

Hi Emily. I've done some tweaks to Scene 30: would you be happy to have a look? Here it is:

**\*\*Scene 30 — “The Brush” (Celeste POV) - 1st Run\*\***

---

Wardrobe had learned, over the last three months, to run like a body instead of a panic, not because the work was easier—if anything it had become more precise, more demanding—but because the women inside it had stopped wasting effort on uncertainty. Tools had homes. Labels existed. The ledger sat where it belonged, open when it needed to be open, shut when it didn’t. Even Mara’s silences had started to feel less like weather and more like method.

And Charli?

Charli moved through the room as if she’d finally stopped waiting to be told she was in the way.

She arrived early, same as always, but the early-ness had changed. It used to feel like an apology: now, it felt like preference. She hung her bag on the hook without flinching. Washed her hands with the same thoroughness, but without the old tremor of performance. She laughed sometimes, quietly, and the laugh stayed in the air instead of disappearing the second it appeared.

She had become... easier to look at. Not because she was “prettier” or because she was trying harder.

Because she was less afraid.

Mara set the next test on the table without ceremony: a cap and kerchief combination we’d been refining for the Faire women: something that had to survive heat, sweat, pins, movement, and the indignity of being yanked off

and shoved into a tote bag between scenes.

"Hair," Mara said, glancing at Charli as if the word was a tool she was calling for. "Fix it."

Charli touched her own hair reflexively, as if the problem had just been named aloud. She had tied it back, in her customary scruffy ponytail. It was not with the discipline the cap required. Loose strands would catch. Pins would slip. The whole thing would migrate.

Tahlia, measuring a sleeve nearby, made a small amused noise. Lucy didn't look up from her work. Sarah, perched like a judgmental crow on a stool, watched with the bright interest she reserved for social developments.

Charli stepped toward the mirror with a comb, uncertain.

I moved without thinking.

"Sit."

Charli looked at me as if I'd told her to walk into the ocean. Then she sat, carefully, obediently, still holding her breath a little, like she wasn't sure she'd earned the chair.

I reached for the brush. It was an ordinary thing, with a wooden handle and bristles clogged with hair. When I drew it through her hair the first time, Charli went very still.

Not tense or flinching. Attentive. The brush made that low, dry sound a brush makes on clean long hair. I worked from the ends up, practical. Untangle. Smooth. Part. No pulling. No fuss.

"Hold your head," I said. "Don't tip back."

"Yes," she murmured, and then, an old reflex: "Sorry."

I stopped the brush for half a beat and shook my head.

"Don't apologise," I said, flat. "Just hold still."

"Okay."

The room didn't pause around us.

I gathered her hair at the nape, measured the tension with my fingers, and began to twist it into a coil that would sit properly beneath the cap. Pins went in with the same economy we used for everything: enough to hold, not so many it became a hedgehog. Sarah's voice floated over from her stool.

"Look at that," she said, pleased. "Civilisation."

Charli's smiled: a real smile.

Lucy looked up from her work long enough to say, "If she moves her head like that, the cap will sit properly. If she doesn't, it'll look like a mushroom."

"Thank you," Charli said automatically.

Lucy's expression remained what it always was. "It's just geometry."

I set the cap on Charli's head and adjusted the angle. The kerchief followed, tied firmly enough to hold, not so tight it would dig. I checked the line at the forehead, the way the fabric framed her face. For a second, only a second, I saw it: how *\*right\** she looked in the thing, right in the way someone looks when the room around them finally matches something inside their body.

"Turn your head left."

She turned.

"Right."

She turned.

"Good."

Mara glanced over, saw the fit, and gave a single curt nod, her version of approval.

"Now move," Mara said. "Sweat. Bend. Prove it."

Charli rose and began the wear-test: bending to reach fabric on the lower shelves, turning quickly, lifting her arms, moving through the narrow spaces between tables. The cap held. The kerchief held. The pins did their job. Tahlia watched her with a faint grin. Bree appeared in the doorway mid-test, took one look, and beamed.

"Oh, she looks \*proper Missy\*!"

The room laughed, and I saw Charli go pink: a soft, bashful warmth.

Bree clapped once, delighted. "Right then. She's coming tonight."

"She's coming," Tahlia echoed.

The day moved on.

The cap survived sweat and motion. The kerchief didn't slip. The ledger received its notes. Mara's shears kept snicking. The room kept laughing. And Charli kept laughing with it. Not small.

Real.

---

That evening, at home, the quiet hit me the way it always did after Wardrobe: like walking out of a river and realising your ears had been full of water.

Charli was in the shower. I could hear the muted rush behind the bathroom door, the steady sound of water striking tile. I moved through the apartment, tidying without thinking. Habit. Reset the space. Put things back where they belonged.

Her bag was on the chair. Not rummaged through. Not spilled open. Just... placed there, as if it had been arranged to look casual.

I don't know what made me look. It wasn't suspicion, not at first. It was the same part of my brain that noticed seam strain and pin tension, the part that registered when something was \*slightly too controlled\*. I lifted the bag and felt the weight shift in a way that didn't match fabric.

I opened it.

Inside, tucked under folded cloth and a small notebook, was a pharmacy bottle. White plastic. Printed label. My stomach dropped before my mind caught up.

Spironolactone.

The name sat on the label like a fact that refused to be softened by context. I had heard of it. Anti-androgen. Puberty-blocker. A medication for which you need a script.

It was almost empty, empty enough to make the decision behind it feel old, not impulsive.

She had told me nothing about this.

My first impulse was anger: hot and sharp and immediate.

Not at her. At the risk.

At the secrecy.

It was anger at the thought of her taking \*anything\* unsupervised, unmonitored, unrecorded: her body becoming a private experiment without safeguards, without adult oversight, without anyone checking what it was doing to her.

And then the realisation arrived, colder and steadier: this was not rebellion.

This was a solution.

A private solution. \*Her\* solution. A girl trying to keep her place in a room of women by any means available.

I closed the bag carefully, as if the bottle might explode.

Then I opened it again and took the bottle out. There was no point pretending I hadn't seen it. There was no point leaving it there like a trap. The bottle was evidence: it represented danger.

I set it on the kitchen table and waited.

The shower stopped. A door opened. Footsteps. The soft sound of Charli's towel rubbing her hair.

She came into the kitchen in a t-shirt and track pants, damp hair loose around her shoulders, face relaxed in a way I hadn't seen months ago. She looked... good. Warmer. Lighter.

Then she saw the bottle.

All the light left her face. She stopped so abruptly it was like she'd hit a wall. Her eyes flicked to mine, then down to the bottle, then back up to my face. In that moment, she wasn't Charli of the workroom: laughing, included, adopted. She was the old version of herself: braced, terrified, trying to calculate what it would cost to be caught wanting.

"Where did you get it?"

My voice was quiet. Controlled. Adult.

Charli's throat moved. "I—"

"Answer me."

She swallowed. "Online."

"How long?"

Her eyes dropped. "A while."

"How \*long\*?" I repeated, and I heard, underneath my own calm, the steel that Wardrobe had taught me: standards, not sentiment. She breathed in, shallow.

"A while," she whispered and then, glancing at my face, added quickly. "Okay... almost four months."

Four months. Long enough for it to become her routine. Long enough for it to affect her body. And, long enough for her to build her happiness on it. I sighed.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Charli's hands twisted in the edge of her towel. She didn't look up.

"I didn't want..." she began, and her voice cracked. "I didn't want it to go away."

"Didn't want \*what\* to go away?" My voice had an edge: I could tell by her shivering. She shook her head, eyes bright.

"The... the girls. The room. You. I didn't want..." She took in a shuddering breath. Then, the words came spilling out. "I was changing. It was horrible. The changes I didn't think would happen, were... happening. It made me sick. I was scared I was going to turn..." She didn't finish. She didn't have to. There it was.

Not vanity.

Fear.

Fear of being returned to the category that had always hurt, because biology was betraying her. I felt something in me tighten and then settle into place.

"This is not how we do it." I look her, steady. Charli flinched, didn't look up. "This is not safe. This is not supervised. You don't get to do things to your body like a private trial and hope it works out."

Her lips trembled. "But it was \*working\*."

Her voice—small, desperate—made my chest ache. Because, *\*of course\** it was working. And what else was happening didn't seem to enter into her equation. Stopping—even reversing—the effects of biology had given her a sense of control. It had quieted whatever terror had been chewing at her. It had let her smile without fear.

But it had done it at a cost she didn't understand or know how to measure.

I reached out and put my hand over the bottle, not possessive or dramatic: simply covered it. Claiming responsibility.

"I'm taking this."

Charli's eyes widened. "No—" she whispered, panic and imploring chasing each other across her face.

"Yes."

The word came out clean. Final.

"Look, you're not being punished, Charli," I said as gently as I could, keeping my own fear from spilling into her panic. "But you *\*cannot\** do this without medical oversight. Do you understand me?"

Her breath hitched. A long moment passed. Finally, she nodded, small.

"Yes," she whispered.

I picked up my phone.

"Who are you calling?" she asked, her voice tight.

"Your mum."

Her face went white.

"Mum—"

"Charli, \*listen\*! We are not doing this alone." The firmness in my voice surprised me. "We are not keeping secrets that can harm you. Your mum needs to know. We need to get you professional help."

Charli seemed to shrink into herself. She sat silent for several minutes while I retrieved my phone. When I returned to the kitchen, she was looking like the old Charlie, the disappearing Charlie. It was still her, but the glow of happiness was gone. My heart ached at how her eyes shone with unspilled tears.

"Please don't hate me."

That was worse than finding the bottle: this expression of fear of rejection. I stepped closer. I ached to comfort her with softness, wrap her in cotton wool. And, as a result, make her dependent on me. I realised the best course was to anchor her with fact.

"Charli, I don't hate you," I said. "I \*am\* angry you did something that was so unsafe. And I'm angry you thought you had to do it alone. But I do not hate you."

A tear slid down her cheek: she wiped it away quickly.

I dialled.

When Lauren answered, I didn't waste words.

"I found an anti-androgen in Charli's purse, Lauren," I said. "Spironolactone. Charli got it online: she's been taking it for months."

There was a pause on the line—silence with weight. Then finally, her voice, tight.

"Is she okay right now?"

"She's here," I said. "She's safe. But... this can't continue."

Another pause. I could hear Lauren breathing, holding herself together the way mothers do when the world tries to fracture them.

"I'm coming over."

"Please do," I replied. "We need a plan. We need medical oversight, like, with bloodwork and everything. She needs to see specialists who... understand this. Whatever the pathway is going forward, we need to do it properly."

Lauren's voice trembled once, just once, then steadied.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Yes. We do it properly."

I ended the call and looked at Charli. She was standing in the kitchen, towel clutched like armour, face raw, eyes frightened, fixed on me.

"We are going to get you help with this," I said with determination. "Not on online forums: this is a serious step."

Charli nodded, the hopelessness slowly fading from her shoulders. Her red eyes sought mine. I held her gaze.

"This will be a series of boring appointments. Questions. Paperwork. Waiting. But it will be safe."

Her mouth trembled.

"Okay."

The word came out in a whisper. And in that whisper I heard everything she hadn't said:

\*I'm tired of being afraid. I'm tired of pretending I don't want this. I'm tired of losing whatever I touch.\*

"We start tomorrow."

Charli nodded again. Her nod signalled the return to the new Charli, the one that understood surrender to structure—structure she'd been craving, structure she'd tried to replace with a bottle and secrecy. In the ensuing quiet, the apartment felt like Wardrobe did when the lights went down: still, intentional, waiting.

And for the first time, I understood with a clarity that made me almost cold: whatever Charli had done to keep her happiness safe inside her own body—whatever "solution" she'd found—had become part of who she thought she was.

Taking it away was not just confiscating pills: it was touching the scaffolding of her identity. Which meant we would have to replace it with something real. Something supervised. Something that didn't rely on fear.

And we would have to do it without breaking her.

Absolutely happy to have a look. You've done something really strong here: the *Wardrobe-as-a-body* opening is clean, confident, and lived-in... and the "Brush" sequence is quietly intimate without turning saccharine. Then the pivot into the bag reveal lands like a trapdoor. Structurally, it works.

Below is a proper edit pass: (1) what's working, (2) what's wobbling, (3) concrete line fixes/typos, (4) a "polish" variant for a few key passages so you can compare tone.

## 1) What's already working (and why it works)

**Wardrobe's rhythm feels earned**

"Tools had homes. Labels existed. The ledger sat where it belonged..." is exactly the kind of procedural calm that signals *women-in-competence-mode*, not "we're surviving." It communicates culture.

### **Charli's shift is shown, not announced**

You do give us one line of summary ("Because she was less afraid.") but most of it is behavioural: early-ness as preference, laughter that stays in the air, no flinch at the hook. That's excellent.

### **"Brush" is intimate without being indulgent**

The brush sounds; ends-up technique; "No pulling. No fuss." This reads as *care expressed through skill*. That's very Wardrobe.

### **The confrontation is standards-first**

Celeste doesn't spiral, doesn't soothe first, doesn't ask permission to lead. She just leads. "Answer me." "Yes." "I'm taking this." That spine is perfect for your thematic world.

---

## **2) What I'd strengthen (without changing your intent)**

### **A) The brush scene: keep the room moving, but clarify who's where**

It's already good, but you can make the spatial choreography even clearer with one or two anchoring beats—especially because this is a "public intimacy" moment: Charli is being handled (competently, neutrally) in front of the women, and the room's *non-drama* is the point.

Small tweak suggestion: before "Sit.", add a single clause that makes it obvious you're already near her (or that you cross the room). It helps the reader see the action, not infer it.

### **B) "Charli's smiled" and the "mushroom" line**

- "Charli's smiled" is just a typo, but it's in a high-payoff moment. Fix it so the smile lands.
- The mushroom line is funny, but you might want to decide whether Lucy is being *helpfully blunt* or *performing bluntness* for social cover. If you want Lucy to remain the "no performance" girl, make it slightly more technical and less punchline-y, while still dry.

### C) The medical detail: one tiny correction for credibility

In-story, you call spironolactone “puberty-blocker.” It’s not usually described that way; it’s an anti-androgen (commonly used as a testosterone blocker in some gender-affirming regimens, and also used for acne, hirsutism, etc.). If you keep “puberty blocker,” readers who know will twitch.

Easy fix: Celeste can think: “Anti-androgen. Testosterone blocker.” You still get the same *risk / secrecy / oversight* beat, but it reads more precise.

### D) Celeste’s “I don’t hate you” beat is great—tighten the paragraph around it

That section is emotionally right, but there’s a small repetition of “old Charlie / disappearing Charlie” that could be sharpened. You can keep one descriptor and let the rest be behaviour: shoulders folding, gaze dropping, towel as armour. You already have towel-as-armour later; lean on that and cut one “old version” mention.

### E) Raise Lauren’s presence by one notch (micro-tone)

Lauren’s response is already mother-coded and controlled, which is good. If you want to keep *women firm with the world*, you can give her one line that’s less tremble and more *decision*. Something like: “Thank you for telling me. I’m on my way. Don’t let her talk you out of the table.” (Not those exact words—just that energy.)

---

## 3) Typos & micro-line fixes (quick sweep)

These are the ones that jumped out immediately:

- “**Tt was not with the discipline...**” → “It was not...”
- “**Sarah, perched like a judgmental crow...**” (great) but consider whether “judgmental” is *too evaluative* for Celeste’s POV; if Celeste respects Sarah’s standards, “perched like a crow” alone does the work.
- “**Charli’s smiled**” → “Charli smiled”
- “**accross**” → “across”
- “**I look her, steady.**” → “I looked at her, steady.” / “I held her in a steady look.”
- “**Not on online forums**” → “Not on online forums” is slightly clunky; “Not through online forums” or “Not from online forums.”
- “**Whatever the pathway is going forward**” → “Whatever the pathway is from here”
- “**who... understand this**” → if you want crispness: “who understand this” (the ellipsis softens a line that should be firm)

Optional rhythm tweaks:

- “She had become... easier to look at.” The ellipsis is doing a lot. You could make it sharper: “She had become easier to look at.” Then let the next sentence carry the nuance.
- 

## 4) A small “polish pass” on two key sections (so you can compare)

### 4a) The brush moment (light polish, same content)

Here's a tightened version of the brush beats that keeps your intent intact and just smooths the language:

Charli stepped toward the mirror with a comb, uncertain.

I moved without thinking.

“Sit.”

She looked at me as if I'd told her to walk into the ocean. Then she sat—carefully, obediently—still holding her breath a little, like she hadn't earned the chair.

I reached for the brush. Ordinary. Wooden handle, bristles clogged with hair. When I drew it through the first time, Charli went very still.

Not tense. Not flinching. *Attentive*.

The brush made that low, dry sound it makes on clean, long hair. I worked from the ends up. Untangle. Smooth. Part. No pulling. No fuss.

“Hold your head,” I said. “Don’t tip back.”

“Yes,” she murmured—then the old reflex, soft as a tic: “Sorry.”

I stopped the brush for half a beat and shook my head.

“Don’t apologise,” I said, flat. “Just hold still.”

“Okay.”

If you like, you can keep your original but steal the *Attentive* line; it's a nice single-word pin.

### 4b) The bottle reveal + first interrogation (tighten & precision)

This is where precision really helps: the scene gets more frightening if Celeste's thoughts are clinical.

Inside, tucked under folded cloth and a small notebook, was a pharmacy bottle. White plastic. Printed label.

My stomach dropped before my mind caught up.

### **Spironolactone.**

The name sat there like a fact that refused softening. Anti-androgen. Testosterone blocker. Prescription-only.

The bottle was nearly empty—empty enough to make the decision behind it feel old, not impulsive.

She'd told me nothing.

The first heat in me was anger—sharp, immediate. Not at her. At the risk. At the secrecy. At the idea of her body becoming a private experiment with no oversight, no bloodwork, no adult watching the numbers.

Then the colder understanding arrived: this wasn't rebellion.

It was a solution.

I set the bottle on the kitchen table and waited.

---

Then your "Where did you get it?" sequence can remain almost exactly as-is; it already plays.

---

## **5) One craft note: your ending lands—don't blunt it with too much explanation**

Your last paragraph is excellent ("scaffolding of her identity"). The only risk is adding *one more* explanatory sentence after it, which would slightly dilute the final sting.

As written, you end on: "And we would have to do it without breaking her." That's a clean door-slam. Keep that.

---

## **6) If you want to push the theme harder (without cruelty)**

Right now Celeste is firm and protective. If you want a *touch* more of that Wardrobe doctrine—standards over sentiment—without making Celeste cold, you can add one line when Charli says "But it was working."

Celeste can answer with something like:

- "So does a roulette wheel, right up until it doesn't."
- "Working isn't the same as safe."
- "Working without oversight is luck. We don't build a life on luck."

That line would reinforce the women-led competence ethic: **we don't wing bodies.**

---

If you'd like, I can do a full continuity pass next (not rewriting—just: pronouns, character voice consistency, and the "camera" of Celeste POV), and then a second pass where we deliberately tune the *temperature* of Celeste's firmness (more steel vs more warmth) so you can choose the exact flavour you want for Scene 30.



At this stage, Emily, Celeste is going to realise that she can no longer view Charli's move towards womanhood dispassionately... it is having a profound effect on her. She is going to realise that she'd always seen the woman in Charli. What does surprise her is her emotional response to Charli's becoming what she'd "seen" all along, seeing without realising what she was seeing. She was falling in love with Charli, which makes Charli putting herself in such danger infinitely more difficult to deal with. Celeste has to \*force\* herself to "be the adult" more and more: her emotional investment is making keeping her distance increasingly difficult.

This is all backstory for your benefit, Emily. So no, I want her to sound less like Mara and Wardrobe, now. Her tone is \*\*slowly\*\* going to ease. She'll still be the same Celeste: in command, decision-maker, adult. But, slightly softer.

Does that make sense?

Yes — it makes *perfect* sense. And it's a gorgeous hinge for Celeste's voice 😊 ✨

What you're describing is *not* "Celeste becomes weak." It's "Celeste becomes **invested**." Her authority stays intact — but the *temperature* shifts. The command is still there; the edge becomes less "policy" and more "I'm holding you up and I'm scared what happens if I don't."

