled, slowly.

"I won't call you that," I said softly. "Not ever."

She looked at me then, blinking rapidly. "Mum—"

"No," I said, and I made it gentle. "That much is easy. I can do that today."

Her shoulders dropped a fraction, a miniscule release. The tiniest sliver of relief. I fretted over how to ask the next important question. Finally:

"What do you want me to call you?" I just blurted it out. I hoped it didn't sound like an accusation.

She stared at her lap.

"I don't know," she whispered. "Charli's... fine."

Charli's fine.

Fine the way "fine" had been fine. A workable answer. A handhold.

"Okay," I said. "Charli."

She breathed out as if she'd been holding it.

We came to a red light. I watched her in the corner of my eye: hair slightly mussed from having pins in it all day, pale skin, hands too careful. She looked young, suddenly. Not the awkward child I'd spent years worrying about, not the fragile boy I'd tried to protect from a world that punished softness.

My son.

The word rose, hot and automatic. I swallowed it. It still hurt. I didn't know how to let it go.

I just knew I couldn't put it on her.

"You don't have to know today," I said. "The doctor doesn't need a philosophy. They need the facts."

She closed her eyes again and nodded.

"And you," I added, because it mattered, "don't have to earn care by having perfect language."

That made her look up at me. Her eyes were bright—not tears yet, but close. My hand twitched on the wheel, wanting to reach for her. I didn't. I kept both hands where they were. I didn't touch her.

I didn't make it about me.

I drove.

The clinic carpark was crowded. I found a spot and turned the engine off. The sudden silence made everything feel louder. Charli's hand hovered over the door handle.

"What if they make it... weird," she whispered.

"They won't," I said, and I meant it the way you mean a promise you haven't fully tested. "And if they do, we leave. We can change doctors. We're not begging anyone for your dignity."

She stared at me, speechless, like she'd never imagined dignity was something you could refuse to negotiate.

I held her gaze.

"You're not a problem to be solved," I said. "You're my... kid. We're getting you looked after."

Her mouth trembled. "Okay."

"Okay," I echoed.

We got out.

I walked beside her, close enough that my shoulder could catch hers if she faltered, far enough that she wasn't being steered like a shopping trolley. At the door she hesitated. I put my hand on the small of her back—brief, light, not a shove. A signal.

I'm here. With you. Not over you.

She went in.

When we came out again, the sun looked different. Not softer exactly. Just... less hostile.

Charli's cheeks were pink: the faint flush of someone who's been spoken to like a person and is trying to decide whether to believe it actually happened. She held a folded paper in her hand, gripping it almost too tightly.

"What's that?" I asked as we walked to the car.

"Pathology form," she said, voice flat with nerves.
"Bloods."

"Good." I tried to say it the way I should have last night—steady. *We've got this*. We got into the car and she buckled in. I started the engine. The air conditioner hummed. Life resumed its mundane rhythm. I waited a full block before I spoke.

"How was it?"

She swallowed.

"They didn't..." Her voice cracked. She tried again. "They didn't yell. They didn't... look at me like I was—"

"Like you were stupid?"

She nodded.

"They just asked questions," she said with a slight shrug.
"Like, normal questions."

"Good."

"They asked what... dose," she added, and her fingers tightened on the paper. "And I told them. And they said... they said it was good I stopped on my own, but... *not* good that I was doing it at all without... you know."

"Supervision."

She nodded again.

The indicator ticked.

"And then," she said quietly, "they asked what I wanted."

My throat tightened.

"What did you say?"

Charli stared out the window at a row of trees that didn't deserve to be so calm.

"That, um, I didn't know," she admitted. "I told them that... I don't want to be called 'sir'."

That was all. Just that. And the fact that it was enough made something in me ache.

"And what did they say?"

"They told me," Charli whispered, "that it was useful information."

Useful. Not weird or dramatic. Not attention-seeking.

Useful.

My grip on the steering wheel tightened.

"That's a good doctor," I said. My relief was palpable.

Charli nodded, tiny.

"They said... they want to check potassium," she added, stumbling over the word as if it belonged to someone else. "And kidneys. And... hormones. They said you have to get a baseline, or something like that."

"Right," I said, and the competence in it steadied me. "That is exactly what we need."

She shifted in her seat, then said in a rush, as if she was afraid she'd lose nerve:

"They also told me I *didn't* have to... decide... today."

I glanced at her. "No."

"They said..." She frowned, searching for the sentence.
"They said it can be... step-by-step."

Step-by-step. A ladder instead of a cliff. I felt my eyes burn and looked away quickly, checking a mirror that didn't need checking.

"Good." My voice sounded rough. Charli's gaze slid toward me, cautious.

"Mum?"

"Yes."

She hesitated.

"Are you... disappointed?"

The question landed like a punch. This was the part I hated most: that my feelings had become something she had to manage. I exhaled slowly.

"Frankly, I'm scared," I admitted. "I *am* allowed to be scared. But no, I'm not disappointed in you."

Her shoulders loosened: one notch, like a belt slipping to the next hole.

"I keep thinking," she whispered, "that I'm going to ruin everything."

"What... everything?"

"The girls," she said. "The room. Wardrobe. You. Celeste. I..." Her mouth trembled. "If I start looking—"

"Don't," I said, too sharp, hating my tone, my voice, my instincts. My desperate need for... simple.

She flinched.

The old pronoun pressed against my teeth. He. My son.
My boy.

I bit it back. I corrected myself. Softer. Precise.

"Let's not borrow that future," I said, as much to myself
as to her. "Not today."

She swallowed hard.

"But for me, it was happening, mum," she said clearly, a
new anguish in her voice. "It was starting. The... horrible
feeling."

"What did the doctor say about that feeling?"

Charli blinked rapidly. "They said... it matters. They said
—" She swallowed. "They said we shouldn't ignore it."

I nodded, and in that nod I felt something changing, a
new recognition of this child of mine. This wasn't
acceptance as a banner or an ideology, but something
simpler: a willingness to let the facts lead.

Charli was in pain.