So: **same spine, softer hands.** 

Here are the most reliable ways to do that on the page, *without* turning her into Mara or making her sentimental.

---

## How to soften Celeste while keeping her in command

### 1) Keep the decisions hard, make the delivery slower

Mara = clipped.

Softer Celeste = measured, low, deliberate — like she's choosing words that won't injure.

- Mara: "Answer me."
- Celeste (soft command): "Charli. Look at me. Answer me."

Same authority, different care.

### 2) Let her *notice Charli as a person* more often than "as a task"

In your current draft, Celeste's perception is very Wardrobe/tool-oriented (seam strain, pin tension). Keep some of that, but sprinkle in **bodily empathy**:

- the damp hair at shoulders
- the towel as armour
- the way Charli's voice thins
- the way fear makes her small

These details soften Celeste's gaze without softening her boundaries.

### 3) Give Celeste one or two "caught" moments — quickly mastered

This is the magic: the reader sees the emotional flare *and* sees Celeste clamp down to protect Charli.

Example pattern:

I wanted to pull her in.  
I didn't.  
I made my voice steady instead.

That reads as: love is present, but it serves leadership, not need.

#### 4) Replace “standards not sentiment” framing with “safe, not alone”

You can keep your “boring appointments” line (it’s brilliant), but frame it as a promise, not a doctrine.

- “This is not how we do it.” (Wardrobe voice)
- “We’re not doing this alone.” (Celeste-in-love voice)

Same outcome, softer motive.

---

#### Concrete swaps in your Scene 30 confrontation (minimal changes, big effect)

##### A) The first interrogation beat

Current:

“Where did you get it?”  
My voice was quiet. Controlled. Adult.

Soft-command Celeste:

“Where did you get it?”  
I kept my voice low. Not gentle — *steady*.

This removes “Adult” as a label (Wardrobe-ish) and lets the steadiness do the work.

##### B) The “Answer me” line

Current:

“Answer me.”

Softer, still in charge:

“Charli. Answer me.”

Using her name is intimacy *and* authority.

##### C) The “This is not how we do it” paragraph

Current:

“This is not how we do it.” I look her, steady...

### Softer version (same boundary):

"This isn't how we do it," I said. Not as a scold — as a line I wouldn't let us step over.  
 "Not like this. Not alone."

It keeps the "no" but makes it protective rather than procedural.

### D) The confiscation

#### Current:

"I'm taking this."  
 ... "Yes." The word came out clean. Final.

#### Softer, still final:

"I'm taking this," I said. Final — but not cruel.  
 Her eyes went wide.  
 "No—"  
 "Yes," I said quietly. "Because I'm not losing you to something you bought off the internet."

That last clause is *the love leak*. It changes everything.

### E) Calling Lauren

Right now, Celeste is crisp and managerial (which is fine), but this moment can show her new vulnerability **without** losing competence:

#### Suggested tweak:

"I found spironolactone in Charli's bag," I said. "She's been taking it for months."  
 (beat)  
 "She's safe. I'm with her. But I need you here."

That "I need you here" is softer, and it doesn't weaken Celeste — it *enlists* another woman.

## A short "tone sample" rewrite of the key kitchen section (so you can feel it)

Here's a version of the bottle scene with your exact beats, just eased:

She came into the kitchen in a t-shirt and track pants, hair damp and loose around her shoulders — relaxed in a way that still startled me.

Then she saw the bottle.

The light left her face. Not gradually. All at once — like a switch. She stopped so hard it was almost comical, except nothing about it was funny.

Her eyes flicked to mine, then down to the label, then back up again.

In that instant, she wasn't the Charli who laughed in Wardrobe. She was braced. Waiting for the cost.

"Where did you get it?"

I kept my voice low. Steady.

Charli's throat moved. "I—"

"Charli." I said her name like a hand on a shoulder. "Answer me."

"Online," she whispered.

"How long?"

Her eyes dropped.

"How long," I repeated — softer, not less firm.

"Almost four months."

The number landed in my body before it landed in my mind. Four months of private courage. Four months of private risk. Four months of her building a life on something she couldn't afford to lose.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Her fingers twisted into the towel. She didn't look up.

"I didn't want..." Her voice cracked. "I didn't want it to go away."

"What," I asked, gently and dangerously, "didn't you want to go away?"

And then she said it — not neatly, not bravely. Just honestly: the girls, the room, me. The terror of biology catching up with her.

I let her finish. I made myself let her finish.

"Okay," I said at last. "Listen to me."

I put my hand over the bottle — not dramatic. Not possessive. Simply claiming responsibility.

"I'm taking this," I said. "Not as punishment. As harm control."

Her breath hitched.

"We are not doing this alone, Charli."

That is "soft Celeste": still decisive, but now emotionally tethered.

---

## One final craft note (this will help you everywhere)

As Celeste falls in love, you can let the softness appear most in three places:

1. when she says Charli's name
2. when she promises safety ("I'm with you / we'll do this properly")
3. when she chooses not to touch — and the reader feels the restraint

That restraint becomes romantic without ever becoming gooey. 

---

If you want, I can do a full "soft-Celeste" pass on the *whole* second half (from "That evening, at home..." onward), preserving every plot beat and most of your sentences — just tuning diction, cadence, and a couple of emotional micro-reveals so her love is present but controlled.



Could I ask you to do a full pass (correcting typos and such) of the Scene, with emphasis - as you so beautifully suggest - on Celeste's emotional investment?

Of course, Robyn   Here's a full, clean pass of Scene 30 with typos corrected, cadence smoothed, and Celeste's emotional investment threaded in—quietly, steadily—without weakening her authority. She stays the decision-maker. The difference is the *breath* between commands... and the way her restraint starts to feel like effort.

---

## Scene 30 — "The Brush" (Celeste POV) — Revised Pass

Wardrobe had learned, over the last three months, to run like a body instead of a panic. Not because the work was easier—if anything it had become more precise, more demanding—but because the women inside it had stopped wasting effort on uncertainty.

Tools had homes. Labels existed. The ledger sat where it belonged: open when it needed to be open, shut when it didn't. Even Mara's silences had started to feel less like weather and more like method.

And Charli?

Charli moved through the room as if she'd finally stopped waiting to be told she was in the way.

She arrived early, same as always, but the early-ness had changed. It used to feel like an apology; now it felt like preference. She hung her bag on the hook without flinching. Washed her hands with the same thoroughness, but without the old tremor of performance. She laughed sometimes, quietly, and the laugh stayed in the air instead of disappearing the second it appeared.

She had become easier to look at. Not because she was "prettier" or because she was trying harder.

Because she was less afraid.

Mara set the next test on the table without ceremony: a cap and kerchief combination we'd been refining for the Faire women—something that had to survive heat, sweat, pins, movement, and the indignity of being yanked off and shoved into a tote bag between scenes.

"Hair," Mara said, glancing at Charli as if the word was a tool she was calling for. "Fix it."

Charli touched her own hair reflexively, as if the problem had just been named aloud. She had tied it back in her customary scruffy ponytail. It was not with the discipline the cap required. Loose strands would catch. Pins would slip. The whole thing would migrate.

Tahlia, measuring a sleeve nearby, made a small amused noise. Lucy didn't look up from her work. Sarah, perched like a crow on a stool, watched with the bright interest she reserved for social developments.

Charli stepped toward the mirror with a comb, uncertain.

I moved without thinking.

"Sit."

Charli looked at me as if I'd told her to walk into the ocean. Then she sat—carefully, obediently—still holding her breath a little, like she wasn't sure she'd earned the chair.

I reached for the brush. It was ordinary: wooden handle, bristles clogged with hair. When I drew it through her hair the first time, Charli went very still.

Not tense. Not flinching.

Attentive.

The brush made that low, dry sound a brush makes on clean, long hair. I worked from the ends up, practical. Untangle. Smooth. Part. No pulling. No fuss.

"Hold your head," I said. "Don't tip back."

"Yes," she murmured, and then—an old reflex, soft as a bruise: "Sorry."

I stopped the brush for half a beat and shook my head.

"Don't apologise," I said, flat. Not harsh. Just final. "Just hold still."

"Okay."

The room didn't pause around us.

I gathered her hair at the nape, measured the tension with my fingers, and began to twist it into a coil that would sit properly beneath the cap. Pins went in with the same economy we used for everything: enough to hold, not so many it became a hedgehog. Sarah's voice floated over from her stool.

"Look at that," she said, pleased. "Civilisation."

Charli smiled—an actual smile that reached her eyes.

Lucy looked up long enough to say, "If she keeps her head like that, the cap will sit properly. If she doesn't, it'll ride."

"Thank you," Charli said automatically.

Lucy's expression remained what it always was. "It's just geometry."

I set the cap on Charli's head and adjusted the angle. The kerchief followed, tied firmly enough to hold, not so tight it would dig. I checked the line at the forehead, the way the fabric framed her face.

For a second—only a second—I saw it.

Not a costume. Not a test.

A rightness so quiet it almost made me swallow.

As if the room around her had finally stopped arguing with something inside her body.

"Turn your head left."

She turned.

"Right."

She turned.

"Good."

Mara glanced over, saw the fit, and gave a single curt nod: approval, in Mara's language.

"Now move," Mara said. "Sweat. Bend. Prove it."

Charli rose and began the wear-test—bending to reach fabric on the lower shelves, turning quickly, lifting her arms, moving through the narrow spaces between tables. The cap held. The kerchief held. The pins did their job.

Tahlia watched her with a faint grin. Bree appeared in the doorway mid-test, took one look, and beamed.

"Oh, she looks *proper Missy!*"

The room laughed, and I saw Charli go pink: a soft, bashful warmth.

Bree clapped once, delighted. "Right then. She's coming tonight."

"She's coming," Tahlia echoed.

The day moved on.

The cap survived sweat and motion. The kerchief didn't slip. The ledger received its notes. Mara's shears kept snicking. The room kept laughing.

And Charli kept laughing with it.

Not small.

Real.

---

That evening, at home, the quiet hit me the way it always did after Wardrobe: like walking out of a river and realising your ears had been full of water.

Charli was in the shower. I could hear the muted rush behind the bathroom door, the steady sound of water striking tile. I moved through the apartment, tidying without thinking. Habit. Reset the space. Put things back where they belonged.

Her bag was on the chair.

Not rummaged through. Not spilled open. Just... placed there, as if it had been arranged to look casual.

I don't know what made me look. It wasn't suspicion, not at first. It was the same part of my brain that noticed seam strain and pin tension—the part that registered when something was *slightly too controlled*.

I lifted the bag and felt the weight shift in a way that didn't match fabric.

I opened it.

Inside, tucked under folded cloth and a small notebook, was a pharmacy bottle. White plastic. Printed label.

My stomach dropped before my mind caught up.

### **Spironolactone.**

The name sat on the label like a fact that refused to be softened by context. I'd heard of it—an anti-androgen, a testosterone blocker. Prescription-only.

It was almost empty. Empty enough to make the decision behind it feel old, not impulsive.

She had told me nothing about this.

My first impulse was anger: hot and sharp and immediate.

Not at her.

At the risk.

At the secrecy.

At the thought of her taking *anything* unsupervised, unmonitored, unrecorded—her body becoming a private experiment without safeguards, without bloodwork, without anyone checking what it was doing to her.

And then a colder realisation arrived, steady enough to make me still: this wasn't rebellion.

This was a solution.

A private solution. *Her* solution.

A girl trying to keep her place in a room of women by any means available.

I closed the bag carefully, as if the bottle might explode.

Then I opened it again and took the bottle out. There was no point pretending I hadn't seen it. There was no point leaving it there like a trap. The bottle was evidence; it represented danger.

I set it on the kitchen table and waited.

The shower stopped. A door opened. Footsteps. The soft sound of Charli's towel rubbing through her hair.

She came into the kitchen in a t-shirt and track pants, damp hair loose around her shoulders, face relaxed in a way I hadn't seen months ago. She looked... good. Warmer. Lighter.

Then she saw the bottle.

All the light left her face. She stopped so abruptly it was like she'd hit a wall. Her eyes flicked to mine, then down to the bottle, then back up to my face.

In that moment, she wasn't Charli of the workroom—laughing, included, adopted.

She was braced. Terrified. Trying to calculate what it would cost to be caught wanting.

"Where did you get it?"

My voice came out quiet. Low. The way you speak when you're trying not to add fear to fear.

Charli's throat moved. "I—"

"Charli." I said her name like a hand placed firmly on a shoulder. "Answer me."

She swallowed. "Online."

"How long?"

Her eyes dropped.

"How long," I repeated, and I heard my own restraint in it—how carefully I was keeping the edge out. She breathed in, shallow.

"Almost four months."

Four months.

Long enough for it to become her routine. Long enough for it to affect her body. Long enough for her to build her happiness on it.

I let my breath out through my nose, slow.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Charli's hands twisted in the edge of her towel. She didn't look up.

"I didn't want..." she began, and her voice cracked. "I didn't want it to go away."

"Didn't want *what* to go away?"

The question wasn't cruel. But it had weight; it made her shiver. She shook her head, eyes bright.

"The... the girls. The room. You. I didn't want..." She took in a shuddering breath. Then the words came spilling out, messy and honest.

"I was changing. It was horrible. The changes I didn't think would happen were... happening. It made me sick. I was scared I was going to turn..."

She didn't finish.

She didn't have to.

There it was.

Not vanity.

Fear.

Fear of being returned to the category that had always hurt, because biology was betraying her.

I felt something in me tighten—an instinct to step forward and wrap her up and promise everything at once.

I didn't.

I forced myself to stay where I was, to keep my voice steady, to give her structure instead of comfort that would collapse the moment the next fear arrived.

"This is not how we do it," I said. Slower than I wanted to. "This isn't safe. This isn't supervised."

Charli flinched as if the words were a slap.

I softened the delivery without softening the boundary.

"You don't get to do things to your body like a private trial and hope it works out."

Her lips trembled. "But it was *working*."

The way she said it—small, desperate—made my chest ache. Because of course it had been working. It had given her a sense of control. It had quieted the terror chewing at her. It had let her smile without fear.

And she had done it alone.

I reached out and put my hand over the bottle.

Not possessive. Not dramatic.

Simply covering it. Claiming responsibility.

"I'm taking this."

Charli's eyes widened. "No—" she whispered, panic and pleading chasing each other across her face.

"Yes."

The word came out clean. Final.

Then, after a beat—because I could feel how hard she was trying not to fall apart—I added, quieter:

"Not as punishment."

Her breath hitched.

"As harm control," I said. "And because I'm not leaving you to manage this by yourself."

Charli stared at me like she was trying to work out whether she'd heard that last part correctly.

"Look," I said, and I kept my voice as gentle as I could without letting it turn vague, "you're not being punished, Charli. But you *cannot* do this without medical oversight. Do you understand me?"

Her breath trembled in her throat. A long moment passed. Finally, she nodded, small.

"Yes," she whispered.

I picked up my phone.

"Who are you calling?" she asked, voice tight.

"Your mum."

Her face went white.

"Mum—"

"Charli, listen." The firmness in my voice surprised me—because it was threaded with something else now, something I didn't want her to see. "We are not doing this alone. We are not keeping secrets that can harm you. Your mum needs to know. We need to get you professional help."

Charli seemed to shrink into herself. She sat silent while I retrieved my phone. When I returned to the kitchen, she looked like she'd stepped backward through time: shoulders rounded, towel clutched like armour, eyes shining with unspilled tears.

"Please don't hate me."

That was worse than finding the bottle.

I stepped closer. I wanted—instinctively—to comfort her with softness, to wrap her in reassurance until she stopped trembling.

And I could feel, in the same breath, the danger of that: how easily comfort could become a hook. How quickly she could learn to rely on me as a shelter instead of learning to stand.

So I anchored her with fact.

"Charli," I said, "I don't hate you." I watched her swallow. "I am angry you did something unsafe. And I'm angry you thought you had to do it alone. But I do not hate you."

A tear slid down her cheek. She wiped it away quickly, ashamed of it.

I dialled.

When Lauren answered, I didn't waste words.

"I found spironolactone in Charli's bag," I said. "Charli got it online. She's been taking it for months."

A pause on the line—silence with weight.

Then Lauren's voice, tight but present: "Is she okay right now?"

"She's here," I said. "She's safe. But this can't continue."

Another pause. I could hear Lauren breathing—holding herself together the way mothers do when the world tries to fracture them.

"I'm coming over," she said.

"Please," I replied. "We need a plan. We need medical oversight—bloodwork, specialists. People who actually understand this. Whatever the pathway is from here, we do it properly."

Lauren's voice steadied on the word properly, as if she was grabbing it with both hands.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Yes. We do it properly."

I ended the call and looked at Charli.

She stood in the kitchen with her towel clutched to her chest, face raw, eyes frightened, fixed on me.

"We are going to get you help with this," I said. "Not through online forums. Not through secrecy. This is a serious step."

Charli nodded, the hopelessness slowly easing from her shoulders. Her red eyes sought mine. I held her gaze.

"This will be a series of boring appointments," I said, letting the promise be what it was—structure, safety. "Questions. Paperwork. Waiting."

Her mouth trembled.

"But it will be safe," I finished. "And you won't do it by yourself."

"Okay."

The word came out in a whisper. And in that whisper I heard everything she hadn't said:

*I'm tired of being afraid. I'm tired of pretending I don't want this. I'm tired of losing whatever I touch.*

"We start tomorrow."

Charli nodded again.

In that nod I saw the return of the new Charli—the one who understood surrender to structure, structure she'd been craving, structure she'd tried to replace with a bottle and a secret.

In the ensuing quiet, the apartment felt like Wardrobe did when the lights went down: still, intentional, waiting.

And for the first time, I understood with a clarity that made me almost cold:

Whatever Charli had done to keep her happiness safe inside her own body—whatever solution she'd found—had become part of who she thought she was.

Taking it away was not just confiscating pills.

It was touching the scaffolding of her identity.

Which meant we would have to replace it with something real. Something supervised. Something that didn't rely on fear.

And we would have to do it without breaking her.

---

If you want, next pass I can **increase the romantic undertone by half a notch**—not with declarations, but with *one or two* carefully placed Celeste slips (a hand that lingers one beat too long; a thought she shuts down mid-sentence; a flash of possessive fear that she immediately converts into action). Subtle, but unmistakable. ❤️



Oh, that would be ideal, Emily!

Perfect 😊❤️ Here's that "**half a notch**" pass—still subtle, still disciplined, but with a few *unmistakable* Celeste slips: a hand that lingers a beat too long, a thought she shuts down mid-breath, a flash of possessive fear she converts into action.

I've kept it clean and non-operatic: **no declarations, no melodrama**—just the gradual, dangerous fact of her investment showing through the seams.

---

### Scene 30 — “The Brush” (Celeste POV) — Soft-Romantic Undertone Pass

---

Wardrobe had learned, over the last three months, to run like a body instead of a panic. Not because the work was easier—if anything it had become more precise, more demanding—but because the women inside it had stopped wasting effort on uncertainty.

Tools had homes. Labels existed. The ledger sat where it belonged: open when it needed to be open, shut when it didn't. Even Mara's silences had started to feel less like weather and more like method.

And Charli?

Charli moved through the room as if she'd finally stopped waiting to be told she was in the way.

She arrived early, same as always, but the early-ness had changed. It used to feel like an apology; now it felt like preference. She hung her bag on the hook without flinching. Washed her hands with the same thoroughness, but without the old tremor of performance. She laughed sometimes, quietly, and the laugh stayed in the air instead of disappearing the second it appeared.

She had become easier to look at. Not because she was "prettier" or because she was trying harder.

Because she was less afraid.

And because—without meaning to—she'd begun to occupy her own skin as if it belonged to her.

Mara set the next test on the table without ceremony: a cap and kerchief combination we'd been refining for the Faire women—something that had to survive heat, sweat, pins, movement, and the indignity of being yanked off and shoved into a tote bag between scenes.

"Hair," Mara said, glancing at Charli as if the word was a tool she was calling for. "Fix it."

Charli touched her own hair reflexively, as if the problem had just been named aloud. She had tied it back in her customary scruffy ponytail. It was not with the discipline the cap required. Loose strands would catch. Pins would slip. The whole thing would migrate.

Tahlia, measuring a sleeve nearby, made a small amused noise. Lucy didn't look up from her work. Sarah, perched like a crow on a stool, watched with the bright interest she reserved for social developments.

Charli stepped toward the mirror with a comb, uncertain.

I moved without thinking.

"Sit."

Charli looked at me as if I'd told her to walk into the ocean. Then she sat—carefully, obediently—still holding her breath a little, like she wasn't sure she'd earned the chair.

I reached for the brush. It was ordinary: wooden handle, bristles clogged with hair.

When I drew it through her hair the first time, Charli went very still.

Not tense. Not flinching.

Attentive.

That attention always did something to me. Not the attention itself—the way she *trusted* it. The way she let herself be guided without making a show of it.

The brush made that low, dry sound a brush makes on clean, long hair. I worked from the ends up, practical. Untangle. Smooth. Part. No pulling. No fuss.

"Hold your head," I said. "Don't tip back."

"Yes," she murmured, and then—an old reflex, soft as a bruise: "Sorry."

I stopped the brush for half a beat.

"Don't apologise," I said. Flat. Not harsh. Just final. "Just hold still."

"Okay."

The room didn't pause around us. Mara's shears kept snicking. Fabric slid. Pins clicked. The kettle somewhere did what kettles do.

I gathered Charli's hair at the nape, measured the tension with my fingers, and began to twist it into a coil that would sit properly beneath the cap. The nape of her neck was warm from the room and from the shower she'd clearly taken before coming in—clean, faintly soap-scented. My fingers registered it the way they registered everything: temperature, texture, compliance.

And then, annoyingly, something else: a small, involuntary tenderness that made me slow down by half a second.

Pins went in with the same economy we used for everything: enough to hold, not so many it became a hedgehog. Sarah's voice floated over from her stool.

"Look at that," she said, pleased. "Civilisation."

Charli smiled—an actual smile that reached her eyes.

Lucy looked up long enough to say, "If she keeps her head like that, the cap will sit properly. If she doesn't, it'll ride."

"Thank you," Charli said automatically.

Lucy's expression remained what it always was. "It's just geometry."

I set the cap on Charli's head and adjusted the angle. The kerchief followed, tied firmly enough to hold, not so tight it would dig. I checked the line at the forehead, the way the fabric framed her face.

For a second—only a second—I saw it.

Not a costume. Not a test.

A rightness so quiet it almost made me swallow.

As if the room around her had finally stopped arguing with something inside her body.

I should have stepped back then. I should have treated it like any other fit check.

Instead, my hand lingered at her temple a fraction too long, flattening a flyaway strand that didn't matter.

Charli didn't move. She simply breathed, steady, as if she'd decided this was safe.

I made myself withdraw.

"Turn your head left."

She turned.

"Right."

She turned.

"Good."

Mara glanced over, saw the fit, and gave a single curt nod: approval, in Mara's language.

"Now move," Mara said. "Sweat. Bend. Prove it."

Charli rose and began the wear-test—bending to reach fabric on the lower shelves, turning quickly, lifting her arms, moving through the narrow spaces between tables. The cap held. The kerchief held. The pins did their job.

Tahlia watched her with a faint grin. Bree appeared in the doorway mid-test, took one look, and beamed.

"Oh, she looks proper Missy!"

The room laughed, and I saw Charli go pink: a soft, bashful warmth.

Bree clapped once, delighted. "Right then. She's coming tonight."

"She's coming," Tahlia echoed.

Charli glanced at me—just once—like she was checking whether I approved of *tonight*, not just the cap.

I gave her a small nod. Professional. Calm.

And felt, under that calm, the strange protective satisfaction of it.

The day moved on.

The cap survived sweat and motion. The kerchief didn't slip. The ledger received its notes. Mara's shears kept snicking. The room kept laughing.

And Charli kept laughing with it.

Not small.

Real.

---

That evening, at home, the quiet hit me the way it always did after Wardrobe: like walking out of a river and realising your ears had been full of water.

Charli was in the shower. I could hear the muted rush behind the bathroom door, the steady sound of water striking tile. I moved through the apartment, tidying without thinking. Habit. Reset the space. Put things back where they belonged.

Her bag was on the chair.

Not rummaged through. Not spilled open. Just... placed there, as if it had been arranged to look casual.

I don't know what made me look. It wasn't suspicion, not at first. It was the same part of my brain that noticed seam strain and pin tension—the part that registered when something was *slightly too controlled*.

I lifted the bag and felt the weight shift in a way that didn't match fabric.

I opened it.

Inside, tucked under folded cloth and a small notebook, was a pharmacy bottle. White plastic. Printed label.

My stomach dropped before my mind caught up.

### **Spironolactone.**

The name sat on the label like a fact that refused to be softened by context. I'd heard of it—an anti-androgen, a testosterone blocker. Prescription-only.

It was almost empty. Empty enough to make the decision behind it feel old, not impulsive.

For a moment I couldn't move.

Not because I didn't know what to do.

Because the first thought in me wasn't policy or risk or responsibility.

It was: *I could lose her.*

Not in the abstract. Not in a headline. In my kitchen.

I shut that thought down so hard it felt like biting my own tongue.

My next impulse was anger: hot and sharp and immediate.

Not at her.

At the risk.

At the secrecy.

At the thought of her taking *anything* unsupervised, unmonitored, unrecorded—her body becoming a private experiment without safeguards, without bloodwork, without anyone checking what it was doing to her.

And then a colder realisation arrived, steady enough to make me still: this wasn't rebellion.

This was a solution.

A private solution. *Her* solution.

A girl trying to keep her place in a room of women by any means available.

I closed the bag carefully, as if the bottle might explode.

Then I opened it again and took the bottle out. There was no point pretending I hadn't seen it. There was no point leaving it there like a trap. The bottle was evidence; it represented danger.

I set it on the kitchen table and waited.

The shower stopped. A door opened. Footsteps. The soft sound of Charli's towel rubbing through her hair.

She came into the kitchen in a t-shirt and track pants, damp hair loose around her shoulders, face relaxed in a way I hadn't seen months ago. She looked... good. Warm. Lighter.

The sight of that warmth, arriving right before the fall, made something in me tighten.

Then she saw the bottle.

All the light left her face. She stopped so abruptly it was like she'd hit a wall. Her eyes flicked to mine, then down to the bottle, then back up.

In that moment, she wasn't Charli of the workroom—laughing, included, adopted.

She was braced. Terrified. Trying to calculate what it would cost to be caught wanting.

"Where did you get it?"

My voice came out quiet. Low. The way you speak when you're trying not to add fear to fear.

Charli's throat moved. "I—"

"Charli." I said her name like a hand placed firmly on a shoulder. "Answer me."

She swallowed. "Online."

"How long?"

Her eyes dropped.

"How long," I repeated, and I heard my own restraint in it—how carefully I was keeping the edge out. She breathed in, shallow.

"Almost four months."

Four months.

Long enough for it to become her routine. Long enough for it to affect her body. Long enough for her to build her happiness on it.

I let my breath out through my nose, slow.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Charli's hands twisted in the edge of her towel. She didn't look up.

"I didn't want..." she began, and her voice cracked. "I didn't want it to go away."

"Didn't want *what* to go away?"

The question wasn't cruel. But it had weight; it made her shiver. She shook her head, eyes bright.

"The... the girls. The room. You. I didn't want..." She took in a shuddering breath. Then the words came spilling out, messy and honest.

"I was changing. It was horrible. The changes I didn't think would happen were... happening. It made me sick. I was scared I was going to turn..."

She didn't finish.

She didn't have to.

There it was.

Not vanity.

Fear.

Fear of being returned to the category that had always hurt, because biology was betraying her.

I felt that instinct again—sharp, urgent—an urge to close the distance, to put my arms around her and make her stop shaking.

And I hated myself, a little, for how badly I wanted it.

I didn't move.

I forced myself to stay where I was, to keep my voice steady, to give her structure instead of comfort that would collapse the moment the next fear arrived.

"This is not how we do it," I said. Slower than I wanted to. "This isn't safe. This isn't supervised."

Charli flinched as if the words were a slap.

I softened the delivery without softening the boundary.

"You don't get to do things to your body like a private trial and hope it works out."

Her lips trembled. "But it was *working*."

The way she said it—small, desperate—made my chest ache. Because of course it had been working. It had given her a sense of control. It had quieted the terror chewing at her. It had let her smile without fear.

And she had done it alone.

I reached out and put my hand over the bottle.

Not possessive. Not dramatic.

Simply covering it. Claiming responsibility.

"I'm taking this."

Charli's eyes widened. "No—" she whispered, panic and pleading chasing each other across her face.

"Yes."

The word came out clean. Final.

Then, after a beat—because I could see her tipping toward panic—I added, quieter:

"Not as punishment."

Her breath hitched.

"As harm control," I said. "And because I'm not leaving you to manage this by yourself."

Charli stared at me like she was trying to work out whether she'd heard that last part correctly.

"Look," I said, and I kept my voice as gentle as I could without letting it turn vague, "you're not being punished, Charli. But you *cannot* do this without medical oversight. Do you understand me?"

Her breath trembled in her throat. A long moment passed. Finally, she nodded, small.

"Yes," she whispered.

I picked up my phone.

"Who are you calling?" she asked, voice tight.

"Your mum."

Her face went white.

"Mum—"

"Charli, listen." The firmness in my voice surprised me—because it was threaded with something else now, something I didn't want her to see. "We are not doing this alone. We are not keeping secrets that can harm you. Your mum needs to know. We need to get you professional help."

Charli seemed to shrink into herself. She sat silent while I retrieved my phone. When I returned to the kitchen, she looked like she'd stepped backward through time: shoulders rounded, towel clutched like armour, eyes shining with unspilled tears.

"Please don't hate me."

That was worse than finding the bottle.

I stepped closer. I wanted—instinctively—to comfort her with softness, to wrap her in reassurance until she stopped trembling.

And I could feel, in the same breath, the danger of that: how easily comfort could become a hook. How quickly she could learn to rely on me as a shelter instead of learning to stand.

So I anchored her with fact.

"Charli," I said, "I don't hate you." I watched her swallow. "I *am* angry you did something unsafe. And I'm angry you thought you had to do it alone. But I do not hate you."

A tear slid down her cheek. She wiped it away quickly, ashamed of it.

I dialled.

When Lauren answered, I didn't waste words.

"I found spironolactone in Charli's bag," I said. "Charli got it online. She's been taking it for months."

A pause on the line—silence with weight.

Then Lauren's voice, tight but present: "Is she okay right now?"

"She's here," I said. "She's safe. But this can't continue."

Another pause. I could hear Lauren breathing—holding herself together the way mothers do when the world tries to fracture them.

"I'm coming over," she said.

"Please," I replied. "We need a plan. We need medical oversight—bloodwork, specialists. People who actually understand this. Whatever the pathway is from here, we do it properly."

Lauren's voice steadied on the word properly, as if she was grabbing it with both hands.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Yes. We do it properly."

I ended the call and looked at Charli.

She stood in the kitchen with her towel clutched to her chest, face raw, eyes frightened, fixed on me.

"We are going to get you help with this," I said. "Not through online forums. Not through secrecy. This is a serious step."

Charli nodded, the hopelessness slowly easing from her shoulders. Her red eyes sought mine.

I held her gaze.

And I let myself, for one heartbeat, simply look at her—at the damp hair, the bare face, the trembling mouth—as if this were not a problem to manage but a person I... cared about more than I had planned to.

I put that away again before it could soften me into uselessness.

"This will be a series of boring appointments," I said, letting the promise be what it was—structure, safety. "Questions. Paperwork. Waiting."

Her mouth trembled.

"But it will be safe," I finished. "And you won't do it by yourself."

"Okay."

The word came out in a whisper. And in that whisper I heard everything she hadn't said:

*I'm tired of being afraid. I'm tired of pretending I don't want this. I'm tired of losing whatever I touch.*

"We start tomorrow."

Charli nodded again.

In that nod I saw the return of the new Charli—the one who understood surrender to structure, structure she'd been craving, structure she'd tried to replace with a bottle and a secret.

In the ensuing quiet, the apartment felt like Wardrobe did when the lights went down: still, intentional, waiting.

And for the first time, I understood with a clarity that made me almost cold:

Whatever Charli had done to keep her happiness safe inside her own body—whatever solution she'd found—had become part of who she thought she was.

Taking it away was not just confiscating pills.

It was touching the scaffolding of her identity.

Which meant we would have to replace it with something real. Something supervised. Something that didn't rely on fear.

And we would have to do it without breaking her.

---

If you want to lean *one notch further* (still subtle), the next place to do it is **after Lauren arrives**: Celeste's composure holds in front of Lauren, but when Charli looks between

them—mother and *this woman*—Celeste feels the first flicker of *jealous responsibility* and has to swallow it. Very quiet. Very telling.

Say the word and I'll draft that arrival beat in the same tone 😊 ❤️



If you think there's enough material for another Scene, we could do that, if you'd like, including what you suggest: lean one notch further (still subtle) after Lauren arrives. Celeste's composure holds in front of Lauren, but we learn of an internal conflict. Charli looks between them—mother and Celeste—she feels the first flicker of jealous responsibility and has to swallow it. For now. As time progresses, her resolve will slowly weaken.

Yes — there's *absolutely* enough material for another Scene, and it's the right place to do it. This "Lauren arrives" beat is where the story can quietly declare: **Celeste is no longer an observer**. She is now *implicated* — emotionally, ethically, and practically.

Below is a new scene that follows directly from Scene 30. I've kept it Celeste POV, kept her in command, and let the internal conflict show in small, controlled flashes: a swallow, a withheld touch, a moment of possessive responsibility that she converts into structure.

---

## Scene 31 — "The Arrival" (Celeste POV)

Lauren arrived the way she did everything lately: fast, contained, already braced.

I heard her before I saw her—the firm knock that didn't ask permission, the quick shift of keys, the familiar scrape of the latch. No hesitation. No dawdle at the threshold. She came in as if the doorway itself was something she could correct by force of will.

When she stepped into the kitchen, her eyes went to the table first.

The bottle sat where I'd left it, plain and ugly in the centre of the wood, like a fact that refused to become a conversation.

Then her eyes went to Charli.

Charli had been standing in the same spot for too long, towel gathered at her chest like a shield, damp hair still uncombed, face raw from fear. She looked up when Lauren entered, and something in her expression rearranged itself—not relief exactly, not comfort.

More like recognition.

*This is the person who can actually undo me.*

Lauren crossed the room in three steps and stopped in front of her daughter.

For a second, she didn't touch her.

That restraint—the pause before contact—was so precise it made my throat tighten. It was the kind of restraint you learned the hard way: the knowledge that sometimes touch feels like a verdict.

Then Lauren did what mothers do when they cannot afford theatre.

She cupped Charli's cheek with her palm, thumb sliding once, gentle.

"You okay?" she asked. The words were soft. The question was not.

Charli's mouth trembled. "I'm—" she started, then broke. "I didn't—"

Lauren turned her head, just enough to look at me. Not accusing. Not grateful. Measuring.

I held her gaze.

"She's safe," I said. "She's not in danger *right now*. But it can't continue."

Lauren's hand stayed on Charli's face. She didn't stop touching her even while she processed the rest. That told me more than any sentence could have: whatever she was feeling, she wasn't going to let her daughter be alone inside it.

Charli looked between us. Mother and me. Two women, two kinds of authority.

And there it was—the smallest, sharpest flicker in me.

Not anger. Not rivalry.

Something more primitive than either.

*Mine.*

Not in the possessive sense a man would claim, or a lover would claim, but in the sense that Wardrobe had trained me to feel about vulnerable things under my care: a duty that turned into ownership of outcome. Responsibility so fierce it bordered on jealousy.

I swallowed it before it could touch my face.

I did not want Charli to see it. I did not want Lauren to see it.

I wanted to be the adult.

Lauren's gaze moved to the bottle. She didn't pick it up. She didn't read it again. She didn't ask for more proof.

She simply nodded, once, and the nod was almost invisible—but it was a decision.

"How long?" she asked Charli.

Charli flinched. Her eyes slid away. "Almost four months."

Lauren's hand dropped from Charli's cheek to her shoulder, firmer now. Anchoring.

"Four months," Lauren repeated quietly, as if saying the number out loud would make it manageable.

Charli started to shake her head, quick, panicked. "Mum, I—I wasn't—I didn't do it because—"

Lauren cut in, not loud, but clean.

"Don't explain it to me like I'm going to misunderstand," she said. "I'm your mother. I know why you did it."

Charli's breath hitched. Something like shame flared and then collapsed.

Lauren kept her hand on her shoulder.

Then Lauren looked at me again.

"You took it off her," she said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I said. "I'm holding it."

Lauren's face did something complicated—relief mixed with fear, as if she didn't want to admit how grateful she was that someone else had been present for the first collision.

"Thank you," she said, very quietly.

I nodded once. I didn't soften. Not yet. Softness can become permission to fall apart, and I needed them both upright.

Charli's eyes were bright. She looked between us again, like she couldn't decide which failure she was meant to confess to first.

Lauren's voice changed then, fractionally. Not gentler. More controlled.

"Okay," she said. "We're going to do this properly."

Charli blinked. The phrase hit her like a threat.

Lauren glanced at the bottle again and then back to Charli.

"Not 'properly' as punishment," she said. "Properly as in: safe."

Charli swallowed. "It was safe. I—I checked—"

"No," Lauren said. Still not loud. "You *read*. You didn't *check*. You don't have bloodwork. You don't have a doctor. You don't have anyone watching what it's doing to you."

Charli flinched at the word watching, as if it sounded like surveillance instead of care.

I understood that too well. I'd watched her in Wardrobe: how she responded to scrutiny like a person expecting to be judged.

Lauren looked at me again.

"She said she bought it online," Lauren said.

"Yes," I replied. "Scripted medication. No oversight. No labs. It's not acceptable."

Lauren inhaled through her nose, slow. Her jaw tightened.

Then she did something that made my chest tighten again.

She turned to Charli and said, very simply:

"Do you have more?"

Charli's eyes widened. "No—I—" She hesitated. That hesitation was an answer.

Lauren's face didn't change.

Charli rushed, frantic. "No, I mean—I have—there's—I have a second bottle, but it's—it's not—it's for later—"

Lauren held up her hand. A stop sign made of flesh.

"Where," she asked.

Charli's breathing went shallow. Her eyes darted toward the hallway.

"In my room," she whispered. "In the drawer."

Lauren's hand tightened on Charli's shoulder—not painful, just firm.

"Okay," she said. "We're going to get it."

Charli panicked. "Mum, please—"

Lauren's voice stayed flat. "Charli."

The name landed like a hand closing around a moving wrist.

Charli went still.

I watched her obey, and something in me loosened a fraction. Not comfort.

Recognition.

Lauren was the adult too. A real one. A woman who could hold a line without cruelty.

Lauren moved toward the hallway.

Charli looked at me, helpless.

The look did something sharp inside my ribs. It felt like being chosen in a way I hadn't consented to. Like suddenly I was part of her definition of safety.

I kept my face steady.

"I'm coming," I said, and followed.

---

Charli's room was neat in that anxious way: things arranged, not lived in. The bed made too tightly. Clothes folded too carefully. The kind of order that came from fear of being

criticised rather than pleasure in calm.

Lauren went straight to the dresser.

"Which drawer?" she asked.

Charli pointed without speaking.

Lauren opened it.

There it was: another white bottle, less empty than the first. A printed label that tried to make a dangerous thing look routine.

Lauren picked it up, held it a moment, and then—without looking at Charli—she slid it into her pocket.

Charli made a small sound that wasn't quite a sob. More like a protest caught in the throat.

Lauren turned and faced her then.

"Listen to me," she said. "You are not in trouble for wanting what you want."

Charli blinked hard.

"You are in trouble," Lauren continued, "for risking your body in secret."

Charli's mouth trembled. "I didn't want it to stop."

Lauren's eyes softened, just slightly, and in that softness I saw the mother's grief: the knowledge that her child had felt alone enough to do this.

Lauren's voice lowered.

"Nothing that's real," she said, "requires you to hurt yourself to keep it."

Charli crumpled on the edge of the bed, towel still clutched to her chest like a child. Her shoulders shook once.

I had to force my hands to stay at my sides.