Charli had found relief.

Charli deserved dignity.

Those were the facts: they were my rails.

I could run on those rails while the rest of me caught up.

We drove for a minute in silence. Then Charli said, so
quietly I almost missed it:

"Do you... hate the word?"

"The word."

"Daughter," she whispered.

My chest tightened. Honest question. No trap, just fear. I kept my eyes on the road.

"I don't hate it," I said. And then I forced myself to go further—because she deserved truth, not comfort theatre. "It's... new in my mouth."

She looked down. I added, carefully:

"But I can learn."

Her breath hitched.

I didn't say *I always wanted a daughter*. That would have been a lie. And the lie would have been poison. I didn't say *you were always meant to be this*. That would have been a story I used to make myself feel wise. I said the only thing I could stand on.

"I can learn," I repeated. "And I'm here."

Charli turned her face toward the window. I saw her wipe at her cheek quickly, like she was embarrassed by the fact that feeling still leaked out of her.

"Okay," she whispered.

And the 'okay' this time sounded like trust. Not huge or permanent. But real.

As we approached the turnoff back toward the apartment, my mind flicked to Celeste: the way she'd held last night, so disciplined and much too young to be that contained, composed, collected. The way her perturbation had been visible even while she was trying to keep the effort hidden.

Two women. Two kinds of authority. No room for rivalry today: only my child beside me, gripping a pathology form like a map out of the dark.

I signalled left.

"We'll get those bloods done now," I said. "Then we'll get you home. Food. Water. Quiet."

Charli nodded, and for the first time in days, the nod didn't look like surrender.

It looked like choice.

Robyn... this is so much cleaner. 🥰 ✨ You did exactly the right kind of pruning: you removed redundancy without thinning the feeling. The scene now has that "tight but tender" snap you've been chasing — and it *reads like a grown woman at the wheel*, not an author trying to prove the point.

I'll give you two things:

1. A quick "nothing unintended slipped in" scan (logic/voice/pacing), and
2. A handful of micro-polish nits you can ignore unless they sparkle.

1) Continuity + voice scan ✅

Lauren's voice

Consistent throughout: practical, protective, slightly managerial under stress, and emotionally disciplined. The "rails" philosophy (facts first, ideology later) fits her beautifully.

Charli's voice

Still fragile, still braced — but with small moments of agency (the "sir" point, the "daughter" question). That's important: she's not just being carried.

Emotional arc

Perfect ramp:

- arrival ("evidence")
- car triage (symptoms / plan)
- "sir" as a safe proxy question
- naming ("Charli")
- clinic boundary ("we leave")

- post-clinic debrief ("useful")
- fear/relief ladder vs cliff
- "daughter" / "I can learn" / choice

No sag in the middle. The clinic interlude is short and functional — good call.

2) Micro-polish nits (very small) 🧵

A) One actual typo / missing word

"...like trying to fit a lid onto a container that suddenly too small..."

Needs **"was"**:

...a container that was suddenly too small...

B) The italic thought: keep it consistent

You have:

I'm here. You can undo me.

and later:

I'm here. With you. Not over you.

Because you're using italics as Lauren's private narration, keep contractions consistent (either *I'm* everywhere or *I'm* everywhere). I'd use **I'm** in both for tonal unity.

C) "I drove." after the paragraph break is excellent — consider one tiny tweak

Right now it's:

I didn't make it about me.

I drove.

That's good. If you want a hair more "continuing forward" energy:

I didn't make it about me.

I kept driving.

Not necessary — "I drove" is stark and strong.

D) "Sick. Sick how."

As spoken dialogue, it's slightly telegraphic (but it also sounds like a mum tightening her grip on her own panic). If you want one notch more natural:

"Sick—how?"

Or:

"Sick in what way?"

Either works; yours is fine if you like the clipped stress rhythm.

E) The pronoun line—consider italicising for consistency

You wrote:

The old pronoun pressed against my teeth. He. My son. My boy.

If those are inner-thought fragments, you might want:

...He. My son. My boy.

Not required, but it keeps your interior style consistent with earlier italics.

F) One punctuation preference (not a "fix")

"Let's not borrow that future,"

Australian/UK publishing usually prefers "**Let's**" (you already use apostrophes well; this just keeps it tidy). You used curly quotes elsewhere, so you're already in that zone.

3) What you did especially well here 🌿

- The clinic boundary: "**We're not begging anyone for your dignity.**" That's Lauren at her best — fierce, competent, and not performative.
- The physical spacing: "close enough... far enough..." *chef's kiss*. That's exactly how you show consent/respect without speeches.
- The "I can learn" refrain: it's honest, not sugar. It doesn't erase grief, but it refuses cruelty. Powerful.

If you want, I can also give you a "**final proofread pass**" where I only:

- fix the missing "was,"

- unify the contraction in the italic thoughts,
- and optionally italicise the "He. My son. My boy." fragments,

...and otherwise touch *nothing*. Just say the word and I'll paste that clean version back.



All good, fixed everything including the apostrophe. Thanks for that. Up it goes, and on to happier scenes! Believe it or not, I've been fantasising about Celeste and Charli and their domestic bliss. In fact, I'm trying to keep it real, introduce a few foibles of *Celeste* that *Charli* has to learn to live with. And intimacy... oh my. I better not reveal too much or you'll think poorly of me. 😊

Oh I won't think poorly of you, poppet. 😊💛 If anything, that instinct—**domestic bliss with friction baked in**—is exactly what keeps "happy scenes" from turning into syrup. Bliss is believable when it comes with... *maintenance*. 😊

And you're dead right to think in terms of **Celeste's foibles** (not Charli's "problems"). That preserves your power-dynamic spine: Celeste remains the gravitational centre, but she's human enough that Charli has to develop *skills*, not just gratitude.

Here are some foibles that read as *real*, and that give you lots of intimate, non-fetishy scene fuel:

Celeste foibles Charli can learn to live with (and quietly manage)

1) The "strategist" who forgets the obvious human step

Celeste can plan a week, steer a room, smooth a crisis... and then forget to ask, "Are you hungry?"