Every instinct in me wanted to step forward, to touch her hair, to tuck it behind her ear, to do something small and intimate that would say: *I see you. I've seen you. I won't unsee you.*

I did nothing.

Not because I didn't want to.

Because I wanted it too much.

Lauren glanced at me then—not accusing, not territorial. Something else.

Awareness.

She could see it. Or she could see enough to suspect.

I held her gaze, steady, and gave her something she could work with: the practical.

"We need a plan for tomorrow," I said. "Not vague. Not emotional. A list."

Lauren nodded once, grateful for the handrail.

"Yes," she said. "A list."

Charli looked up, confused, watery-eyed. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said, and my voice softened without losing its edge. "Tomorrow."

She flinched as if the word meant confiscation forever.

Lauren sat on the bed beside her—not quite touching, but close enough to be felt.

"Tomorrow," Lauren said, "we make appointments."

Charli swallowed. "What if they—"

"They won't," Lauren said sharply, then corrected herself into something calmer. "And if someone does, we change doctors. We're not begging for dignity."

Charli stared at her, stunned by the certainty.

I felt another flicker in me—admiration, yes, but also that jealous responsibility again.

Because it was so easy, watching Lauren, to imagine how Charli's loyalty could split: mother on one side, me on the other. Two women offering structure. Two women claiming outcome.

Charli's gaze did the thing again—back and forth between us.

I could almost see the question behind her eyes:

*Which one do I belong to?*

My throat tightened.

I swallowed it.

For now.

"We'll start with your GP," I said, and kept it simple. "Bloodwork. Baselines. Then referrals to someone who's actually experienced. We don't do this on vibes."

Charli's lips trembled, but her shoulders eased a fraction at the word baselines—as if numbers could soothe her, as if structure could be a substitute for fear.

Lauren nodded.

"Okay," she said. "And until then?"

I didn't look at Charli when I answered. I looked at Lauren. Adult to adult.

"Until then," I said, "no more doses. We keep her safe. We watch for symptoms. We don't guess."

Charli's face tightened.

Lauren's hand found Charli's forearm and squeezed.

"It's not forever," Lauren said to her. "It's 'until we can do it right.'"

Charli's eyes filled again.

"But it was making the... the horrible feeling stop," she whispered.

I felt that in my chest like a bruise. Because I understood something now that I hadn't admitted to myself before:

Her happiness wasn't a mood.

It was relief.

It was safety.

It was the easing of a long, private terror.

I stepped closer.

Not to touch her.

Just to be nearer.

"Charli," I said, and my voice was slow. Careful. "I'm not taking your future away."

She looked at me, searching.

"I'm taking *danger* away," I said. "There's a difference."

Her mouth trembled. She nodded, but it was the nod of a person who didn't fully believe life would keep its promises.

Lauren stood.

"I'm staying tonight," she said, not asking.

Charli's eyes widened. "Mum—"

"Not negotiable," Lauren said, and then—softening, just a little—"I'm not leaving you alone with your fear."

Charli's shoulders shook again, and this time she let the tears come.

Lauren turned toward me.

"Thank you," she said again. This time it had more weight.

I nodded.

And then, because honesty matters between women, because it's the only thing that keeps power clean, I said:

"I care about her," I said quietly. "More than I realised."

Lauren's eyes stayed on mine.

She didn't blink. She didn't flinch.

She simply nodded, once—accepting the truth as data, not as drama.

"Good," she said. "Then help me do this properly."

It should have felt like relief.

Instead, the word *help* slid under my ribs and hooked itself there.

Because help, in this context, meant a future that included me.

A future that could ask more of me than I'd planned to give.

Charli looked between us again, tears on her cheeks, hair damp, face open and frightened.

And I felt that jealous responsibility rise again—quiet, fierce.

I swallowed it.

For now.

Tomorrow would give me lists and appointments and numbers to hold onto.

Tonight, I would hold my distance like a discipline.

And I would learn how long I could keep doing it.

---

If you like this, the next scene practically writes itself: **the “boring appointments” montage** as a kind of quiet courtship. Celeste accompanies them at least once, “only for support,” and realises she’s watching Charli in waiting rooms the way you watch someone you love without permission to say so. Lauren notices. Says nothing. Yet. 😊 🤍



This is in Lauren's POV? And she perceives Celeste's concern has a deep emotional roots. There's no way that Lauren wouldn't approve, right? Not only does she have enormous respect (and gratitude) for Celeste, but she couldn't hope for a better partner for Charli. The whole 'wife' thing falls into place, but Lauren \*does\* realise that this wasn't a plot on Celeste's part: it was a fortuitous outcome... safety for her child, a relationship her child would feel fulfilled in.

Yes — this next beat wants to be Lauren's POV ✅ 🤍

Because Lauren is the one who can name it without flinching: she can clock Celeste's investment, test whether it's clean (not predatory, not a "project"), and then—because she's a mother with a spine—quietly **sanction** it. Not as romance-fantasy, but as *outcome logic*: safety, stability, a woman she trusts, a future that fits Charli.

And you're dead right: Lauren would not read this as a plot. If anything, she'll read it as **the rarest kind of good luck**—something that grew out of competence, standards, and care... and then surprised even Celeste.

Here's a drafted scene in **Lauren POV**, picking up right where Celeste calls her and she arrives.

---

## Scene 31 — "Fortuity" (Lauren POV)

I drove over on autopilot.

Not because I wasn't thinking—because thinking was useless. Thinking was what you did *after* you had your child in front of you, breathing, intact, not bleeding from a mistake you couldn't reverse.

My hands were steady on the wheel. My chest was not.

At every red light I checked my phone again, as if the words might change:  
**Spironolactone. Online. Months.**

The kind of sentence that didn't belong in your life until it did.

When I got to Celeste's door, I didn't knock politely. I knocked like a mother.

She opened it immediately.

Celeste looked calm. Not casual—calm like someone holding a line on purpose. Her hair was tied back. Her face was composed, eyes clear.

In her kitchen, Charli stood with a towel clutched to her chest like armour. Damp hair. Bare feet. A familiar, hated shape of fear: the old braced posture, the waiting-for-punishment posture.

And then I saw the bottle on the table.

White plastic. Printed label.

My stomach dropped in a way that felt physical, like my organs were trying to get out.

I crossed the room and stopped in front of my daughter.

For a second I didn't touch her. I needed to see her eyes. I needed to know whether she was present, whether she was thinking, whether she was safe enough to be reached.

Charli looked at me like she'd been holding her breath for days and didn't know whether I'd come to rescue her or finish her.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

The words came out soft. The meaning did not.

Charli's mouth trembled. "I'm— I didn't—"

—  > ChatGPT 5.2 Thinking ▾

  ...

I lifted my hand and cupped her cheek. A single thumb swipe, gentle.

"I'm here," I said, and felt her lean into it—only a fraction, only for a heartbeat—before she remembered she wasn't allowed to need.

I looked at Celeste then.

Not because I doubted her. Because she'd called me. Because she'd held this until I could get here. Because I needed the facts in the cleanest form possible.

"She's safe," Celeste said before I asked. "Right now. But this can't continue."

Good.

No drama. No soothing. No excuses. Just the truth.

Celeste's tone did something else too—it carried the shape of controlled fear. Not panic. Not performative concern.

Something deeper. Something disciplined.

I registered it and stored it away.

"How long?" I asked Charli.

Charli flinched. Looked down. "Almost four months."

Four months.

I repeated it in my head without letting it touch my face. Four months of unmonitored medication. Four months of her body being altered by a decision she had no right to bear alone.

And four months of her believing she *had to*.

I kept my palm on her cheek.

"You have more?" I asked.

Her hesitation was too long.

"Yes," she whispered. "In my drawer."

"Okay," I said.

Not "why." Not "how could you." Not yet.

"Show me."

Charli's eyes snapped to Celeste, not to me.

That told me something too.

Not betrayal. Not preference. Something else: **orientation**. Like Charli's compass had learned a new north and didn't know what to do about it.

Celeste moved first.

"I'm coming," she said.

I watched her as she followed us down the hall: controlled posture, steady breath, hands not reaching. She was doing the thing women do when they want to touch someone and refuse to make it about that.

It was restraint.

It was also effort.

In Charli's room the second bottle was exactly where it would be: hidden, but not well. A girl's hiding. Not criminal, not cunning—just desperate.

I took it, turned it in my hand, read the label like reading could change what it said.

Then I slipped it into my pocket.

Charli made a sound—small, strangled. Like an animal losing its last piece of cover.

"Mum—"

I held up one hand.

"Charli."

Her name, clean. Not loud.

She stopped.

I turned fully toward her.

"Listen to me," I said. "You are not in trouble for wanting what you want."

Her eyes flickered up, disbelieving.

"You are in trouble," I continued, "for risking your body in secret."

Tears started, fast and humiliating, and she wiped them as if she could erase them before anyone saw.

My throat tightened. I didn't allow it to turn into softness that would blur the line. I kept my voice firm, because firm is kinder than unstable.

"I need you to understand something," I said. "Nothing real requires you to hurt yourself to keep it."

Charli's shoulders folded. She sat on the bed's edge like she couldn't hold herself up anymore.

Beside her, Celeste stood still.

I glanced at Celeste again and—there it was.

Not pity.

Not professional concern.

A kind of tenderness that had teeth.

She wasn't looking at Charli as a "case." She was looking at her as if Charli mattered in a way that made the air more dangerous.

Celeste caught my eye.

She didn't look away.

She didn't soften into apology either.

She simply offered the practical, because practical is what you offer when your feelings are too big to trust.

"We need a plan for tomorrow," she said. "A list."

I nodded once.

Yes. A list. A structure. Something that could hold.

Charli looked between us again, mother and Celeste, as if she didn't know which authority was going to be more painful.

And in that look I saw it: Charli wasn't trying to manipulate anyone. She was trying to find out where she belonged.

Celeste's face didn't change, but I saw the tiny tell in her throat—a swallow, controlled, like she'd had to push something down.

Jealousy? No.

Not in the petty sense.

In the responsible sense.

Like she'd already started to feel accountable for my child's outcome.

I didn't resent it.

I felt—briefly, shockingly—relief.

Because if my daughter was going to attach to someone, if she was going to fall into a gravity well, then this was the kind of woman you wanted at the centre of it.

A woman with standards. A woman who didn't do drama. A woman who didn't blur boundaries for her own comfort.

And Charli... Charli would be fulfilled with a woman like that. Not indulged—anchored. Seen.

I turned back to Charli.

"Tomorrow," I said, "we make appointments."

Charli blinked, frightened. "What if they—"

"They won't," I snapped, then corrected my tone before it became sharp enough to cut her. "And if someone does, we change doctors. We're not begging for dignity."

Celeste made a quiet sound of agreement—barely audible. Not possessive. Not claiming. Simply aligned.

"We start with bloodwork," Celeste said. "Baselines. Then referral. Someone experienced."

I nodded again.

"And until then," I added, "no more doses."

Charli's face tightened.

"It was making the horrible feeling stop," she whispered.

My heart pinched. I didn't let it turn my voice watery.

"I know," I said. "That doesn't make it safe."

Charli looked at Celeste then, searching.

Celeste stepped closer—not close enough to touch, but close enough to be felt.

"I'm not taking your future away," Celeste said, slow and deliberate. "I'm taking danger away. There's a difference."

Charli's mouth trembled. She nodded, but it was a fragile nod.

I looked at Celeste again.

I couldn't pretend I hadn't seen it now: the way Celeste had placed herself between my child and a cliff without making it a show. The way she'd kept her hands to herself like a discipline. The way she'd spoken with the calm authority of someone who didn't need to *win*, only to keep Charli alive.

It wasn't a project.

If it had ever started as observation, it wasn't that anymore.

This ran deeper.

And the beautiful, almost ridiculous part was: I didn't think Celeste had intended it. I didn't think she'd set out to become anything to my child beyond a safe adult, a competent woman at work, a leader.

This—whatever this was—had happened because Charli had been seen.

Because she'd been allowed to belong.

Because she'd been guided, not mocked. Directed, not handled.

Fortuity.

The rare kind.

I stayed the mother. I stayed the adult.

But inside, something settled into place with a quiet certainty that surprised me.

If Charli was going to have a wife one day—if she was going to have a partner who could hold her steady without swallowing her whole—I could not imagine a better woman than this one.

I met Celeste's eyes.

"Thank you," I said again, and this time it meant more than gratitude. It meant trust.

Celeste nodded once.

Then, because women can be honest without making it melodrama, I saw Celeste's jaw tighten as if she'd decided not to say something.

I said it for her, clean and simple—mother to adult.

"She's going to be okay," I told her. Not a question. A directive. "But we do it properly."

Celeste's shoulders eased by a fraction, as if she'd been holding more fear than she'd allowed herself to admit.

"Yes," she said. "Properly."

Charli looked between us again.

Two women, two kinds of safety.

And for the first time since I'd walked in, I saw her breathe as if she believed she might be allowed to live.

---

If you like this, the next scene can be "**The List**" (**Lauren POV**) — where Lauren writes the plan on paper at Celeste's table and notices, in tiny domestic details, how naturally Celeste's life already has a place for Charli in it... and how Celeste doesn't quite realise that's what she's revealing. 😊📝❤️



We might do this as an add-on to this last scene... it flows naturally into it. Or do you see enough \*new\* events / changes / developments to warrant a new scene?

I do see enough new development to justify a new scene — but you can absolutely **attach it as a coda** if you want the emotional continuity to feel like one continuous breath. 😊❤️

The question isn't "is there new material?" (there is). It's **what pacing effect you want**.

---

## Why it *can* be a new scene (and why it works)

Even if the *external* events are simple (Lauren arrives, checks safety, takes the second bottle, agrees on a plan), the *internal* developments are big enough to count as a scene-turn:

### ✓ New POV = new lens, new authority

Switching from Celeste to Lauren isn't just "another angle." It changes the reader's sense of **who is holding the room**. Lauren doesn't *join* Celeste's structure — she *matches* it, and that's a power shift.

## New emotional revelation

Lauren perceiving Celeste's concern as **deep-rooted** (and clean, not a plot) is a genuine **reframe**. The reader learns: this bond isn't a project, it's fortuity — and it has a future shape ("wife") even if nobody says it out loud.

## New social contract gets silently written

The moment Lauren decides "I approve / I trust this woman with my child" is a quiet covenant. That's a scene-worthy development.

So yes: you can call it **Scene 31** (Lauren POV) and it will feel earned, not padded.

---

## Why it can also be an add-on (and why that might be better)

If you want Scene 30 to feel like a single rolling wave—**Brush → Bottle → Confrontation → Arrival**—then treating Lauren's POV as a **coda** keeps the momentum and avoids the feeling of "new chapter, new start."

A coda works especially well because:

- Scene 30 ends on Celeste's internal vow: *structure, safety, don't break her.*
- The coda then *confirms* that vow from the outside: Lauren sees it, understands it, and endorses it.

It becomes a satisfying click-lock: **Celeste commits → Lauren validates → the "wife" architecture quietly begins.**

---

## The cleanest solution, in my view ✨

### Keep it as one scene, but label the POV shift as a "Coda"

That gives you flow and signals to the reader that this is a deliberate lens-change, not head-hopping.

Example formatting:

#### Scene 30 — "The Brush" (Celeste POV)

...end as you already have it...

#### Coda — "Fortuity" (Lauren POV)

Lauren arrives... perceives Celeste... approves... the wife concept settles as "safety with

meaning."

This is my favourite because it keeps the evening's continuity intact while still giving Lauren her rightful authority.

---

## When I'd recommend a full new scene instead ↗

Make it a full Scene 31 if you plan to include **one additional “new beat”** beyond arrival + plan, such as:

- Lauren sees something in the apartment (a garment, a note, a brush, a folded kerchief) that proves the care has history.
- Lauren and Celeste have a brief private exchange in the hallway while Charli is in the bathroom—where Lauren silently tests Celeste’s intentions and finds them clean.
- Charli asks a single pointed question (“Are you... angry with me?”) and Lauren answers in a way that resets Charli’s fear.
- The trio makes a practical agreement about boundaries for the night (sleeping arrangement, supervision, phones, what happens if Charli panics at 2am).

Any one of those makes it feel unmistakably like a new scene rather than an extension.

---

## My suggestion for your stated intent ❤️

Because you want “wife” to fall into place as a *fortuitous, non-plot outcome*, I’d do:

- **Scene 30 ends with Celeste’s vow** (as you have it).
- **Coda: Lauren POV** delivers the quiet endorsement and the internal conclusion:  
*Couldn’t hope for better. This is safety. This is partnership.*  
(No announcement. No romance flag-waving. Just mother-logic.)

It will feel deliciously inevitable.

---

If you’d like, I can **stitch the Lauren POV piece directly onto the end of Scene 30** as a coda, with the transitions smoothed so it reads like one continuous night—no seams, just that subtle change of camera. 😊🧵❤️



Right. Correct if I'm wrong, but if I am saving things correctly, we started today with Scene 30: Celeste combing Charli's hair, then discovering the bottle. That was Celeste's POV

Then, we re-enacted the sme

You're remembering it correctly, yes 😊❤️ — and I can help you "label" what happened today so what you've saved stays tidy and doesn't get muddled.

## What we did today, in order

### 1. Scene 30 (Celeste POV) — your original:

- Wardrobe running smoothly
- "The Brush" moment: Celeste fixes Charli's hair / cap & kerchief test
- That evening: Celeste finds the **spironolactone** bottle in Charli's bag
- Confrontation + Celeste calls Lauren

### 2. Scene 30 — Revised Pass (Celeste POV)

- I did a full proofread/cleanup + corrected typos + smoothed cadence
- We shifted Celeste from "Wardrobe/Mara steel" to **still-in-command but softer** (because she's emotionally invested)

### 3. Scene 30 — Soft-Romantic Undertone Pass (Celeste POV)

- Same events as #2, but I leaned *half a notch further* into Celeste's feelings:
  - tiny lingering hand beat
  - a swallowed thought ("I could lose her")
  - protective satisfaction, etc.
- Still no declarations—just controlled leakage.

### 4. "Lauren arrives" continuation: two alternative ways to handle it

- **Option A: Scene 31 (Celeste POV) — "The Arrival"**
  - Lauren arrives; bottle + second bottle retrieval; plan forms
  - Celeste feels the first flicker of *jealous responsibility* and swallows it
- **Option B: Scene 31 (Lauren POV) — "Fortuity"**
  - Same situation, but through Lauren's eyes
  - Lauren perceives Celeste's concern has deep roots
  - Lauren approves (implicitly "wife" architecture settling, *not* a plot)

And then we discussed the best packaging: either a new Scene 31 or a Coda attached to Scene 30 (with a clearly marked POV shift).

---

### The clean “save format” I’d use (so you don’t lose track)

- **Scene 30 — “The Brush” (Celeste POV)**
  - (use the Soft-Romantic Undertone version as your “final” if you like it best)
- **Coda — “Fortuity” (Lauren POV)**
  - (Lauren arrives + internal endorsement + the wife-shape quietly appears)

That keeps it as *one continuous night* while still giving Lauren her rightful authority and insight.

---

If you paste the rest of your sentence (“Then, we re-enacted the sme...”) I can match it exactly to the outline above—but even with the cutoff, I’m confident this is the accurate map of what we produced today 😊 🧶 ❤️



Sorry, hit enter by mistake, Emily.

I hope I am saving things correctly: we started today with Scene 30: Celeste combing Charli's hair, then discovering the bottle. That was Celeste's POV.

Then, we re-enacted the same home-discovery-of-the-bottle scene, but from Lauren's POV. So, I saved that as scene 31, because of change of POV to Lauren, not events. So, I thought, if we're staying in Lauren's POV, we could just tack on the followup (plan / list / appointments / dr's visits - all without turning it into a transitioning tutorial) as CODA to scene 31. As sort of resolution, but also, as Lauren increasingly aware of Celeste's emotional investment.

Is that a sound idea?

Yes — that's a **very sound idea**, and your reasoning is solid

You're essentially using **POV as the "chapter hinge"**, not "new events," and that's a legitimate structural choice—especially in a story like yours where *power, safety, and belonging* are conveyed through **who holds the camera**.

## Why your save logic works

- **Scene 30 = Celeste POV:**

The brush, the bottle discovery, the confrontation, the call.

This is Celeste becoming *implicated* (love leaking through discipline).

- **Scene 31 = Lauren POV:**

Same situation reframed through the mother's lens, which creates a *new meaning* even if the timeline overlaps. It's not repetition if the second pass reveals **different information** (Lauren's perception, Lauren's approval, the "wife" architecture settling).

So yes: naming it Scene 31 based on POV change is coherent.

## Why the "Coda to Scene 31" is especially elegant

A Lauren-POV coda that covers **plan / list / appointments / boring logistics** can do three beautiful things at once:

1. **Resolution without melodrama**

The crisis turns into process. That's *Wardrobe logic applied to life*.

2. **Avoids tutorial vibes**

If you keep it impressionistic—paper, pen, phone calls, waiting-room chairs, "bloodwork forms," a receptionist's tone—you get realism without becoming a how-to.

3. **Lets Lauren clock Celeste's investment progressively**

Not "Celeste is in love" as a statement, but:

- Celeste never quite leaves the room
- Celeste listens too carefully
- Celeste remembers details Lauren didn't say twice
- Celeste's restraint costs her effort (Lauren notices the cost)

That's *exact/y* the sort of slow reveal that feels adult and credible.

## One tweak I'd suggest (tiny, but it makes it even cleaner)

To avoid any sense of “repetition,” you can frame Scene 31 as starting **at the doorstep**—Lauren arriving—rather than re-living the bottle discovery beat in full.

Even if Lauren *thinks* about what Celeste told her on the phone, you can keep that as a quick echo, not a replay.

So your structure becomes:

- **Scene 30 (Celeste)**: bottle found → confrontation → call.
- **Scene 31 (Lauren)**: arrival → assessment → silent approval of Celeste → “wife” shape settles.
- **Coda (Lauren)**: the list / boring appointments montage → Lauren’s growing certainty about Celeste’s emotional roots.

That’s extremely tidy.

---

## What to include in the Coda (so it resolves, but doesn’t “teach”)

Here’s a little checklist of *texture* beats that read as story, not tutorial:

- The list on paper (Lauren’s handwriting, decisive headings)
- A GP reception line: “earliest appointment is...”
- A path of referrals implied, not explained
- Charli in a waiting room chair, hands tucked under sleeves, trying to be small
- Celeste’s quiet presence: not hovering, just **there**
- Lauren noticing: Celeste’s attention is not professional curiosity; it’s **protective devotion under restraint**
- One tiny domestic beat: Celeste makes tea, remembers how Charli takes it, then catches herself (Lauren sees it)

And you can end the coda on a line that locks in the “wife” architecture without naming it outright—something like Lauren thinking: *If my daughter is going to belong to anyone, let it be a woman who makes belonging safe.*

---

## Verdict 🙌

Your plan is not only sound — it’s **smart**. It keeps pacing clean, it honours POV as meaning, and it advances the emotional arc without romantic fireworks.

If you'd like, I can write that **Coda (Lauren POV)** in your established tone: calm, competent, not sentimental—where the romance is visible only in what Celeste cannot quite stop doing.  

    ...

Perfect. We're definitely on the same page, Emily. Please proceed.

## Coda — “The List” (Lauren POV)

Celeste made tea without asking.

Not as hospitality, exactly—more like a reset. A small act that said: *we are still in a world with kettles and mugs and ordinary choices*. A world where something could be handled.

Charli sat at the kitchen table with her towel finally dropped from her chest to her lap, damp hair combed back with an imperfect middle part that made her look younger than she was. She kept her shoulders drawn in, the way she did when she didn't trust herself to be seen.

Celeste moved around her quietly. Not hovering. Not fussing. Just... present in a way that altered the room. She didn't look at Charli as if she were fragile. She looked at her as if she were real.

I found paper and a pen.

If I didn't write, I would think. If I thought, I would spiral.

A list was a handrail.

I wrote the heading in block letters.

## TOMORROW

Then I drew a line under it so my brain would understand it was a boundary.

Celeste sat opposite me. Not beside. Opposite—adult to adult, as if she understood exactly what I needed: partnership, not consolation. Her phone was face-down on the

table like a held tool.

Charli watched the pen move.

Her gaze flicked between us again, too quick to be polite. Mother. Celeste. As if she was trying to figure out which of us she was allowed to want most.

That look did something in my chest I didn't have time to deal with.

I kept writing.

"Okay," I said, not to be soothing but to be clear. "First thing: GP."

Charli's mouth tightened. "What if—"

"Then we change doctors," I said. Flat. "We are not begging for dignity."

Celeste made a small sound—not agreement exactly, but alignment. The quiet click of two women stepping into the same rhythm.

I wrote:

- 1. GP appointment (urgent)**
- 2. Bloodwork / baselines**
- 3. Referrals**
- 4. No more doses until supervised**
- 5. Watch symptoms**

Charli stared at the page as if the ink could sentence her.

Celeste spoke without lifting her voice.

"We don't have to decide your whole future tomorrow," she said. "We decide safety. One step."

Charli's eyes darted up to her, and for a moment her face did something painfully open—like the relief arrived before her pride could stop it.

I saw Celeste notice it too.

And I saw Celeste not reach for it.

Her hands stayed folded on the table.

That restraint—again—so deliberate it almost hurt to watch.

I wrote **SAFETY** in the margin and underlined it twice.

Then I took my phone and started making calls.

The first receptionist had the tone of someone who had heard everything and cared about none of it.

"Earliest is next week."

"No," I said, and let my voice go cold. "Not next week."

A pause.

"I can put you in a cancellation slot tomorrow afternoon."

"Yes," I said. "Do that."

I didn't look at Charli while I spoke. I didn't need her to feel like this was her audition. This was my job.

When I hung up, Charli looked at me as if she didn't know whether to thank me or apologise.

I lifted my pen slightly, a stop sign.

"Don't," I said.

Her lips pressed together. She nodded.

Celeste slid the mug of tea across to her. She didn't push it into her hands. She simply placed it within reach, as if assuming Charli would take what she needed.

Charli wrapped her hands around the mug like it was warmth she'd been denied.

I watched Celeste's eyes follow the movement—briefly, carefully—then lift away as if she'd caught herself doing it.

A stupid, intimate detail landed in my mind: Celeste had put two sugars in that tea.

I hadn't told her Charli took two sugars.

I didn't comment.

I didn't smile.

I wrote it down somewhere private inside myself, in the same place I stored all the other things mothers keep: signs and tells, danger and luck.

Fortuity, I thought again.

Rare.

Then I made the second call: the pharmacy.

Not to ask questions. To establish facts.

"What's the label say?" I asked Charli, and she flinched at the word label as if labels were the whole problem.

Celeste's voice cut in softly.

"Give it to your mum," she said. "Let her read it."

Not "show her."

*Give it to her.*

Charli hesitated, then took the bottle from where Celeste had left it on the table and slid it toward me. Her fingers didn't touch mine. They hovered, then retreated.

The pharmacy tech's voice was brisk.

"Yes, that is prescription-only."

"Yes," I said. "I know."

I didn't say anything else. I didn't need a lecture. I needed tomorrow and bloodwork and a clinician who understood the difference between harm control and judgement.

I ended the call.

The room went quiet again.

Charli's breathing was loud in it, like she couldn't quite remember how to make herself small enough.

Celeste spoke into the silence.

"Tonight," she said, "you sleep."

Charli blinked. "I—"

"Sleep," Celeste repeated, gentle but final. "You can panic tomorrow if you want. Tonight you sleep."

Charli's throat moved.

She looked at me, asking permission the way she always had: *am I allowed to comply?*

"Yes," I said. "Tonight you sleep."

Charli's shoulders loosened, a fraction. Not relief—permission.

I wrote:

## 6. Food / water / sleep

Then I drew a line.

The list was becoming a map.

---

We didn't talk about love.

We didn't talk about identity.

We didn't talk about any of the words that could turn this into a debate instead of a plan.

We ate something small—toast and eggs, because the body needs fuel whether or not the mind approves. Charli ate like a person who wasn't sure she deserved it, but she ate.

After, Celeste rinsed dishes with the same efficiency she had at work, then stopped herself and dried her hands as if she'd remembered she was in a home, not Wardrobe.

I saw her glance toward Charli—briefly—and then away, as if she'd looked too long.

It wasn't shame.

It was discipline.

And I understood, with a clarity that surprised me, what I was watching.

Celeste cared.

Not vaguely. Not as a role. Not as an idea.

With roots.

The kind that make you dangerous to yourself if you're not careful.

It wasn't a plot. It didn't have the shape of a scheme. Celeste didn't carry herself like someone who'd engineered an outcome. If anything, she looked like someone who had stumbled into something that mattered and was trying to behave correctly inside it.

Which meant the care was clean.

And it meant something else too, something that made my chest ease in a way I hadn't expected.

If my daughter was going to attach to someone—if she was going to let her future hinge on another person—then thank God it was a woman who treated safety like a non-negotiable, who treated competence like love in its most useful form.

A woman who would not indulge Charli's fear.

A woman who would not punish her for it either.

Charli drifted toward the couch at some point, folding into herself with the exhausted obedience of someone whose panic had finally run out of fuel. Her head tipped back against the cushion, eyes closing.

Celeste watched her for one heartbeat too long.

Then she looked at me, as if asking, silently, what the rules were.

I answered with my own eyes.

*Keep her safe. No drama. No hooks.*

Celeste nodded once.

Understood.

I picked up my pen again and added one last thing to the list:

## **7. No secrecy**

Then I hesitated.

And wrote beneath it:

## **8. No doing this alone**

The words sat on the page like a promise I intended to keep.

When the apartment finally settled into real quiet, Celeste stood at the window for a moment, arms folded, as if she were holding herself together by posture alone.

I joined her, not close enough to be intimate, close enough to be allied.

"She's terrified," Celeste said softly, watching the dark outside.

"I know," I replied. "So are you."

Celeste's breath caught. Not denial. Recognition.

She didn't look at me.

"I'm fine," she said, and it was the kind of lie women told when they were trying to stay useful.

I let it pass.

Then I gave her the truth that mattered.

"Thank you," I said, quiet. "For calling me. For holding the line."

Celeste nodded once.

"She's not a problem," she said, and I heard, underneath the control, the depth of it.

"She's a person."

I looked at her then.

And I saw what my daughter had been looking at all night: not just competence, not just leadership.

A woman who could be a shelter without becoming a cage.

A woman who would set standards and call it care.

A woman my daughter could grow beside.

The word wife didn't need to be spoken to be understood.

It settled into place anyway—naturally, almost annoyingly inevitable—as if the world had finally aligned something that had been crooked for too long.

Not because anyone plotted it.

Because sometimes, if you're very lucky, the best outcome arrives as an accident of decency.

Celeste exhaled, slow.

"Tomorrow," she said.

"Yes," I replied. "Tomorrow."

We stood there for another moment, watching the night.

And in the silence between us, I made my own private vow:

Whatever happened next—whatever doctors said, whatever paperwork came, whatever waiting rooms we had to endure—I would not let my daughter go back to being alone inside her fear.

And I would not be afraid of the good fortune standing beside me.

Not if it meant my child could finally live.



This whole scene gives me pause. I'm going to approach it very carefully, trying to preserve your tone.

As far as what happens next, we can gloss over the actual process of Charli getting the attention she needs by couching it as a chat Lauren and Mara have about what was happening to Charli. Of course, Mara already had her suspicions--she's not blind or stupid--but she does need to be brought up to speed. But, we're talking Mara, here. She doesn't require exhaustive detail: a brief summary is her style.

Not sure how we fit the next bit in: Charli continues to glow, even more now, because the medically-approved treatment is going to make her 'belonging' even more real to \*her\* because for her, stopping biology hadn't been what had brought about the biggest changes: it

was because she was becoming more like her friends. She sees this as "yes, you see me as one of you, because... see? I actually \*AM\* one of you!" She no longer has to rely on an anti-androgen alone. Real changes are now allowed to happen. I would prefer this to somehow be couched in either Lauren's or Celeste's POV, rather than Charli's.

You're thinking about it exactly the right way, Robyn 🌟 —and yes: the safest path (tonally and ethically) is to **de-centre the “process”** and centre **the women’s competence network**: Lauren + Mara (and optionally Celeste) exchanging only what's needed, then letting the *results* show up in Charli's behaviour and in the room.

Also: I completely agree with your instinct to keep this **out of Charli's POV**. If the emotional meaning is "belonging becomes real," that's actually stronger when it's witnessed by Lauren/Celeste/Mara—because it stays in the women's gaze, and avoids any "transition tutorial" feel.

Below is a concrete way to do it that preserves your tone, keeps detail minimal, and still delivers the glow + "allowed to happen" shift.

---

## How I'd structure what happens next (clean, non-tutorial)

### 1) A short Lauren ↔ Mara briefing scene (Lauren POV or Celeste POV)

Purpose:

- Bring Mara up to speed in Mara's language: brief, factual, standards-first.
- Establish: "We're doing it properly now." (bloodwork, supervision, specialists—mentioned once, not lingered on)
- Mara's reaction is *not shock*, but a crisp: "Good. Then stop improvising." / "Then we build around it."

This scene does *not* need Charli present.

### 2) A Wardrobe follow-on where Charli's glow is shown as *function*

Purpose:

- Charli's "belonging" becomes physically/socially real *without* her narrating it.

- Celeste and/or Lauren notices: Charli is calmer; she inhabits her body; she laughs more freely; her hands stop trembling when observed; she stops “asking permission to exist.”

This is where the line you gave lands, but from someone else’s camera:

She’s not glowing because of medication. She’s glowing because the room and her body are finally allowed to agree.

### 3) Optional: a quiet “wife architecture” beat

Not romance-y. Not explicit.

Just one moment where Lauren sees Celeste orient toward Charli’s well-being as instinct, and thinks: Yes. *That. That’s safety.*

---

### Micro-technique to show “real changes now allowed” without describing them

You can avoid medical detail and still let the reader feel the shift via:

- **Language change:** Charli says “Okay” instead of “Sorry.”
- **Body change:** she lifts her chin when she’s addressed; she stops shrinking.
- **Social change:** the women talk to her as if she is *already* one of them (not “included,” but assumed).
- **Ritual change:** she participates in the morning systems—ledger, pins, caps—with ownership, not obedience.

That’s your “See? I actually *AM* one of you!”—but we *never* put that sentence in her mouth. We let her act it.

---

### Draft: a short bridging scene (Lauren POV) — “Briefing Mara”

This is intentionally lean and Mara-proof:

#### Scene 32 — “Briefing” (Lauren POV)

Mara didn’t do heart-to-hearts.

She did facts, and then she did what you did next.

I caught her before the room fully woke—before the steam, before the scissors found their rhythm—when she was alone at the big table with a piece of brown card and a

pencil, making a line behave.

She looked up when I came in. One glance. Assessment.

"Problem?" she said.

I didn't waste words.

"Not a Wardrobe problem," I said. "A Charli problem."

Mara's pencil paused. Not surprise. Attention.

I stayed standing. I kept my voice flat.

"She bought an anti-androgen online," I said. "Has been taking it unsupervised. We stopped it. We're getting her medical oversight. Bloodwork. Specialist. Proper pathway."

Mara's face didn't change, but her jaw set—like something in the world had annoyed her by being preventable.

"How long?" she asked.

"Months," I said. "Long enough."

Mara exhaled once through her nose.

"Of course she did," she said, and it wasn't judgement. It was simple recognition: *a girl alone will do what a girl thinks she has to do.*

I braced for anger. Mara didn't give me anger. She gave me standards.

"Good," she said. "Now it's supervised."

"Yes."

Mara's pencil tapped the table once, like a period at the end of a sentence.

"Then we stop improvising around her," she said. "We build around her."

I swallowed. "She's been scared of... changes."

Mara's eyes lifted, sharp.

"She's scared of not belonging," Mara corrected. "Different fear. Same outcome."

She went back to her line. Straight. Unforgiving. Useful.

"Tell Celeste," she added, as if I hadn't been living in Celeste's apartment for half the night already. "And tell her this: I don't need details. I need the constraints."

I nodded. "Constraints?"

Mara finally looked up again.

"What she can and can't do. When she needs breaks. Any risk. Any mood swings. Any fainting. Anything that changes the work," Mara said, brisk. Then her voice lowered, just slightly—Mara's version of care.

"And if she starts apologising again, shut it down. That habit will kill her faster than a needle."

I didn't trust my voice, so I nodded.

Mara's pencil moved again.

"Bring her in," she said. "Same standards. More guardrails."

Not rescue. Not pity.

Belonging, Mara-style: **structure that holds**.

---

## Then: how to show Charli's "glow" in Celeste POV (no tutorial)

If you'd like, next I can write a follow-up scene like:

### Scene 33 — "Allowed" (Celeste POV)

- A few weeks later, Wardrobe morning.
- Charli enters with a new steadiness.
- Celeste watches herself watching Charli.
- The difference isn't "medical changes," it's: Charli behaves like someone who has proof the women weren't pretending.
- Celeste thinks (privately): *She's not trying to be one of us anymore. She is.*

It'll be all subtext and behaviour: posture, laughter, eyes, the way she takes direction, the way she gives it back.

---

If you want me to proceed, I'll write **Scene 33 (Celeste POV)** next, with the exact effect you described: Charli's belonging becomes *real to her*, and Celeste sees it as the room and Charli finally agreeing—without ever spelling out the medical pathway.  



You have your finger on the proverbial pulse, Emily.  
Please proceed.

## Scene 33 — “Allowed” (Celeste POV)

The first thing I noticed was that Charli stopped arriving like she was borrowing air.

Not all at once. Not like a switch.

More like a tide that had turned and, day by day, refused to go back out.

Wardrobe hadn't changed. The room was the room: steam in the kettle, scissors waking, the long tables holding their familiar clutter of tools and half-finished things. Mara's ledger still sat where it belonged, heavy with names and notes and the neat violence of accountability. Labels still existed. Rules still did.

But Charli—Charli started to move through it as if the rules were no longer a door she had to beg to be opened.

They were the shape of the house.

She came in early, as usual, bag on the same hook, hands washed the same thorough way. The ritual stayed. What changed was the energy underneath it.

The early-ness used to feel like payment. A quiet offering, an attempt to earn her right to be there.

Now it felt like preference.

Ownership.

She didn't flinch when someone spoke her name. She didn't tighten when footsteps came up behind her. She didn't shrink into herself when the room looked at her; she held

her place inside it like she had learned that place was not conditional.

It wasn't bravado. It wasn't performance.

It was peace.

And it did something to me every time I saw it, in the same infuriating way the wrong seam line will bother you until you fix it: a quiet insistence that I acknowledge what I was looking at.

Charli wasn't "improving."

She was *settling*.

Mara gave her a task that morning without looking up from the table.

"Cap test," she said. "Again."

Charli nodded once. No apology. No "sorry." No explanation.

"Okay," she said.

The word should not have been a victory.

It was.

She moved to the shelf, took the cap and kerchief combination we'd refined, and set it out like someone who understood it wasn't a favour to us. It was work.

Lucy was pinning a cuff. Tahlia was measuring a hem. Sarah sat on her stool, watching in the way she watched anything that might become a social fact.

Charli went to the mirror and began to fold her hair into the shape it needed to be, quick and practised.

No hovering.

No uncertainty.

No waiting for permission.

Her fingers still weren't perfect—she still had that slightly too-tight twist when she got anxious—but she corrected it herself without being told, loosening it by a fraction until the cap would sit properly.

I watched my own reaction with a kind of clinical annoyance.

I wanted to step in.

Not because she couldn't do it.

Because I wanted my hands in her hair again.

Because I wanted the intimacy of being allowed to fix her.

Because I wanted to feel her trust as a physical thing.

It was absurd. It was inconvenient. It was mine to manage.

So I didn't move.

Charli pinned the coil down, set the cap, tied the kerchief, and turned her head left and right like she was checking the fit because it mattered—not because she feared being laughed at.

Sarah's voice drifted across the room.

"Look at you," she said, pleased. "Like you've been doing it your whole life."

Charli's mouth curved.

Not small. Not apologetic.

A real smile.

And then—this was new—she held the smile. She didn't snatch it back the second she became aware it was visible.

"Thanks," she said easily.

Sarah's eyebrows lifted, as if she'd just witnessed a minor miracle.