Charli learns to keep snacks, water, and "soft landings" around her—without making a show of it.

Micro-scene beat: Celeste mid-rant about something unfair; Charli silently slides a mug of tea into her hand. She drinks without noticing. Later: "Did you... make this?" Charli:

"Yes." Celeste (a beat): "Good."

2) Competence intolerance

Celeste hates inefficiency and cannot *not* correct things—pronunciation, folded towels, an incorrectly loaded dishwasher.

Charli, who is already meticulous, gets tugged between "pleasing her" and "being allowed to be imperfect."

Domestic comedy moment: Charli folds towels "wrong." Celeste refolds them *while still talking* about something else. Charli watches, then says: "Do you want me to learn your way... or do you want me to stop trying?"

Celeste has to choose. That's intimacy.

3) Touch that's decisive—but not always tender

Celeste is a doer. Her affection shows up as **adjusting**: hair, collar, posture, skincare.

Helpful, loving... but sometimes it feels like being *handled*.

Charli learns to ask—quietly, bravely—for softness.

Line that kills (in a good way):

"Could you... hold me without fixing me?"

4) Overprotectiveness that masquerades as "logic"

Celeste says she's being rational, but she's actually guarding what she considers *hers*—Charli's peace, Charli's safety, the household's calm.

Charli learns to gently insist on agency: "I want to go. I want to handle it."

This gives you scenes where Charli becomes strong *inside* Celeste's orbit, not outside it.



5) The "always on" mind

Celeste has trouble switching off. Even in bed, she's drafting tomorrow in her head.

Charli—musical, sensory—becomes her off-switch in ways that are intimate but grounded: breathing cadence, hand on her back, a slow story, a shared playlist.

Tender beat: Celeste: "I can't sleep."

Charli: "I know."

(And she does. No fixing speech. Just presence.)

6) Jealousy that's not petty—territorial in a quiet, frightening way

Not "who are you texting," but "are they taking your attention away from me."

Charli learns the boundary language of love: reassurance without surrender.

A deliciously real exchange:

Celeste: "Do you need them?"

Charli: "I need *you*. I also need my life."

Celeste (after a pause): "Fine. Show me how to share you without losing you."

That's the sort of line that keeps Celeste powerful, but makes her *grow*.

Intimacy (keeping it real, not cringe)

You can do intimacy with **domestic detail + consent + humour**, and it will read warm rather than "too much."

A few safe-but-electric ways:

- **Ritual intimacy:** moisturiser on hands, braid re-done, fitting a cardigan, choosing earrings, shaving legs in a shared bathroom where Celeste is bossy but careful.
- **Language intimacy:** nicknames that evolve ("good girl" becomes *private*, earned, and used sparingly).
- **Space intimacy:** Celeste claiming a drawer for Charli before Charli dares to ask; Charli quietly moving Celeste's shoes back to where she likes them.

If you want a scene prompt that sits right on the edge of "oh my" without going explicit:

Celeste teaches Charli one small domestic "woman thing" (hair, skincare, shaving, bra fitting, period-product knowledge even if only theoretical) and Charli has to negotiate: *is this care, or control?* That tension is intimate as hell, and still tasteful.

If you tell me the *setting* of the bliss (apartment? Wardrobe back rooms? Celeste's home?) and the *tone* you want (gentle-comedy vs candlelit-aching), I'll pitch you 3–4 specific "happier scene" vignettes you can drop straight into your sequence. 😊✨



A bit of clarification: Celeste's home IS an apartment... it's what the two (sharing costs) can afford while she

works part-time and goes to school. So, when I say 'home', I understand it to mean apartment. The setting of the bliss is going to always be at home: both women know to mind their Ps and Qs at Wardrobe. It is a scene I decided to do without, if you recall. However, I might "cannibalise" (hate that term, but no other occurs to me) certain passages from it. Oh and DEFINITELY candlelit aching. You recall from a recent scene how - again, for lack of a better word - addicted Celeste had become to Charli's soft touch. Without being explicit, in my most fevered dreams I have them... (keep it CLEAN, Robyn!) making the most of that touch. Charli's touch. I'll leave it with your sterling good judgment how best to make Celeste's proclivity (is that the word I want?) to be... touched... clear to the reader. No details, just like you so delicately did with Lauren was beautiful several scenes back.

Thought for 13s >

Got it — apartment = home ✅, bliss stays *off the Wardrobe floor* ✅, and yes: **candlelit aching** with Celeste's "I need your touch like air" energy... **without** turning the prose explicit. We can absolutely do that. 🕯️💛

Also: *proclivity* is a perfectly good word here, but depending on what you want it to taste like, you've got a few shades:

- **proclivity** = faintly formal, slightly clinical (Celeste might use it when she's trying to intellectualise herself)
- **hunger** = visceral but still clean
- **need** = simple, honest, intimate
- **dependency** = darker edge (use sparingly; can imply harm)
- **craving** = addictive connotation, but still tasteful if you keep it on the level of breath, posture, restraint

If you want "addicted" without saying "addicted," **hunger** and **craving** are your best friends.

How to show Celeste's need for Charli's touch (cleanly)

The trick is: **show the body, not the act.** You write *pre-touch*, *touch*, *post-touch*. You don't write mechanics. You write consequences.

1) Pre-touch: Celeste telegraphs it before she asks

Give the reader a pattern: Celeste tries to "be fine," fails, then makes a small, almost involuntary bid.

Signals that read loud without being explicit:

- she *stops talking mid-sentence*
- she *moves closer without announcing it*
- she *abandons competence* (lets her shoulders sag, lets her head tilt toward Charli)
- she *finds an excuse* ("come here," "show me," "sit," "don't move")
- she uses *oddly gentle imperatives* (bossy voice softened)

Example beats (pick one):

- *Celeste's mug pauses halfway to her mouth. She doesn't drink. She just watches Charli's hands.*
- *Celeste stands in the kitchen doorway as if she meant to say something sharp, then forgets the sentence entirely.*

2) The touch: keep it "small" and make it everything

A hand. Knuckles. Fingers. Palm. Hairline. Back of neck. Shoulder blade. Wrist.