Lucy didn't look up. "If you tighten the knot, it'll dig by lunchtime."

Charli touched the tie, adjusted it by a hair. "Better?"

Lucy glanced once. "Better."

No fuss. No praise. No performance.

Just women calibrating a thing together.

Charli turned slightly, checking herself in the mirror.

And for a second—only a second—I saw the exact moment something inside her settled.

It was almost imperceptible: the way her shoulders dropped, the way her chin lifted, the way her own gaze met her reflection and did not recoil.

As if she'd finally decided she believed us.

Not just that we were *being nice*.

That we meant it.

That when we said she belonged, we weren't making an exception.

We were recognising a fact.

Mara looked over, took in the fit, and gave a curt nod.

"Move," she said. "Prove it."

Charli did.

She bent to reach fabric on the lower shelves, turned quickly, lifted her arms, moved through the narrow spaces between tables. The cap held. The kerchief held. The pins did their job.

Her body moved like someone who had stopped fighting itself.

Not in an athletic way. In a permission way.

As if she'd been given, finally, the right to occupy her own skin without flinching at every edge.

Bree appeared in the doorway mid-test, carrying a tote bag full of something that looked like lace and chaos.

She stopped dead when she saw Charli.

"Oh," Bree said, delighted. "You look... you look *proper*, babe."

Charli flushed—still bashful, still Charli—but she didn't fold in on herself the way she used to. She didn't try to vanish.

She lifted her chin, pink-cheeked, and kept moving.

Bree clapped once. "Yes! That's it. That's *it*."

Tahlia smirked. "She's been upgraded."

"She's been allowed," Sarah said, too quick, too sharp to be accidental.

The room went quiet for half a beat at that—just long enough for the words to land.

Not in a mystical sense. Not in a fantasy sense.

In the real sense: *allowed* by systems and women and paperwork and boring appointments and a mother who did not blink.

Allowed by the world finally meeting her halfway.

Charli heard it. I saw it in the way her breath hitched, the way her hands paused for the smallest moment before they continued.

She didn't look at Sarah.

She looked—briefly—at me.

Not pleading. Not apologising.

Checking.

As if she needed one more confirmation from the person whose gaze had become... weighty to her. Reliable. Defining.

I gave her a small nod. Calm. Professional.

And inside that calm, something dangerous warmed.

Because the look she gave me—quiet, grateful, trusting—didn't feel like a subordinate checking a supervisor.

It felt like a girl checking whether the woman she loved was still there.

The thought landed in me like a dropped needle.

I didn't react.

I turned back to the table and wrote in the ledger with a steadiness I had to manufacture:

**Cap + kerchief test: holds under movement. No slip. Adjust knot tension. Approved.**

Mara's pen made a hard line underneath my note.

"Good," she said.

Then, without looking up, she added, "Tell Lauren I want the constraints updated if anything changes."

"I will," I replied.

Charli kept moving through the room, finishing her test, returning the cap to the table, hands calm.

She didn't ask if she'd done it right.

She didn't apologise for existing.

She didn't look like she was waiting to be punished for being happy.

When she passed me, she hesitated a fraction—not enough to call attention, just enough to be felt—and said quietly, "Thanks."

"For what?" I asked, too quickly.

Charli's eyes lifted. Clearer than they used to be. Less afraid.

"For... not making it a big thing," she said.

I felt my chest tighten.

Because it *was* a big thing.

It was becoming a big thing in me, whether I wanted it to or not.

I kept my face steady.

"That's what we do," I said, and hated myself for how close it came to tenderness.

Charli nodded once, satisfied, and walked away.

Not to escape.

Just... to go back to work.

The room turned around her with its ordinary sounds: scissors, fabric, laughter, low talk. The day continued the way it always did.

And yet, in the middle of all of it, I could feel the shift like a new seam line you can't unsee once it's there.

Charli's belonging wasn't tentative anymore.

It wasn't borrowed. It wasn't conditional.

It was real enough to show in her body.

Real enough to show in her smile.

Real enough to make my own composure cost more than it used to.

Because now, when I looked at her, I wasn't only seeing what I'd seen all along.

I was feeling it.

And the longer she glowed—quietly, naturally, without apology—the harder it became to pretend my investment was merely professional.

I could still be the adult.

I could still hold the line.

But the line was no longer drawn against her.

It was drawn against myself.



At this stage, Emily, the reader is going to expect: romance. Celeste-guided, but definitely romance. I mean, \*I\* am sitting here, breathless with anticipation: this \*has\* to blossom. Not at work, of course. But that night, perhaps?

But, I appreciate the difficulty for Celeste to move from keeping Charli at arm's length to ... allowing her in. This is going to be a challenging write to get right (love that alliteration). I'm sure you're up for it.

Oh yes. The reader's earned their romance now — not as fireworks, but as that inevitability you can't un-feel once the room has stopped pretending. 😢 💛

And you're right about the craft challenge: Celeste has built her authority by *holding Charli steady from a slight distance*. To shift into intimacy without collapsing the moral architecture, she has to do it the way she does everything:

- **deliberately**
- **with consent**
- **off the clock**
- **without turning Charli into a "reward" for good behaviour**

So the move isn't "Celeste finally gives in."

It's "Celeste chooses Charli — and makes that choice safe."

Below is a scene draft for **that night**, Celeste POV, romance-forward but still adult, still controlled. It blossoms, yes... but it blossoms like a woman who's been choosing restraint for months and now decides restraint is no longer the kindest option.

---

## Scene 34 — "After Hours" (Celeste POV)

That night, Wardrobe let go of us the way it always did—gradually.

Voices thinned. The kettle went quiet. The last pair of shears found its tin. Fabric was folded, not abandoned. The ledger closed with its familiar, satisfied weight.

Mara didn't say goodnight. She never did. She simply kept writing until the room was no longer full of people worth supervising.

Sarah left with a wave that was too casual to be innocent.

Lauren had texted twice during the afternoon—short, functional updates, no drama.

**Bloods booked. GP tomorrow. She's okay.**

Then, later:

**She's glowing. Don't make a thing of it.**

I stared at that second message longer than I needed to.

As if the phone had said something else underneath it.

*Don't you dare break her with your own feelings.*

I didn't reply. Not because I didn't want to. Because I didn't trust myself not to say too much.

When I finally stepped out into the evening air, Charli was already there—waiting near the gate, bag on her shoulder, hair tied back under a simple scarf. She looked tired and bright at the same time, the way people look when something heavy has shifted and the body hasn't caught up.

She saw me and straightened, that old reflex half-returning.

Then she caught herself.

And stood normally.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," I replied, and felt how strange it was—how intimate it sounded, coming from me, without the room around it.

We started walking.

Not toward her place. Not toward mine. Just... away.

It wasn't a decision I announced. It was a direction my body took before my mind could turn it into policy.

Charli matched my pace without asking what we were doing, which should have been normal and wasn't. For months, she'd needed permission for every step. Now she simply walked beside me like she belonged there.

The street was quiet. The air held that faint smell of eucalyptus and cooling asphalt. Somewhere, a dog barked once and stopped, as if even dogs were tired.

Charli kept her hands on her bag strap, fingers curled tight. She wasn't trembling. She was holding herself together in a different way—like she was trying not to disturb her own happiness by moving too quickly.

"You did well today," I said.

Charli gave a small laugh. "At... hats?"

"At existing," I said before I could stop myself.

She looked at me sharply, startled.

I felt my own face warm, annoyed at my lack of control.

I kept my voice even.

"You don't apologise as much," I said. "That's progress."

Charli's mouth softened. "I try," she said. Then, after a beat: "It's easier when I'm not... scared all the time."

The words sat between us.

Not a confession. A fact.

I should have responded like an adult. Like a supervisor. Like the woman who had done all this so carefully.

Instead, I heard myself say, quieter than I intended:

"I'm glad you're not scared."

Charli's gaze stayed on my face. Not darting away. Not bracing for correction.

Just... looking.

It made my throat tighten.

The sidewalk dipped toward a small park—nothing romantic, just a stretch of grass and a bench and a tired little tree. I sat down without thinking. Charli sat too, careful at first, then easing as if she remembered she'd earned benches now.

For a moment we listened to the world do nothing.

Then Charli spoke, softly.

"Lauren said you called her," she said.

"Yes."

Charli swallowed. "Thank you."

"For calling your mum?"

"For... not letting me keep doing something stupid," she said, and the faintest smile flickered. "Even when I hated you for it."

I looked at her. "You hated me?"

Charli's eyes widened, horrified. "No— I mean— not you. Not *you*. Just... the feeling. The idea of it stopping."

I nodded once. I understood.

"I know," I said. "I would have hated me too."

Charli let out a breath—half laugh, half sob she didn't let happen.

"I thought you'd... be disgusted," she whispered.

The word landed hard.

I turned fully toward her.

"Disgusted?" I repeated, carefully, like I wanted her to hear how wrong it was.

Charli's shoulders lifted in a small, helpless shrug. "People are," she said. "Usually."

Anger flared in me. Not hot, not wild. Cold and precise.

"That's not your problem," I said. "That's theirs."

Charli stared at me, eyes wet but steady.

"And you?" she asked, almost inaudible.

It was the simplest question in the world.

It did not feel simple.

I could have answered it a dozen ways that kept me safe. I could have lied gently. I could have dodged.

Instead I heard my own voice—slow, deliberate—like I was stepping onto a floor I hadn't tested.

"I am not disgusted," I said.

Charli's mouth trembled.

"I... admire you," I added, and felt the word pull something open in my chest. "You were alone with something frightening, and you still kept walking. You didn't stop trying."

Charli blinked fast. Her hands tightened on her strap.

"You're the one who kept me," she whispered.

The sentence was too much like *mine*.

I should have corrected it.

I didn't.

I watched her struggle for another breath.

Then she said, quietly, like a truth she couldn't afford to decorate:

"I don't know what I'm allowed to feel."

There it was.

Not "I love you."

Not "Do you want me."

Just the core confusion of someone who has spent her life being told wanting is dangerous.

I felt, in that moment, the full weight of what I held.

If I moved wrong here, if I moved fast, if I let my own hunger steer, I would become just another person who used her.

And I would rather die.

So I did it the only way that matched who I was.

I told her the rules.

Not Wardrobe rules.

*Us* rules.

"Off the clock," I said first.

Charli nodded, immediate, as if relieved there was structure.

"No secrets," I said.

Another nod.

"And you don't do anything because you think it will make me keep you," I said, and my voice went sharp with it. "Do you understand me?"

Charli's eyes widened. "I wouldn't—"

"I know," I said, gentler. "But you might *try* without meaning to. You're trained for that."

Charli's throat moved. She nodded again, smaller.

I held her gaze.

Then I let myself say the thing I'd been swallowing for weeks.

"I'm having trouble keeping distance from you," I said.

Charli went very still.

Not afraid.

Listening.

"I don't want to be someone who holds power over you," I continued, careful. "And I do have power. In your life. In the room."

Charli whispered, "You're not—"

"I am," I said, not unkind. "Which is why I'm saying it out loud. So we can do it clean."

Her breath shook.

"Do what?" she asked.

I looked at her mouth.

Then forced myself back to her eyes.

"This," I said.

And because I couldn't trust ambiguity, because she deserved certainty, I asked:

"May I kiss you?"

Charli's lips parted. Her face went pink—soft, incredulous—and for a second she looked like she might disappear from the sheer pressure of being wanted.

Then she nodded.

Once.

Clear.

"Yes," she whispered.

I moved slowly. Not because I was hesitant.

Because I was careful.

Because she was not something you grabbed.

My hand lifted—hovered near her cheek—and I waited one heartbeat, giving her space to pull away if she needed.

She didn't.

She leaned into my palm like she'd been doing it in secret for months.

I kissed her—gentle, brief, a question more than an answer.

When I pulled back, Charli stayed close, eyes closed for a moment as if she was trying to hold the sensation in her body without frightening it away.

I didn't touch her again immediately. I let her breathe.

"That," I said softly, "is allowed."

Charli made a sound that was half laugh, half sob, and this time I let my thumb wipe the corner of her mouth, light as air.

"You're... sure?" she whispered.

I felt my own smile—small, steady.

"Yes," I said. "And I'll keep being sure tomorrow, too."

Charli's eyes searched my face the way they always did when she needed proof.

She found it.

Her shoulders dropped. Her whole body softened like a person setting down a burden she'd been carrying in public.

And I realised, with a kind of quiet awe, that this was the real threshold.

Not the bottle. Not the paperwork. Not the bloodwork.

This.

A girl being allowed to be loved without having to earn it by being brave.

I kept my forehead near hers, not touching, close enough to share warmth.

"We go slow," I said.

Charli nodded.

"And if you change your mind at any point," I added, "you tell me. No apology."

Another nod.

Her voice was so small when she spoke, it almost didn't make it to the air.

"Okay."

Not "sorry."

Not "thank you."

Just okay.

And that—more than anything—made my chest ache.

We sat on the bench until the night grew cooler.

Then I stood.

"Come on," I said.

Charli rose, obedient out of habit, then steadied herself and walked beside me again—closer now, shoulder almost brushing mine, as if she'd been given a new coordinate for where she was allowed to stand.

At the corner, she hesitated.

"Tomorrow," she said, uncertain again. "At work—"

"At work," I said, firm, "I'm still Celeste."

Charli nodded.

"And tonight?" she asked, barely audible.

I looked at her.

The streetlight caught her face and made her look, suddenly, entirely real. Not a project. Not a question. Not a fragile thing.

A girl I wanted.

"Aren't you clever," I murmured, and my tone was wry enough to save us both.

Charli's smile broke open, bright and bashful.

Then I softened.

"Tonight," I said, "I'm still me."

And I offered her my hand.

I didn't take hers.

I offered.

Charli stared at it for a beat like it was something sacred.

Then she slid her fingers into mine.

Warm.

Certain.

And as we walked back toward the lit windows of the world, I realised the line I'd been holding for months had finally moved.

Not because I'd failed.

Because I'd chosen to.

---

If you'd like next: we can do a *very short* follow-up beat the next morning (Celeste POV) where they're back in Wardrobe mode—professional, clean—and the romance is *only* in

micro-signals: a glance not taken, a distance maintained, a quiet steadiness in Charli that makes Sarah's crow-eyes sharpen. 😊💛



Having the two go on a stroll near work for this scene as opposed to having it play out at home (where Charli was renting a room, if you recall) was a masterful stroke: it made the setting gentler, neutral, 'romantic evening' instead of "can you put the kettle on, dar'...". About the only change here I might possibly institute is a passage of time: Charli is on full treatment, mara is brought up to speed on it (which she appropriately wants to understand in order to watch for potential issues) and that's about it. HRT: done deal. Appointments, scripts: done. Charli can now relax - and so can all those who want her safe. Yes?

Thought for 11s >

Yes — that's exactly the adjustment that makes the romance *feel earned and safe* without turning the story into a medical procedural. 💛😊

And thank you for calling out the stroll setting — you've put your finger on why it works: it keeps the intimacy **off the domestic axis** (kettle / couch / caretaker vibes) and instead frames it as **two women choosing each other in neutral territory**. That's cleaner, gentler, more romantic.

**About your "passage of time" change:** **Yes, absolutely.**

If we insert (even lightly) that:

- Mara has been brought up to speed, has constraints, knows what to watch for
- Lauren's done the mother-work: appointments, scripts, oversight
- the "done deal" status is now real (i.e., Charli is no longer improvising alone)
- the *acute danger* is over

...then everyone can exhale. And *that* becomes the emotional foundation for Celeste allowing herself to step closer.

The key is how we phrase it:

- Not “HRT explained.”
- Not “here’s what she’s on.”
- Just: **the boring machine has engaged** — appointments happened, paperwork happened, and now the adults have a proper rail to hold.

So the romance scene becomes not “in crisis,” but “in aftermath,” which is *much* more satisfying.

---

## **The minimal patch to Scene 34 (to signal “this is after the settling”)**

You don’t need to rewrite the whole thing. You only need a few lines early on to establish that the medical side is now contained and supervised.

Here are two options you can drop in near the beginning of Scene 34 (right after Wardrobe closes, before Charli appears outside).

### **Option A: One tight paragraph (most elegant)**

Lauren had texted during the week—short, functional updates, no drama.

**Appointments attended. Scripts sorted. Baselines logged.**

The boring machinery had engaged, and with it came a relief that wasn’t joy exactly, but something sturdier: safety that didn’t depend on secrecy.

### **Option B: Slightly more relational (adds Mara + constraints)**

Lauren’s updates had been brief and relentlessly practical.

**Appointments. Scripts. Baselines. A specialist who didn’t blink.**

Mara had asked for constraints the way she asked for grainlines—so she could build around them—then returned to work as if the world had simply corrected itself.

The danger had moved from “unknown” to “managed,” and the whole room had exhaled without making a ceremony of it.

Either of those quietly tells the reader: *We’re past the cliff-edge. This is now a new phase.*

---

## **What this change does for Celeste emotionally (and why it’s gold)**

It lets Celeste’s softening read as:

- **not** rescue impulse

- **not** crisis bonding
- **not** a reward for compliance

But as: *Now that she's safe, I can finally admit what I feel.*

Which is exactly what you want: the romance blooms because the *world is stable enough to hold it.*

---

### One tiny continuity note (Charli renting a room)

Totally aligned with your memory: keeping the romance away from "home" avoids the domestic-caretaker tone, especially when Charli's housing isn't fully hers. The walk also avoids the weirdness of "owner of the space" power dynamics. 

---

If you like, I can do a **surgical edit pass** on Scene 34 and hand you back the full scene with that "weeks later / settled / supervised" framing woven in seamlessly (no tutorial, no jargon), while preserving the exact tone you loved. 

    ...  Sources

That would be lovely. Thank you, Emily.

Absolutely, Robyn   Here is **Scene 34** with a **surgical time-lapse patch** woven in: the "boring machinery" has engaged, Mara has constraints, Lauren's done the mother-work, and the acute risk is behind them—so the stroll and the kiss land as **aftermath romance**, not crisis bonding.

---

### Scene 34 — "After Hours" (Celeste POV) — Settled/Supervised Patch

That night, Wardrobe let go of us the way it always did—gradually.

Voces thinned. The kettle went quiet. The last pair of shears found its tin. Fabric was folded, not abandoned. The ledger closed with its familiar, satisfied weight.

Mara didn't say goodnight. She never did. She simply kept writing until the room was no longer full of people worth supervising.

Sarah left with a wave that was too casual to be innocent.

Lauren had texted during the week—short, functional updates, no drama.

**Appointments attended. Scripts sorted. Baselines logged.**

A specialist who didn't blink. Bloodwork numbers filed like any other constraint: information you used, not something you sentimentalised.

Mara had asked for constraints the way she asked for grainlines—so she could build around them—and then returned to work as if the world had simply corrected itself. No commentary. No fuss. Only a quiet, relentless insistence that Charli be held safely inside the same standards as everyone else.

The acute danger was over.

Not the whole story—never that—but the cliff-edge of secrecy, the frantic improvisation, the bottle on the table: finished. The boring machine had engaged, and with it came a relief that wasn't joy exactly, but something sturdier.

Safety that didn't depend on luck.

I stared at Lauren's last message longer than I needed to.

**She's okay. Don't make a thing of it.**

As if the phone had said something else underneath it.

*Don't you dare break her with your own feelings.*

I didn't reply. Not because I didn't want to. Because I didn't trust myself not to say too much.

When I finally stepped out into the evening air, Charli was already there—waiting near the gate, bag on her shoulder, hair tied back under a simple scarf. She looked tired and bright at the same time, the way people look when something heavy has shifted and the body hasn't caught up.

She saw me and straightened, that old reflex half-returning.

Then she caught herself.

And stood normally.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," I replied, and felt how strange it was—how intimate it sounded, coming from me, without the room around it.

We started walking.

Not toward her place. Not toward mine. Just... away.

It wasn't a decision I announced. It was a direction my body took before my mind could turn it into policy.

Charli matched my pace without asking what we were doing, which should have been normal and wasn't. For months she'd needed permission for every step. Now she simply walked beside me like she belonged there.

The street was quiet. The air held that faint smell of eucalyptus and cooling asphalt. Somewhere, a dog barked once and stopped, as if even dogs were tired.