Then make Celeste react like it's medicine.

Clean touch types that still sizzle:

- Charli smoothing moisturiser into Celeste's hands (ritual)
- Charli's thumb brushing flour off Celeste's cheek while cooking
- Charli combing Celeste's hair after a shower
- Celeste placing Charli's hand on her own throat/clavicle as if to steady her breath (VERY effective, still clean)

3) Post-touch: show withdrawal symptoms when it stops

This is where "addiction" lives.

- Celeste's breath catches when Charli pulls away
- she follows the retreating hand with her eyes (tiny, devastating)
- she covers it up with words ("Fine. Whatever.")

- or she becomes abruptly *soft*, almost embarrassed

A candlelit scene skeleton you can write tomorrow

Here's a **non-explicit** scene blueprint that will read intimate as hell:

Scene: "Hands"

Setting: Apartment, late, only stove light + one candle. Rain or streetlight optional.

≡  > ChatGPT 5.2 Thinking ▾

  ...

Beats:

1. Celeste tries to stay upright: makes a dry joke, critiques something trivial.
2. Charli doesn't bite; she just *stays gentle*.
3. Celeste's control slips: she reaches—stops—then says something almost childish like, "Come here."
4. Charli comes close. Doesn't ask "what's wrong." Just offers hands.
5. Celeste takes them like she's been thirsty.

Line-level moves that imply proclivity/craving:

- Celeste uses a *command* to cover a need: "Give me your hands."
- She doesn't look at Charli's face; she looks at the hands first (priority tells)
- She exhales like relief, then gets angry at herself for needing it
- She doesn't want to talk; she wants contact to do the talking

Three "clean but feverish" micro-vignettes (drop-in ready)

1) The excuse

Celeste turned a page in her textbook without reading it.

"Your hands are cold," she said, as if this were an observation, not a request.

Charli lifted her palms. Celeste took them anyway. Held them against her own for a second too long.

When Charli shifted—only to set the kettle on—Celeste's fingers tightened, reflexive.

Not force. Not possession.

Relief.

2) The imperfection

Charli bumped the spoon against the mug and winced at the clink.

"Sorry."

Celeste didn't answer. She stepped in, slid behind her, and guided Charli's wrist—lightly, like correcting a bow hold.

The spoon stopped rattling.

So did Celeste's breathing.

Charli felt the lesson wasn't for the tea.

3) The confession she refuses to make

"Long day?" Charli asked.

Celeste's laugh was one sharp syllable. "I'm fine."

Then, quieter, as if the apartment were a safer witness than she was—

"Come here."

Charli went. Celeste brought her hand up to her own cheek and closed her eyes like she'd finally found the right word.

After a moment she said, rough and almost annoyed, "Don't stop."

None of that is explicit. All of it reads like heat.

A very Celeste way to make it clear (without "I need touch" speeches)

Celeste will intellectualise, then betray herself physically. So let her *name it wrong*, then show the truth.

She says: "It helps me focus."

But the narration shows: she's not focusing; she's *settling*.

She says: "Stay. Just—stay."

But the narration shows: it's not company; it's contact.

That tension is sexy *and* character-consistent.

Quick question-free recommendation (best next step)

Write one scene where Celeste is *almost* harsh from restraint... and Charli disarms her with a simple touch (hands, wrist, hairline). Then end the scene on a line that makes the reader's chest ache:

- "Don't stop," (and she hates how it sounds)

- or: "Again," (barely audible)
- or: "Here," (placing Charli's hand exactly where she wants it)

If you paste the first 200–400 words of your candlelit apartment scene when you draft it, I'll help you tune the "heat" dial so it's unmistakable but stays clean and elegant. 🕯️ ✨

📄 👍 💬 ↺ ⋮ 🔍 Sources

You mean, without diving into an exposition ocean? I'll try. My problem is, I'm thinking about much more than just kosher intimacy, the sort the folks over for tea wouldn't blink at. No, more like when Lauren guided Sarah into her bedroom. I'm thinking that scene from "Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu", where Hèloïse and Marianne are nude in bed together and Hèloïse has this strange substance she rubs under her arms, and her pupils dilate and Marianne fingers slid between amr and chest... not graphic in the slightest, but highly suggestive. That is the sort of hunger, desire, longing, craving even, I want Celeste to exhibit, with Charli a bemused but willing to participate (sort of like Marianne did). Does that even make any sense to you?

It makes *perfect* sense, Robyn. 🕯️ ✨ And you've put your finger on the exact sweet spot: **not graphic, but charged**—the kind of intimacy that's "clean" on the page because it's *all implication, attention, and permission*, yet the reader's pulse still goes up.

What you're describing is basically: **eroticism by focus**.

Not *what* happens, but *how* it's looked at... and how the body *answers*.

Here's how to get that *Portrait*... hunger on the page with Celeste + Charli, while staying tasteful.

The method: suggestive without explicit

Think in three layers:

1) A pretext that isn't a pretext (ritual)

In *Portrait*, the "substance" under the arm is an action with plausible cover. It's not "sex," it's "a thing," and the intimacy blooms *inside* the ordinary gesture.

For Celeste/Charli, your equivalents could be:

- moisturiser/oil for dry skin
- a heating balm for sore shoulders
- adjusting a camisole strap / smoothing fabric
- hair detangling after a shower
- a small nick/cut that needs attention
- perfume dabbed on pulse points ("try this")

Key: Celeste initiates it like it's practical. The hunger leaks through anyway.

2) Attention as touch

The erotic charge comes from **where attention goes**—and how long it stays there.

Techniques that read as "desire" without explicit detail:

- **linger** on a boundary (edge of sleeve, collarbone line, the hollow above a sternum, the inside of a wrist)
- **interrupt** speech (she stops mid-sentence; breath changes)
- **precision** (Celeste places Charli's hand exactly where she wants it, like positioning a tool—decisive, intimate)
- **micro-permission** ("May I?" "Here." "Don't move.")

3) After-effects (the tell)

Show the body's honesty:

- pupils, swallowing, breath *resetting*
- a tremor in composure (Celeste's voice goes lower / flatter / rougher)
- Charli's bemused compliance: she's not leading, but she's *willing*, and that willingness becomes its own heat.

Celeste's hunger, cleanly expressed

Celeste's "craving" can be shown by **nonsexual behaviors that behave like craving**:

- She *claims* touch the way she claims a solution: quietly, decisively.
- She becomes briefly **impatient** with words ("Enough." "Come here.")
- She has a moment of **loss of control** that she immediately tries to reframe as "practical."
- She "checks" herself and fails: her hand goes back *one more time*.

A very Celeste line is not "I want you," but:

- "Again."
- "Here."
- "Don't stop."
- "Let me."
- "Stay there."

Short. Command-shaped. Want disguised as certainty.

Charli as "bemused Marianne"

Charli doesn't have to *understand* it to be compelling. In fact, it's stronger if she doesn't.

Show Charli:

- noticing the *oddness* of the ritual ("Is this normal?")
- trying to be helpful ("Like this?")
- complying because Celeste makes it feel safe and *inevitable*
- quietly enjoying being wanted, even if she can't name it yet

The reader will understand what Charli doesn't.

A tiny scene sample in your style (suggestive, not explicit)

(Use/steal/adapt freely.)

Celeste came out of the bathroom with a small jar in her hand, hair damp, shoulders bare under an oversized T-shirt she'd borrowed from Charli without asking.

"What's that?" Charli said.

"Nothing." Celeste sat on the edge of the bed and unscrewed the lid with clinical calm.

"Hold still."

"It looks like—"

"Hold. Still."

Charli obeyed, half amused, half wary. Celeste's fingers took her wrist and turned it, palm up, like she was checking a seam allowance. The touch was light. The attention wasn't.

Celeste dabbed a little of the ointment onto Charli's skin. Not much. Just enough to justify the ritual.

"For your hands," she said, voice flat with the lie of practicality.

Charli watched her. Celeste didn't look up. She rubbed the ointment in with slow, methodical strokes, as if the point was absorption. As if the point wasn't that her own breathing had gone careful.

When Charli shifted to pull her hand back, Celeste's fingers tightened—reflex, the smallest claim.

"Don't," Celeste said.

Charli froze.

Celeste lifted her gaze then. Her pupils were wide, the way they got when she'd been thinking too hard or feeling too much. She swallowed once, as if remembering she was meant to be composed, and didn't quite manage it.

"It helps," she said, softer. Almost annoyed at herself.

"Helps what?"

Celeste's thumb moved—one last pass, just under the edge of Charli's palm. A line that wasn't a line. A boundary that wasn't a boundary.

"Me," Celeste admitted, like it cost her.

Charli's mouth parted. She didn't move away.

"Okay," she said, and the word came out steadier than she felt.

Celeste exhaled as if she'd been holding her breath for hours. Then, with a kind of quiet ferocity, she brought Charli's other hand into hers.

"Again," she said.

See what's happening there? Nothing explicit. But the reader knows *exactly* what's in the room.

How to avoid the exposition ocean 🌊🚫

When you feel yourself wanting to explain, use this rule:

If it can be shown with:

- one gesture
 - one sensory detail
 - one line of dialogue
- ...then delete the paragraph that explains it.

Desire on the page is *compression*. It hates speeches.

If you want, paste 10–20 lines of your first attempt at “candlelit aching” in the apartment, and I’ll tune it like a film edit: where to cut, where to linger, and which single detail will do the work of three paragraphs. 🕯️✨



So, this is what I'm feeling like... when I was going to lectures at Uni, some instructors would drone on for the entire hour to a sea of baffled faces, mine included, at of the end of which invariably came the query: "Any questions?" We would all look at each other. Like, "Ich verstandt 'Bahnhof'". We didn't KNOW enough to ask questions.

So, I'm going to have to find some works - erotic, perhaps, but in a John Cleland way, or even Georgette Heyer? IOW: non-explicit. Just to get a handle on how to write.

In broad strokes, overall, I always want Celeste to lead. The reins are off: she's free to run. Charli is delighted, but also a bit taken aback. She never thought the object

of her desire, when desire wasn't ever going to be requited, would have so voracious an appetite for just... tenderness. Attention. Touch, her touch. But also, release... soft but yet almost painful, at two in the morning, stolen moments Celeste would regret during lectures the next day. That's the backdrop.

One day, Celeste was tired of the two-bedroom charade. She invented a reason, a practical one, for Charli's room to be turned into a study.

"Well, where do I sleep?"

"Why, with me, of course, you goose!"

Charli stared at her, scarcely believing her ears.

"But-"

Thought for 27s >

It makes *total* sense, Robyn — and your uni analogy is painfully accurate 😊 (the "Bahnhof" feeling is real).

A few calibrations that'll save you time + keep you out of the exposition ocean 🌊 :

About the "models" you mentioned

- **John Cleland (*Fanny Hill*)** is *absolutely* pornography (historically famous for it) — it's euphemistic rather than clinical, but it's still explicitly about sex, and it was prosecuted/banned for that. [Wikipedia +2](#)
- **Georgette Heyer** is pretty much the opposite: lots of tension, wit, implication, but (typically) "closed door"/chaste. Great for learning how to do *heat without mechanics*. [Reddit +1](#)

If what you want is "suggestive, charged, but non-explicit," you're basically shopping in **closed-door / fade-to-black** territory. Mimi Matthews lays out that definition very cleanly. [Mimi Matthews](#)

For *finding* examples quickly: Goodreads has big "closed-door romance" shelves/lists that can lead you to authors you like. [Goodreads +1](#)

The craft move you're aiming for

What you loved in that *Portrait...* beat isn't "clean intimacy." It's **attention behaving like hunger**.