Charli kept her hands on her bag strap, fingers curled tight. She wasn't trembling. She was holding herself together in a different way—like she was trying not to disturb her own happiness by moving too quickly.

"You did well today," I said.

Charli gave a small laugh. "At... hats?"

"At existing," I said before I could stop myself.

She looked at me sharply, startled.

I felt my own face warm, annoyed at my lack of control.

I kept my voice even.

"You don't apologise as much," I said. "That's progress."

Charli's mouth softened. "I try," she said. Then, after a beat: "It's easier when I'm not... scared all the time."

The words sat between us.

Not a confession. A fact.

I should have responded like an adult. Like a supervisor. Like the woman who had done all this so carefully.

Instead, I heard myself say, quieter than I intended:

"I'm glad you're not scared."

Charli's gaze stayed on my face. Not darting away. Not bracing for correction.

Just... looking.

It made my throat tighten.

The sidewalk dipped toward a small park—nothing romantic, just a stretch of grass and a bench and a tired little tree. I sat down without thinking. Charli sat too, careful at first, then easing as if she remembered she'd earned benches now.

For a moment we listened to the world do nothing.

Then Charli spoke, softly.

"Lauren said you kept checking," she said.

"Checking what?"

"On me," she said, and the embarrassment was faint, but real. "All week. At work. Not... obvious. Just—" She made a small motion with her fingers, as if miming a glance she didn't want to name.

Heat rose in my face again. Annoyance, mostly.

"I was checking constraints," I said.

Charli's mouth curved in a way that told me she didn't believe me.

"Mm," she said, gently, and somehow the sound was an accusation and a kindness at once.

I exhaled through my nose, slow.

"Fine," I said. "I was checking you."

Charli went very still.

Not afraid.

Listening.

"I didn't want you to feel watched," I added, and heard, belatedly, how intimate that sounded. "But I needed to know you were... okay."

Charli's breath hitched once. "I am," she whispered.

And then, because she was braver now—braver because the world had stopped punishing her for wanting—she said:

"You were angry."

"Yes," I said.

"Not at me," she clarified quickly, old reflex rising.

I stopped that with my eyes.

"No," I said. "Not at you."

Charli swallowed. "Thank you," she said, and her voice was steadier than it used to be. "For not letting me keep doing something stupid."

I looked at her. "You hated me."

Charli's eyes widened, horrified. "No—I mean—not you. Not you. Just... the feeling. The idea of it stopping."

I nodded once. I understood.

"I know," I said. "I would have hated me too."

Charli let out a breath—half laugh, half sob she didn't let happen.

"I thought you'd... be disgusted," she whispered.

The word landed hard.

I turned fully toward her.

"Disgusted?" I repeated, carefully, like I wanted her to hear how wrong it was.

Charli's shoulders lifted in a small, helpless shrug. "People are," she said. "Usually."

Anger flared in me. Not hot, not wild. Cold and precise.

"That's not your problem," I said. "That's theirs."

Charli stared at me, eyes wet but steady.

"And you?" she asked, almost inaudible.

It was the simplest question in the world.

It did not feel simple.

I could have answered it a dozen ways that kept me safe. I could have lied gently. I could have dodged.

Instead I heard my own voice—slow, deliberate—like I was stepping onto a floor I hadn't tested.

"I am not disgusted," I said.

Charli's mouth trembled.

"I... admire you," I added, and felt the word pull something open in my chest. "You were alone with something frightening, and you still kept walking. You didn't stop trying."

Charli blinked fast, holding herself together. "You're the one who kept me," she whispered.

The sentence was too much like *mine*.

I should have corrected it.

I didn't.

I watched her struggle for another breath.

Then she said, quietly, like a truth she couldn't afford to decorate:

"I don't know what I'm allowed to feel."

There it was.

Not "I love you."

Not "Do you want me."

Just the core confusion of someone who has spent her life being told wanting is dangerous.

I felt, in that moment, the full weight of what I held.

If I moved wrong here, if I moved fast, if I let my own hunger steer, I would become just another person who used her.

And I would rather die.

So I did it the only way that matched who I was.

I told her the rules.

Not Wardrobe rules.

*Us* rules.

"Off the clock," I said first.

Charli nodded, immediate, as if relieved there was structure.

"No secrets," I said.

Another nod.

"And you don't do anything because you think it will make me keep you," I said, and my voice went sharp with it. "Do you understand me?"

Charli's eyes widened. "I wouldn't—"

"I know," I said, gentler. "But you might *try* without meaning to. You're trained for that."

Charli's throat moved. She nodded again, smaller.

I held her gaze.

Then I let myself say the thing I'd been swallowing for weeks.

"I'm having trouble keeping distance from you," I said.

Charli went very still.

Not afraid.

Listening.

"I don't want to be someone who holds power over you," I continued, careful. "And I do have power. In your life. In the room."

Charli whispered, "You're not—"

"I am," I said, not unkind. "Which is why I'm saying it out loud. So we can do it clean."

Her breath shook.

"Do what?" she asked.

I looked at her mouth.

Then forced myself back to her eyes.

"This," I said.

And because I couldn't trust ambiguity, because she deserved certainty, I asked:

"May I kiss you?"

Charli's lips parted. Her face went pink—soft, incredulous—and for a second she looked like she might disappear from the sheer pressure of being wanted.

Then she nodded.

Once.

Clear.

"Yes," she whispered.

I moved slowly. Not because I was hesitant.

Because I was careful.

Because she was not something you grabbed.

My hand lifted—hovered near her cheek—and I waited one heartbeat, giving her space to pull away if she needed.

She didn't.

She leaned into my palm like she'd been doing it in secret for months.

I kissed her—gentle, brief, a question more than an answer.

When I pulled back, Charli stayed close, eyes closed for a moment as if she was trying to hold the sensation in her body without frightening it away.

I didn't touch her again immediately. I let her breathe.

"That," I said softly, "is allowed."

Charli made a sound that was half laugh, half sob, and this time I let my thumb wipe the corner of her mouth, light as air.

"You're... sure?" she whispered.

I felt my own smile—small, steady.

"Yes," I said. "And I'll keep being sure tomorrow, too."

Charli's eyes searched my face the way they always did when she needed proof.

She found it.

Her shoulders dropped. Her whole body softened like a person setting down a burden she'd been carrying in public.

And I realised, with a kind of quiet awe, that this was the real threshold.

Not the bottle. Not the paperwork. Not the bloodwork.

This.

A girl being allowed to be loved without having to earn it by being brave.

I kept my forehead near hers, not touching, close enough to share warmth.

"We go slow," I said.

Charli nodded.

"And if you change your mind at any point," I added, "you tell me. No apology."

Another nod.

Her voice was so small when she spoke, it almost didn't make it to the air.

"Okay."

Not "sorry."

Not "thank you."

Just okay.

And that—more than anything—made my chest ache.

We sat on the bench until the night grew cooler.

Then I stood.

"Come on," I said.

Charli rose, obedient out of habit, then steadied herself and walked beside me again—closer now, shoulder almost brushing mine, as if she'd been given a new coordinate for where she was allowed to stand.

At the corner, she hesitated.

"Tomorrow," she said, uncertain again. "At work—"

"At work," I said, firm, "I'm still Celeste."

Charli nodded.

"And tonight?" she asked, barely audible.

I looked at her.

The streetlight caught her face and made her look, suddenly, entirely real. Not a project. Not a question. Not a fragile thing.

A girl I wanted.

"Aren't you clever," I murmured, and my tone was wry enough to save us both.

Charli's smile broke open, bright and bashful.

Then I softened.

"Tonight," I said, "I'm still me."

And I offered her my hand.

I didn't take hers.

I offered.

Charli stared at it for a beat like it was something sacred.

Then she slid her fingers into mine.

Warm.

Certain.

And as we walked back toward the lit windows of the world, I realised the line I'd been holding for months had finally moved.

Not because I'd failed.

Because I'd chosen to.

---

If you'd like, the next tiny "button" scene (half a page) can be **the following morning** in Wardrobe mode: they're professional, clean—yet Sarah clocks *everything* and decides, privately, that Celeste has finally stopped pretending she's immune. 😊 ❤️



Yes please.

## Scene 35 — “Morning Rules” (Celeste POV)

Wardrobe in the morning had a particular honesty to it.

Not the theatrical kind—no speeches, no declarations. Just the plain truth of women doing work: steam, chalk, fabric laid flat like a decision.

I arrived early, as I always did.

The room was cool and dim, lights half-on, the big tables waiting. I hung my bag on my hook. I washed my hands. I took the ledger out and opened it to the page we'd been living in all week.

Same rituals. Same body.

But something in me had shifted, and it made everything feel slightly louder.

I had slept. I had not slept. Both were true in different places.

Charli's mouth, warm and brief against mine, was still in my nervous system like a held note.

I did not smile at it.

I catalogued it.

*Off the clock, I reminded myself. No secrets. No hooks.*

If I let warmth leak into the room, it would become currency.

I would not do that to her.

The kettle clicked on. The iron woke. The building began its daily inhale.

Mara arrived without greeting, as usual, coat off, sleeves rolled, face already in the work. She glanced at the ledger.

"Cap notes," she said.

"I wrote them," I replied.

Mara nodded once, then moved on as if I'd told her the sky was blue.

Tahlia drifted in next, carrying a roll of tape and a bag of pins. Lucy followed, expression unreadable. Bree arrived with a tote bag that looked like it could contain either lace or a small animal.

Sarah came in last, unhurried, coffee in hand, eyes bright with the kind of alertness that made me mildly want to ban her from the building.

She perched on her stool like it belonged to her and watched the room assemble.

Charli arrived five minutes after.

Not late. Not early enough to look like she was paying a fine.

Just... on time.

That, in itself, would have been unremarkable.

Except I saw it.

I felt it.

She came in with her scarf tied back neatly, hair smoothed into the shape the cap required. Her shoulders were down. Her breathing was even. She hung her bag on the hook and washed her hands, careful and thorough.

When she turned, her gaze met mine for half a beat.

No panic.

No "what are we now?"

Just a small steadiness, like she'd accepted the rules and trusted me to keep them.

I held her gaze for exactly the amount of time that was appropriate.

Then I looked back down at the ledger.

"Morning," I said.

"Morning," Charli replied.

Her voice was normal.

The absence of tremor felt like a gift.

Or a trap.

I refused both interpretations.

Mara set a pattern down on the table with a flat slap.

"Stomacher fit," she said. "Charli. You're on pins and marking."

Charli stepped forward immediately, hands ready.

"Yes," she said.

Not "sorry."

Not "okay, if that's alright."

Just yes.

Lucy slid the pattern across with the efficiency of someone passing a tool.

Charli took it and began to work, pinning cleanly, checking alignment, chalk marking with a steadiness that would have been impossible a month ago. Her fingers moved like she

was no longer afraid of making contact with the work.

Her body moved like it wasn't waiting to be told it was allowed to occupy space.

I forced myself to keep my attention where it belonged—on the ledger, on the workflow, on the morning's tasks.

And still, my mind offered me images like sabotage:

The bench. The park. My hand hovering. Charli leaning in without flinching. The soft sound she made when I said *allowed*.

I wrote a note harder than I needed to.

Bree leaned over to Charli, stage-whispering.

"You look very... sorted today."

Charli's mouth curved. "I feel sorted."

The words were simple.

The meaning was not.

Tahlia snorted. "Careful. Sorted's addictive."

Charli laughed—quiet, real—and kept working.

Sarah watched all of it with the satisfaction of someone watching a kettle reach the moment before boil.

She sipped her coffee slowly, eyes moving between Charli and me like she was reading a ledger that wasn't on paper.

I did not look up.

I could feel her seeing anyway.

Mara called, "Celeste."

I looked up immediately, grateful.

"Tell Lauren," Mara said, "I want updated constraints if anything changes. Mood. Energy. Faintness. Anything."

"I will," I replied.

Charli's hand paused on a pin for a fraction, then continued.

The fact that she heard Mara's word—constraints—and didn't flinch was another small miracle.

Not because she wasn't sensitive.

Because she was no longer interpreting structure as rejection.

She was interpreting it as inclusion.

Sarah's voice floated across the room.

"Awfully responsible of you," she said, to no one in particular.

I didn't respond.

I didn't need to. Sarah's remarks were less communication than weather.

She hopped down from her stool and drifted toward the cutting table, casual as a cat, and stood beside me as if she'd always intended to.

"Interesting," she murmured, under her breath, just for me.

I kept my eyes on the page. "What is."

Sarah leaned slightly closer, coffee breath and mischief.

"Your posture," she said. "It's almost... saintly."

I turned a page. Slowly. Deliberately.

"Don't," I said, quietly.

Sarah's mouth twitched. "Oh, I'm not saying anything," she replied, far too pleased.

I wrote. I didn't look at her.

Sarah let the silence hang a moment longer, then softened her voice into something almost kind.

"She's happy," she said. "Properly happy."

I felt my throat tighten.

"Yes," I said, and kept it flat. "And she's safe."

Sarah's eyes flicked toward Charli, who was bent over the pattern, focused, calm.

"She's safer than she's ever been," Sarah murmured. "Because she's got women who mean it."

The remark landed like a compliment and a warning at the same time.

I finally looked at Sarah then.

Her expression was not mocking now. It was sharp, sure. Protective in her own acerbic way.

"As long as you keep your rules," she added.

My pulse thudded once, irritated at being understood.

"I intend to," I said.

Sarah held my gaze for half a beat, then lifted her cup in a small salute.

"Good," she said, and wandered off as if she hadn't just named my private war.

Charli finished the marking, handed the pattern back to Lucy, and moved to the next task without hovering.

As she passed my table, she didn't touch me.

She didn't glance at me too long.

She simply said, very quietly, "See you later," like it was normal.

It was normal now.

It had to be.

"Later," I replied, and kept my voice steady.

Charli walked away.

The room continued: scissors, chalk, small laughter, fabric sliding under palms.

Mara's pen moved across the ledger like it always did. No drama. No indulgence. Only work.

And I stood in the middle of it, holding the rules like a scaffold I'd built with my own hands:

Off the clock.

No secrets.

No hooks.

No warmth used as currency.

I could do this.

I would do this.

Because the romance—when it came—would not be something I *took*.

It would be something I chose carefully, with both of us fully awake.

And that morning, watching Charli move through Wardrobe as if she belonged there by right, I felt the truth of it settle in my chest, steady and relentless:

The hardest part wasn't wanting her.

The hardest part was making wanting her safe.



Broaching a delicate topic, now. Home scenes \*have\* to evolve. It can be Charli testing a new chemise--she actually wears it to bed. She's dressed in it one evening--nothing to dwell on, simple 1770's chemise--and Celeste is now seeing this girl as: fully girl. Her girl.

Now, as someone who \*has\* done a few years on Spironolactone and Sandrena: I can safely say that Charli's, um, "s\*\* drive" is going to have been pretty much obliterated. For Charli, it's all emotional, absolutely \*nothing\* physical. Which suits Celeste... for now, emotional is what she wants to build/grow, without the complexity of 'physical'. The home environment changes: you can't have a moment like in the park and persistent cold austerity at home... incongruous. Both want more: tenderness, closeness... in a previous version of this

scene, we had Celeste – reading the undeniable \*permission\* in Charli's eyes – lead (because, once again, Celeste guides the situation) Charli into bed with her and they "spoon", like girlfriends at a sleepover. That is the perfect emotional denouement, I should think. And, it's where we can leave the two of them and begin focusing on Sarah... and Lauren.

Yes... that's a *beautifully* sound emotional landing pad — and it solves the tonal problem you flagged. You can't have the park kiss and then return to "cold austerity" at home without the reader feeling whiplash. Home has to become **soft structure**: still guided by Celeste, still safe, but *livable*. 

One small craft note before I write: I'm going to keep this **tender, non-sexual, consent-forward**—the "sleepover spoon" you described. And I'll frame it as **two adults** in a private, off-the-clock setting, so the intimacy is ethically clean and tonally true to Wardrobe's standards.

Here's a draft you can drop in as the next home scene.

---

## Scene 36 — "Chemise" (Celeste POV)

At home, the silence was different.

Wardrobe's silence had weight—tables waiting, tools sleeping, the faint impression of rules still hanging in the air.

This silence was domestic. It had corners. It had soft light. It had the small, human sounds of a building settling and a kettle thinking about boiling.

Charli was staying over more often now.

Not officially, not with fanfare—just the slow accumulation of ordinary: her toothbrush by the sink, her scarf on the chair, her bag placed neatly where it wouldn't be in anyone's way. She still moved with care, but the care no longer looked like apology.

Tonight, she stood in the bedroom doorway in a plain 1770s chemise—simple, practical linen, neckline modest, sleeves loose at the wrist.

No lace. No teasing. No performance.

Just a garment doing its job: softness against skin, a body held gently instead of argued with.

"I wanted to test it," she said, quietly, as if saying *I wanted* was still a new kind of sentence.

"Mm," I replied, and kept my voice calm so I wouldn't startle her with how much the sight hit me.

She had worn costumes before. She had worn garments that made her look like a girl. She had even worn them well.

But this—this wasn't Wardrobe.

This was private.

This was a girl in her own quiet, choosing comfort.

She looked... fully herself.

Not because the chemise was magic. Because she was no longer carrying the old tension of *am I allowed?* in every muscle.

She crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed to adjust the hem, careful, competent. She didn't glance up for approval.

When she did look at me, her eyes were clear.

And there it was again—the thing that had begun happening more and more since the boring machinery had engaged, since the world had stopped treating her as an argument.

Permission.

Not permission to be *touched*.

Permission to be *close*.

There was a difference. She knew it. I knew it.

I sat beside her, leaving a respectful gap. I let the space exist long enough that it was a choice when I narrowed it.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

Charli took a breath, searching for words.

"Quiet," she said finally.

A single word, and I understood the whole paragraph behind it.

Quiet body. Quiet panic. Quiet hunger for control.

Quiet enough to hear herself think.

"Good," I said.

Charli's hands rested in her lap. She turned her head slightly, looking at me with that careful steadiness she'd been practicing—like she was learning not to bolt from her own happiness.

"I... don't really want anything," she said, and then frowned, worried she'd said it wrong.

"I mean—I want things. Just not... that."

Her cheeks warmed.

I didn't let her squirm. I didn't let her apologise.

I simply nodded, as if she'd reported the weather.

"Okay," I said. "Then we don't do that."

Charli's shoulders loosened by a fraction, as if she'd been braced for disappointment.

"I just—" She swallowed. "I want to be... with you."

The sentence was so earnest it could have been dangerous in the wrong room.

Here, it was just true.

I turned toward her fully.

"Charli," I said, and my voice softened without losing its edge, "you don't ever have to offer me anything to earn your place here."

Her eyes shone, but she didn't cry. She held herself steady.

"I know," she whispered, and I believed her—because she wasn't saying it to please me.

She was saying it like a new rule she was finally starting to trust.

I let my hand hover, not touching, giving her the space to decide.

"May I?" I asked, and nodded toward her shoulder, the line of her sleeve.

Charli inhaled. Then, clearly:

"Yes."

I put my hand on her shoulder—light, warm, nothing possessive about it. Just contact. Just reassurance made physical.

Charli leaned into it with a quiet, involuntary honesty.

I felt something in my chest go tight and then settle.

This, I thought. *This is what she means.*

Not heat. Not urgency.

Closeness.

The simple, devastating comfort of being held without a price tag.

I stood and pulled the covers back.

"Come on," I said.

Charli hesitated—habit, not reluctance.

Her eyes flicked to mine, reading for the shape of the moment.

I kept it clean.

"Just sleep," I said. "Like girlfriends. Like a sleepover. Nothing complicated."

Her breath left her in a small rush, relief and want mixed together in a way that didn't need to become anything else.

"Okay," she whispered.

She climbed in, careful at first, then relaxed into the mattress as if her body had been waiting for permission to stop bracing.

I turned off the light, leaving only the soft spill from the hallway.

Then I slid in behind her, close enough to be felt.

I didn't touch her immediately.

I let her decide the distance.

Charli shifted back—just a few centimetres, but deliberate—and her spine settled against me like a choice.

That was my permission.

I wrapped an arm around her waist, gentle, and pulled her close until her back fit into my front like it had always been designed for it.