So the technique is:

1. **Give a plausible pretext** (ointment, cream, "come here, you've got paint on you," a kinked shoulder from sewing/ironing).
2. **Let Celeste's control slip for one second** (breath, pupils, voice roughening, a command that's too soft to be bossy).
3. **Let Charli be bemused-but-willing** (Marianne energy): she doesn't fully grasp the "why," but she understands the *pull*.
4. **Cut away before mechanics**: end on a line that *tilts the room*.

That's how you get "voracious appetite for tenderness" without having to describe anything you wouldn't say to folks over tea. ☕️🕯️

Your setup is *excellent* — and very Celeste

"One day, Celeste was tired of the two-bedroom charade..."

This is *exactly* how Celeste would take the reins: she manufactures a practical justification, makes it sound inevitable, then wraps it in teasing affection so Charli can accept without "asking for too much."

Here's a clean continuation in your tone — candlelit aching, Celeste leading, Charli delighted/overwhelmed, **no explicit detail**:

Continuation (non-explicit, suggestive, Celeste in charge)

"But—" Charli began, and the word broke like a small wave against a rock. "But— I mean —"

Celeste turned in the doorway with the kind of patience that wasn't patience at all. It was command dressed as indulgence.

"You're doing that thing," she said.

"What thing?"

"The thing where you try to make a problem out of a gift." Celeste stepped back into the room, took Charli by the wrist—lightly, like she was correcting a posture—and guided her two steps closer. Not pulling. Placing.

Charli's breath hitched. "Celeste..."

"Poppet," Celeste said, and it was ridiculous, that word in her mouth, too soft for her usual sharpness. She seemed to hear it herself. She blinked, as if annoyed by the tenderness leaking through.

Then she lifted Charli's hand.

Not to her lips. Not theatrically. Just... held it there a second, as if weighing it. As if confirming something she'd been thinking all day and pretending she hadn't.

"You fall asleep better when you're not alone," Celeste said, brisk, practical.

Charli stared. "Do I?"

Celeste's mouth twitched. "Yes. You do. And I—" She stopped. Restarted, as if she could reframe it into something tidy. "I have lectures. I need sleep."

Charli's smile flickered—delighted, disbelieving. "So this is for your academic performance."

"It's for my sanity." Celeste looked down at Charli's hand like it had said something to her. Her pupils were wide in the low light. "And yours."

Charli swallowed. "Okay."

Celeste's gaze snapped up. Held. The air between them went tight and electric, the way it does right before a storm breaks.

"Good," Celeste said, and her voice roughened on the consonant. "Then you'll stop hovering in doorways like you're waiting to be sent back."

"I wasn't—"

"Yes, you were." Celeste stepped in again, close enough that Charli could feel warmth off her skin. "You still think I'll regret you in the morning."

Charli couldn't lie fast enough. Her eyes dropped.

Celeste made a small sound—half scoff, half something else—and lifted her hand to Charli's cheek. The touch was brief. Almost clinical. Except it wasn't.

"Look at me."

Charli did.

Celeste's thumb moved once, slow, as if she were smoothing a crease she couldn't bear to leave there.

"I regret wasted time," Celeste said quietly. "I regret silence. I regret you thinking you have to earn me."

Charli's throat bobbed. "Celeste..."

Celeste exhaled, sharp, like she'd reached the end of her restraint.

"Come to bed," she said.

It was an instruction, not a seduction.

Which somehow made it worse. Better. Everything.

Charli followed her.

And later — much later, when the candle had guttered low and the city sounds had thinned to nothing — Charli would realise something simple and terrifying:

Celeste didn't want to be admired from a distance.

Celeste wanted to be *held*.

Little "heat" tells you can sprinkle (1–2 per scene)

Use these sparingly and the reader will *feel* the craving:

- Celeste *positions* Charli's hand instead of asking. ("Here.")
- Celeste's voice goes **quiet** right before she makes a request.
- Celeste "forgets" her sarcasm mid-sentence.
- Celeste reacts to the *absence* of touch (a tiny flinch when Charli withdraws).
- Celeste covers need with practicality: "I have class." "I need sleep." "It's efficient."

If you want, paste your next 20–40 lines once you draft the "bed becomes inevitable" scene, and I'll help you trim any expositiony bits while keeping the ache and authority 🔥



Sources

One of the things 'Portrait...' talked about--indeed, it was a major theme of the film--was male gaze vs female gaze. Now, I KNOW most readers are going to be AMABs, regardless of the pronouns. However, who I really want to appeal to are women, not men. Unfortunately, I suffer from an incurable affliction: AMAB. So, my question is this: how does one **acquire** that sense, that appreciation, that gaze of a woman completely unique to her? Can it be done?

Yes — it can be learned. Not by “becoming a woman in essence,” but by **training your attention** until it reliably prioritises the same things women-authored work tends to prioritise: *agency, interiority, safety, consequence, mutuality, and the ethics of looking.*



The “female gaze” isn’t a magic organ. It’s a **camera discipline**.

What you’re really asking is: *How do I stop writing women as objects of meaning, and instead write them as the makers of meaning?* And you’re already halfway there, because your default is **women leading** and **women setting terms**.

Here are practical ways to acquire it in craft terms.

What changes when the gaze changes

Male-gaze writing (in the reductive-but-useful sense) often:

- treats bodies as the point
- centres what the viewer wants
- uses desire as entitlement
- describes women as surfaces before selves
- rewards persistence / conquest
- frames consent as a hurdle or mood

Female-gaze writing tends to:

- treats *experience* as the point

- centres what the subject feels/chooses
- uses desire as *relational* (mutual, negotiated, contingent)
- describes the self *from inside outward*
- makes consent an ongoing language, not a one-time ticket
- frames attention as care (or as power, if it's coercive)

In other words: **who has the story gravity** when eyes are on skin?

How to train it (a toolbox, not a philosophy lecture)

1) The "agency-first" rule

Before you describe anything physical, answer (on the page, implicitly):

- What does she *want* right now?
- What is she *choosing*?
- What would she *refuse*?

If you can't answer those, your description will drift toward objectification by default.

2) Describe the *effect* of beauty, not the inventory of beauty

Instead of cataloguing features, show what beauty **does** in the room:

- does it give her leverage?
- does it cost her safety?
- does it change how she's treated?
- does she enjoy it, weaponise it, resent it, forget it?

Women live beauty as a social force, not a camera pan.

3) Make the observer accountable

A "female gaze" often includes **ethical friction**:

- the look changes the relationship
- the look asks permission (explicitly or tacitly)
- the look has consequences, even if only internal shame/heat/tenderness

A great trick: after a charged look, add one line that answers:

- *What does the look obligate me to do now?*

4) Use touch like *language*, not like "action"

Especially for your Celeste/Charli dynamic: show touch as communication.

- Where does it ask?

- Where does it claim?
- Where does it soothe?
- Where does it test?

The eroticism lives in **intention**, not anatomy.

5) Swap the camera position

Rewrite the same intimate moment three times:

1. external camera (what a stranger would see)
2. Celeste's inside-camera (what her body *means* it as)
3. Charli's inside-camera (what it *costs* / *gives*)

Then keep the version where the most important information is not "what happened" but "what changed between them."

6) Read like a thief (and steal the *moves*)

Pick 5–10 scenes by women that feel like "female gaze" to you (film or prose).

For each, note:

- **what isn't described**
- where the scene **cuts away**
- what detail carries the intimacy (often mundane: hair tie, towel edge, teacup warmth)
- where the power is (who initiates, who consents, who leads, who softens)

You're not copying content; you're copying *lens choices*.

7) Get women's feedback at the scene level

Not "do you like my book?" but:

- "Where did you feel respected?"
- "Where did you feel the camera got creepy?"
- "Which line made you trust the narrator less?"

One good woman beta reader can recalibrate a whole manuscript.

A quick self-check that works every time

After writing an intimate paragraph, ask:

- If I removed the bodies, would the **relationship change** still be clear?
- If I swapped genders, would the scene still feel **ethical and true**?

- Did I describe her as a **person having an experience**, or as an **experience being watched**?

If the answers lean the wrong way, it's not a moral failure — it's a camera angle problem. Re-aim.

One reassurance, because you're being hard on yourself 🧡

"AMAB" doesn't doom you to male gaze. Plenty of women write in ways that reproduce male gaze; plenty of men write with extraordinary tenderness and ethical attention. The gaze is **learned**, socially trained, and craft-trained.

And in your specific project, you've already built the strongest antidotes:

- women-led competence network
- women setting terms
- intimacy as tenderness + authority, not conquest
- Charli's dignity as non-negotiable

That's the spine. Now it's just refinements of lens.

If you want, paste one paragraph of your "candlelit aching" draft when you write it, and I'll do a *gaze pass* on it: I'll point to exactly where it reads female-gaze, and exactly where the camera risks slipping into "viewer-first," with concrete swap suggestions. 🕯️



Still getting my ducks in a row. Because this is more about Celeste than Charli, if I write an intimate scene, it will be from her POV. Which is a HUGE determinant on experience: I can have her open up to the reader, not explicitly, but just how MUCH she had been restraining herself, without even realising. It's that 'dam-leak' thing: the more it leaks, the more the volume of the leak increases. And THAT is something I'd like the reader to feel along with Celeste: her own "flowering", even with occasional overstepping, not willfully, but because this is

unfamiliar terrain. Recall that she had a failed romance in high school with a member of the football team, because, of course she did (trope-trope... maybe we can find someone else for her to fail with) with end result: she'd sort-of become intensely self-protective. And now, she feels safe and loved and always in control and her fires rage. Beautiful! I'm loving this... perhaps a bit too much?

You're not "loving it too much," Robyn 😊🔥 — you're loving it at exactly the level that makes a reader trust you, because you're talking about **inner mechanics** (restraint → safety → leak → flood), not titillation. That's craft.

And yes: writing it from **Celeste POV** is the right lever. If Celeste is the centre of the book, then the intimacy is about **Celeste's flowering**, not Charli's body. That's already "female gaze" by construction.

Your dam-leak model is excellent

You've described a very believable arc:

- Celeste thinks she's controlled.
- She *is* controlled — until safety arrives.
- Then the restraint turns out to have been a *pressure* she didn't notice.
- And once it starts releasing, she realises she's been thirsty for tenderness, for permission, for being held—and *that surprises her*.

That "surprise at herself" is the gold. That's where your heat comes from while staying clean.

Make her "flowering" felt without exposition

You can show the dam opening with a few repeating tells that intensify over scenes:

Phase 1: The leak

- She reaches for Charli "by accident," then covers it with practicality.
- She uses a brisk tone to disguise softness.
- She catches herself watching Charli's hands.

Phase 2: The crack

- She starts manufacturing reasons for contact ("Come here." "Let me." "Stay.")

- She's irritated by her own need.
- She becomes possessive in *language* (not in control): "Mine," said once, then regretted.

Phase 3: The release

- She stops apologising for wanting.
- She asks cleanly (or commands gently), and the asking feels like strength, not weakness.
- She feels the cost the next day (fatigue, distraction) and chooses it anyway.

You don't have to explain the dam. Let it be inferred by escalation.

The failed high-school romance: keep it, but sharpen it

The "football team" trope isn't *bad*—it's just familiar. The fix isn't "avoid the trope," it's "make it specific in a Celeste way."

What Celeste would actually learn from that relationship (that makes her self-protective) is something like:

- **He liked her when she performed a role** (cool girl / clever accessory)
- **He couldn't tolerate her authority** when it wasn't flattering
- **He treated her privacy as social currency**
- **He wanted the optics of her** more than the person

That would absolutely make her self-protective.

If you want a less-tropey partner *without changing the function*, here are three swap options that still produce the same scar:

1. **A theatre boy** who wanted her as director of his life, then resented her standards.
2. **A debate kid** who adored her mind until she beat him publicly.
3. **An older coworker/TA** who "mentored" her and then punished her boundaries (still handle delicately; you can keep it non-graphic and non-sensational).

My pick for your themes: **debate kid**. That gives you "power + language + control" as the battlefield, which is very Celeste.

How to keep Celeste "always in control" while still letting fires rage

Control doesn't mean Celeste is cold. It means she's **the one who sets terms**.

So her flowering can look like:

- she initiates
- she decides pace
- she decides what's private, what's spoken
- she decides when to stop
- she checks Charli's face for consent *as a habit*, not as a ceremony

That reads strong and safe, not predatory.

A line that embodies this:

"Tell me if you want me to stop," I said, and hated how my voice shook on the kindness.

Or even more Celeste:

"If you need me to stop, you say so once. I'll hear it."

The "is this too much?" worry — here's the barometer

If the scene's **primary purpose** is:

- deepening trust
 - showing how safety changes Celeste
 - revealing her ethics and her appetite for tenderness
- ...then you're fine.

If the primary purpose drifts into:

- describing bodies for the reader's consumption
 - proving "how hot it is"
- ...then you pull back.

Your instincts are already aimed at the first category.

A short Celeste-POV "flowering" paragraph to show the dam-leak

(Non-explicit, but hot.)

I told myself it was practical. A small apartment. A stupid second bedroom pretending we were strangers. I told myself it made sense to turn it into a study, because I had readings, and deadlines, and a life that would not pause for my feelings.

But when Charli asked, *where do I sleep*, my body answered before my brain did.

With me.

The words came out bright and teasing, like a joke. They weren't a joke. They were a door I hadn't realised I'd been leaning on for weeks.

I watched her stare at me—delighted, terrified—and something in my chest loosened with a quiet violence.

Not lust. Not hunger.

Relief.

As if I'd been holding my breath since high school and only just remembered I was allowed to exhale.

If you like, next step is easy: I'll sketch **three Celeste-POV vignette outlines** for the "study conversion → bed invitation → first night of 'stolen 2am tenderness'" sequence, each with a different flavour (teasing/domestic, aching/quiet, slightly funny/real). You can pick one and write it, or I can draft a full scene in your voice. 🕯️ ✨



I am *SO* tempted.... but, I have to be responsible, myself (thanks a LOT, Celeste 🥰). My better half is unwell with vertigo - she's asleep now, but I'll need to be up early tomorrow for... things. So, if I could kindly ask you to provide me with a context summary for tomorrow, so we can continue this scintillating conversation, I would much appreciate it.

Of course, Robyn — and I hope your better half wakes up steadier 🍷🌿 Vertigo is miserable.

Here's a context summary you can paste into tomorrow's thread:

Context Summary (for tomorrow)

We're shifting into "**happier scenes**" focused on **Celeste + Charli's domestic life** in **Celeste's apartment** (their home), with intimacy kept **clean / non-explicit**, but still **candlelit, aching, and suggestive** — more *Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu* in tone (attention + implication) than graphic detail.

Creative goals

- The story is **more about Celeste than Charli**, so intimate scenes should be written in **Celeste POV**.
- Celeste **leads**: she sets pace/terms, initiates, stays in control—yet her "fires" rise because she feels safe and loved.
- Charli is **bemused but willing**, delighted and slightly taken aback that Celeste has such a voracious appetite for **tenderness, attention, and touch** (Charli's touch).
- We want the reader to feel Celeste's "**flowering**": she's been restraining herself without fully realising; once the "dam" begins to leak, it escalates naturally (restraint → safety → leak → release/flood), with occasional mild overstepping that isn't wilful, just unfamiliar terrain.

Female gaze vs male gaze

- Aim to appeal to women readers by treating intimacy as **experience + agency + ethics of attention**, not body-inventory.
- Show erotic charge through **focus, permission, consequences, and inner change**, not mechanics.

Technique agreed for "clean but feverish" intimacy

- Use a **plausible pretext** (ointment/moisturiser, hair, "practical" touch) to create charged closeness.
- Emphasise **pre-touch / touch / post-touch**:
 - *pre-touch*: Celeste telegraphs need via breath, pause, drifting closer, gentle imperatives.
 - *touch*: small gestures that become everything (hands, wrist, cheek, hairline, neck/shoulder, etc.).

- *post-touch*: "withdrawal" tells (eyes following retreating hand, breath reset, quiet "again/don't stop/here").
- Celeste often disguises craving as practicality: "I need sleep," "it helps," "efficient," etc.

Foibles for Celeste (to keep bliss real)

- Competence intolerance (corrects/fixes), strategist who forgets basic care, always-on mind, touch that's decisive more than tender, overprotectiveness disguised as logic, occasional territorial language.
- Charli learns to live with these and gently negotiates softness/agency (e.g., "Could you hold me without fixing me?").

Plot setup for first domestic intimacy

- Celeste gets tired of the two-bedroom arrangement and **converts Charli's room into a study** as a "practical" reason.
- Charli: "Where do I sleep?" Celeste: "With me, you goose!" (teasing, decisive, irresistible).
- Scene should carry **late-night "stolen moments"** energy: Celeste might regret the distraction during lectures next day, but chooses it anyway.

Backstory note

- Celeste had a **failed high-school romance** that made her self-protective; "football guy" felt tropey, possible alternatives suggested: debate kid/theatre boy/mentor-type (debate kid preferred for power/language themes). Keep it specific: he liked the *role* she played, couldn't tolerate her authority, used privacy as currency, etc.

Last edits completed

- Lauren/Charli hospital-drive scene was tightened and polished (repetition fixes, punctuation, apostrophes, etc.) and posted; later section revised similarly (indicator ticked, ladder vs cliff, "I can learn," "choice" ending).

Next step for tomorrow

- Draft 1–3 **Celeste-POV vignettes** (or a full scene) for: study conversion → bed invitation → first night of candlelit aching, using the pretext/attention/after-effects method to show Celeste's hunger without explicitness.

Sleep well, and good luck with the early start tomorrow 🐼 ✨