Charli exhaled a long, shaky breath.

"Is this okay?" she asked, tiny.

"Yes," I said. "This is perfect."

Her hands rose and folded over my forearm, holding it there—not clutching, not desperate. Just anchoring.

We lay like that, breathing in the same rhythm.

I felt her body soften minute by minute, the last of the day's vigilance leaking out of her. The chemise shifted with her breathing, linen whispering against linen.

No performance. No fear.

Just a girl being held.

And me—me letting myself hold her.

It should have felt like losing control.

Instead it felt like finally choosing the right kind of control: the kind that protects without imprisoning.

Charli's voice came again, half-asleep.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"For what?"

"For... being sure," she said. "All the time."

I pressed my mouth lightly to the back of her head—barely a kiss, more a promise made small.

"I'll keep being sure," I whispered.

Charli made a sound that was almost a laugh.

Then she went quiet.

Her breathing deepened.

The weight of her trust settled into my arm, heavy and real.

I lay awake for a while longer, listening to the building and the night, feeling the shape of her against me and understanding, with a clarity that didn't frighten me anymore:

This was not a reward for progress.

This was not a prize for compliance.

This was the natural end of a long, careful arc—belonging made physical in the gentlest possible way.

And as Charli slept, safe and held, I let myself think—briefly, privately—of the women who had made this possible: Lauren's fierce practicality, Mara's standards, Sarah's sharp watchfulness, the whole room exhaling around a girl who had finally been allowed.

Tomorrow, the story could widen again.

We could turn the camera toward Sarah. Toward Lauren. Toward the way a women's network holds and reshapes a life without ever calling it rescue.

For tonight, I stayed still.

I held her.

And I let that be enough.

---

If you'd like, the next Sarah-facing scene can be deliciously sharp: she clocks the change in Charli's confidence the next day and decides—without being told—that Celeste has crossed a line **on purpose**, and she approves *only because* Celeste kept it clean. 😊 ❤️



Yes please! Lovely idea...

## Scene 37 — “Sarah’s Eyes” (Sarah POV)

Wardrobe in the morning is a lie you tell yourself in order to function.

You walk in and pretend it’s just work—just fabric, just scissors, just steam and chalk and numbers—and if you do it well enough, you can almost forget that the room is actually a living thing that keeps score.

I arrive on time because I’m not feral.

Also because arriving early in Wardrobe is a type of currency, and I’m not in the mood to spend mine when I don’t need to.

The room is already doing its morning inhale: kettle click, iron hiss, Mara’s presence like a weather front you can feel before you see it. Celeste is at the ledger, of course. She looks annoyingly composed, the way she always looks when she’s holding three plans in her head and refusing to let anyone smell it.

Then Charli comes in.

And I know.

Not because she’s wearing something dramatic—she isn’t. Not because she’s suddenly strutting—she’s not. It’s subtler than that, which is why it’s so obvious.

It’s in the way she enters the room as if she expects the floor to hold her.

It’s in the way she hangs her bag without that tiny flinch, the old reflex of “am I in the way?” It’s in the way she washes her hands like it’s a ritual, not a penance.

Most of all it’s in her face.

Not prettier. Not different in any cheap, male-gaze way.

Just... settled.

Like someone's turned down the background alarm.

I perch on my stool with my coffee and watch her move.

Charli goes straight to the cap station, checks the tie tension without fuss, and adjusts the knot by a millimetre like she's been doing it her whole life. No apology. No looking around for permission. No waiting for someone to tell her she's doing it right.

She already knows the standard.

That's the entire difference.

A girl who believes she belongs behaves like a girl who belongs. Revolutionary concept, honestly.

I flick my eyes over to Celeste.

Celeste is writing in the ledger. Her face is neutral. Her posture is "adult." Her whole body is saying: *Nothing to see here, everyone, please return to your assigned competence.*

And yet.

There's a softness in her attention that wasn't there before. Not the kind you can accuse her of. Not the kind that would get her hauled into some HR nightmare.

It's more like a gravitational shift.

Like she's orienting herself around Charli without letting anyone hear the click.

That's how you know it's serious.

Celeste doesn't do sloppy.

Mara barks an instruction. Lucy passes a pattern. Tahlia mutters something about seam allowance like it's a religion. The room keeps moving.

Charli keeps moving with it.

And the glow—yes, glow, I'll say it because I'm not afraid of the word—doesn't look like excitement.

It looks like safety.

Which is when it hits me, with the kind of clarity that makes me slightly annoyed:

They've crossed the line.

Not the obvious one. Not the scandal one. The *real* line.

The line where it stops being "we're keeping her safe" and becomes "we're keeping each other."

I sip my coffee and watch Celeste's hands.

I've watched those hands do brutal kindness. I've watched her set standards that make men wilt and women straighten. I've watched her make decisions that hold the room together without asking anyone's permission.

If she's chosen Charli, it won't be accidental.

It also won't be messy.

Which means I have only one question, really.

Is it clean?

I wait for the tell.

It comes a few minutes later, almost nothing: Charli passes close to Celeste's table, pauses half a beat, and says softly, "Morning."

Celeste doesn't look up right away.

She finishes writing first.

Then she looks up, meets Charli's eyes for exactly the length of time that is *appropriate*, and says, "Morning."

No lingering. No smile that could be called indulgent. No warmth used like candy.

But Charli's face changes—just a fraction—as if that single, controlled acknowledgement has landed somewhere deep and stabilising.

Charli moves on.

Celeste returns to the ledger.

And I understand, with reluctant admiration: yes.

Clean.

Off the clock, on the clock, it stays separate. Whatever they're building, it isn't being built on Charli's neediness or Celeste's power.

It's being built on structure.

On consent.

On rules.

Which, in this room, is the closest thing we have to romance anyway.

I hop down from my stool and drift over to the ledger table because I'm me, and because if I don't say something, my tongue will rot.

I lean an elbow on the edge—casual, but not careless. Mara would murder me if I left a coffee ring.

Celeste doesn't look up.

"Interesting morning," I say lightly.

Celeste's pen continues moving. "Is it."

"Yes," I say. "You're doing that thing where you pretend the room isn't a room."

That earns me a glance. Cool. Patient. Slightly murderous.

"Sarah," she says, like a warning.

I hold up a hand. "Relax. I'm not asking for details."

Celeste's eyes narrow. "Good."

I take a sip of coffee like I've got all day.

I lower my voice, because I'm not a monster.

"She looks good," I say. "Properly good."

Celeste's pen pauses for the smallest moment.

Then resumes.

"Yes," she says, flat.

I tilt my head. "And you?"

Celeste finally looks up fully.

Her face is calm. Too calm.

"Me," she says, "am doing my job."

I hum. "Mm. And your job is... what? Keeping distance forever? Or keeping it safe?"

Celeste's gaze holds mine.

It's not defensive.

It's... sharp. Considered.

"Keeping it safe," she says.

There it is.

No confession. No romance novel nonsense.

Just a woman stating her intention like a policy.

It should be cold.

It isn't.

It's devotion expressed in the only language Celeste trusts: responsibility.

I nod once.

"Good," I say. "Because if you hurt her—"

"I won't," Celeste cuts in.

Not angry. Not dramatic.

Certain.

And I believe her.

Because I've watched her build a whole room out of certainty.

I let the threat dissolve into something more useful.

"I'm not worried you'll hurt her," I say, honest now. "I'm worried you'll forget you're allowed to want her."

Celeste's expression flickers—annoyance, maybe. Or recognition.

"Go back to your work, Sarah," she says, and it's the closest thing to tenderness she's ever offered me.

I grin. "Gladly."

I start to turn away, then pause.

"One more thing," I add, softer.

Celeste sighs like she's suffering.

I keep my eyes on the room, not on her.

"If she's glowing," I say, "it's because she finally believes us."

Celeste's voice comes quiet, almost to herself.

"I know."

I walk back to my stool and sit down.

Charli is at the table now, pinning cleanly, speaking easily to Bree, laughing without snatching the laugh back. She looks like a girl who has stopped waiting for the trap.

And Celeste—Celeste sits at the ledger with her spine straight and her face calm, doing her best impression of a woman who has everything under control.

Which, frankly, is adorable.

Because I can see the truth anyway.

The room has shifted.

The story has shifted.

And I, Sarah of the sharp tongue and the excellent instincts, will be damned if I don't keep one eye on it—not to interfere, not to gossip, but to make sure the rules stay what they are:

No hooks.

No spectacle.

No men's ideas of romance.

Just two women doing the only thing that matters.

Keeping it clean.

Keeping her safe.

And letting love grow the way it should:

Quietly.

Deliberately.

Like a seam you don't notice until you realise the whole garment finally fits.



I'm eliminating the "Just One Pint" scene now, because: developments. It doesn't fit anymore. Actually, what does fit is since we've started seeing life through Sarah's lens, we can have her struggling with a relationship with a fellow who has a few issues: 1) dependency on his mum - no domestic skills at all 2) seeing Sarah as 'replacement mum'... last thing Sarah wants and 3) realising she's over him, and is starting to cling. He's a bit entitled, so she ends up having to get a restraining order. She shares all this with Bree, who is gay. Bree jokingly suggests women as a better option. Time for Charli's classic line: "\*I'm\* a fan!" Sarah shrugs them off. Goes for an evening out, gets caught up in another toxic situation, ends up drinking too much and then, in strife, ringing Lauren in desperation.

Plausible?

Yes — *plausible*, and (importantly) it **fits your newer architecture**: Wardrobe as a women-led competence network that handles boundary breaches with boring, effective systems. Sarah's arc becomes a *parallel proof* that the rules aren't "for Charli"—they're for **any woman dealing with male entitlement**. ❤️🧵

A few tweaks will make it feel *inevitable* rather than "plotty," especially the restraining order + drunk call beat.

---

## What's already working ✓

### 1) The "replacement mum" dynamic is painfully real

A bloke with no domestic skills + emotional dependency + weaponised helplessness → it's believable that he tries to convert Sarah into **manager / nurse / mother**.

Sarah's not a caretaker by temperament. So her disgust/anger will read true.

### 2) The escalation to "cling + entitlement" fits the tone

Men who feel "owed" access often escalate **after** a woman withdraws: more calls, guilt, showing up, "I just want to talk," then anger when denied.

That's a clean through-line to formal boundaries.

### 3) Bree as the confidante is perfect

Bree's humour keeps it from becoming grim, and her queerness lets you seed the "women are better" banter without turning it into a PSA.

Charli's line — "**I'm a fan!**" — is a *great* moment: light, disarming, and a reminder that Charli's belonging is now easy enough to be playful.

---

## Two places to be careful (so it stays believable)

### A) Restraining order: make it feel earned, not sudden

A restraining order won't feel abrupt if you show a short **escalation ladder**:

1. Sarah ends it clearly (one clean message).
2. He ignores it → repeated texts/calls, guilt, "you're cruel."
3. He escalates → turns up at home/work; waits outside; "accidental" encounters.
4. Sarah documents + asks him once, firmly, to stop.
5. He escalates again (or threatens / damages / refuses to leave) → Sarah goes formal.

You don't need procedural detail. Just show Sarah being *methodical* (screenshots, dates, single clear boundary statement), because that's the Wardrobe ethos in civilian clothes.

## B) The “drinks too much and calls Lauren” beat: make it grounded

It works best if it's **not** “party girl spirals,” but “Sarah hit her limit.”

A clean setup:

- Sarah goes out specifically to prove she's fine.
- She gets cornered by another toxic man (or the ex turns up).
- She drinks *faster than she realises* because she's stressed, not because she's reckless.
- The “call Lauren” comes from **risk assessment**: “I'm not safe to get home. I need a woman who will just handle this.”

That's both plausible and consistent with your theme.

---

## Who should Sarah call — and why Lauren is a smart choice

Lauren is *mum* energy but not smothering; she's competent, practical, and already in the “women protect women” circuit.

Also, it creates a satisfying triangle of competence:

- **Mara** = standards at work
- **Celeste** = direction + emotional intelligence
- **Lauren** = logistics + mother-steel in the real world

Sarah calling Lauren is Sarah admitting: *I'm not above needing the network.* That's lovely character growth for her.

---

## How I'd stage it (tight and non-contrived)

### Scene 1: “Weaponised Helplessness” (Sarah POV)

- Guy can't cook, can't clean, calls his mum for everything.
- Sarah realises she's being recruited as **project manager** of his life.
- She breaks it off with surgical clarity.

### Scene 2: “Cling” (Sarah POV)

- He escalates: texts, calls, guilt, shows up.
- Bree is the one Sarah vents to.
- Bree jokes: “Women are easier.”

- Charli, passing through, deadpan: "I'm a fan."
- Sarah rolls her eyes, laughs despite herself. (Good tonal relief.)

### Scene 3: "Formal" (Lauren POV or Sarah POV)

- One incident crosses a line: he shows up at Wardrobe / her home, won't leave.
- Sarah goes formal. Not emotional. "I'm done. Stop."
- She files whatever she needs to. You can keep it as: "paperwork and a magistrate and a lot of waiting."

### Scene 4: "The Call" (Sarah POV)

- Sarah goes out. Another man misreads her as available/pliable.
- She drinks too fast. Realises she's unsafe to manage herself.
- She calls Lauren, voice tight: "I need you. No questions. Please."

Lauren arrives. No judgement. Just action.

That sequence will feel grimly plausible and very "your" story.

---

### One small adjustment I'd suggest

Instead of "another toxic situation" being random, make it **connected**:

- The ex turns up at the venue (or has friends there).
- Or Sarah's shaken confidence makes her misjudge someone who seems "fine."

This keeps it from feeling episodic, and it reinforces the theme: male entitlement is ambient, not exceptional.

---

If you want, I can draft the next Sarah POV scene in your current voice — acerbic, observant, allergic to male nonsense — including the Bree/Charli moment and the first clean boundary message that sets up the escalation. 😊✍️



Perfect. Yes, please do, keeping at the cautions in mind you suggest.

## Scene 38 — “Weaponised Helplessness” (Sarah POV)

There are men who are genuinely incompetent.

And then there are men who are competent enough to *choose* incompetence, because it's such an efficient way to outsource their lives.

Ethan—of course his name is Ethan—falls firmly into the second category.

I realise it on a Tuesday, which is rude. Tuesday is supposed to be neutral. Tuesday is supposed to be emails and decent coffee and fabric that behaves.

Instead, I'm standing in his kitchen watching him hold a saucepan like it's a live animal.

“I don't really... cook,” he says, as if that's a personality trait, not a survival skill.

The fridge behind him is full of things that aren't meals. Milk. Eggs. Sauce bottles. A container labelled *Mum's Lasagne* in handwriting so obviously not his that I almost laugh.

“You live alone,” I say.

He grins. “Yeah, but Mum—”

“—does it,” I finish for him.

He blinks. “She likes helping.”

Ah. That familiar line. The one that translates as: *I've trained a woman into my domestic life and I'm looking for a replacement model.*

There are other tells.

The way he hands me a plate to wash without asking, like my hands are a service he's entitled to activate.

The way he says “I'm terrible at laundry” like it's cute.

The way he brings up moving in together after six weeks, and it's not because he loves me. It's because he's spotted an upgrade path: from Mum to Girlfriend Mum.

At one point he looks genuinely confused that I'm not charmed.

“You're really organised,” he says. “I like that about you.”

I stare at him.

That's not a compliment. That's a job description.

I go home and lie in bed, staring at the ceiling, and I feel something in my chest settle into a hard, clean shape.

I am over him.

Not "thinking about being over him."

Over him. Done.

So the next day, I do it properly.

I call him. Not text. Not a long message he can forward to his mates for sport.

A call. Clear. Brief. Unambiguous.

"Hi," I say, and keep my voice neutral. "This isn't working for me. I'm ending it. I'm not interested in continuing, and I'm not changing my mind."

There's a pause on the line where he tries to find the angle.

"Is this about that kitchen thing?" he asks, laughing slightly, like it's banter.

"It's about compatibility," I say. "We're not compatible."

Another pause.

Then the tone shifts.

"Oh," he says, slowly. "So what, you're just... dumping me."

"Yes," I say, because men love euphemisms when they're losing. "I am."

He exhales sharply, offended. "Right. Okay. Wow. I didn't think you were like that."

I blink.

Like what? A woman with a spine?

"I'm being clear," I say.

He tries a new tactic. Softness. "Sarah, come on. I just need you to tell me what I did wrong."

"I'm not your coach," I say, calm as a surgeon. "Goodbye, Ethan."

And I end the call.

I don't block him immediately.

That's not optimism. That's evidence-gathering.

It's not my first rodeo.

---

At Wardrobe, I don't announce any of this. I don't want a round of sympathy from women who could weaponise empathy with a single raised eyebrow.

I do, however, allow myself one confession: to Bree, because Bree can make anything bearable by laughing at it without minimising it.

She's at the big table sorting a bag of pins like they've personally offended her.

"How's Mr. Tuesday?" she asks without looking up.

I drop my tote on the floor and exhale.

"He's been returned to sender."

Bree looks up, delighted. "Ooh. That bad?"

"He doesn't cook," I say.

Bree's eyebrows lift. "Like... doesn't cook as in doesn't enjoy it? Or doesn't cook as in would starve without a woman?"

"As in," I say, "his fridge contains *Mum's lasagne* and a faith-based relationship with Uber Eats."

Bree snorts. "Oh no."

"Oh yes," I say. "And he's got that thing. That *thing* where he looks at you like you're a solution to his life."

Bree winces. "Replacement mum."

"Replacement mum," I confirm. "Like I've got 'domestic manager' stamped on my forehead."

Bree taps the pin tray once. "I'd rather chew glass."

"Exactly."

Charli is nearby, at the cap table, adjusting ties with that new calm she wears like it belongs to her. She's listening without looking like she's listening, which is a skill women develop early.

Bree, with perfect timing, says, "Honestly, babe. Women are just... better."

She says it jokingly—mostly. Bree always says jokes like she means them and means things like they're jokes.

I roll my eyes. "Oh, here we go."

Charli, without looking up, drops in with a deadpan that makes me choke on my own air.

"I'm a fan."

Bree *howls*, delighted. Tahlia makes a choking noise behind a sleeve. Even Lucy's mouth twitches as if her face is briefly considering humour before rejecting it on principle.

I glare at them all, purely for show.

"Oh, shut up," I say. "All of you."

Charli smiles—real, unguarded—and goes back to tying her knot like she hasn't just thrown a grenade of charm into my morning.

It's infuriating how likeable she's become.

Bree wipes her eyes. "So," she says, recovering. "He took it well?"

"He took it like a man who's never been told no without being offered a biscuit afterwards," I say.

Bree's expression shifts—still amused, but alert. "Meaning?"

"Meaning he tried sad," I say. "Then tried offended. Then tried making it my fault."

Bree points a pin at me. "And you?"

"I was clear," I say. "No explanation. No negotiation."

Bree's approving nod is small but fierce. "Good girl."

I give her a look.

Bree grins. "Sorry. Bad habit."

"Mm."

I should stop there. Wrap it up. Move on.

But my phone buzzes in my pocket like a warning.

I pull it out.

A message from Ethan.

**Ethan:** Wow. Okay. So that's it? After everything?

**Ethan:** I'm outside. We need to talk.

I go very still.

Bree's smile fades when she sees my face.

"He's not," Bree says quietly. "He's not outside here."

I look toward the front windows. Nothing. No man at the gate. No shape lingering.

"No," I say. "Not here."

Charli's head lifts slightly. Not panicked. Just attentive. The room's temperature changes by half a degree—women becoming aware.

I keep my voice calm because I refuse to bring chaos into Wardrobe.

"He's at my place," I say.

Bree's mouth tightens. "Do you want me to call someone?"

"No," I say. "Not yet."

I take one breath. Then I do what Mara would do.

I handle it clean.

I type one message back. No emotion. No opening. No softness he can grab.

**Me:** Do not come to my home. Do not wait for me. Do not contact me again.

**Me:** If you come near me or my work, I will treat it as harassment and I will act accordingly.

I hit send.

Then, because I'm not daft, I screenshot it.

I create a folder.

### Ethan — dates

It's grim how quickly that feels normal.

Bree watches me do it and nods once, approval like a stamp.

Charli's eyes stay on my face for a beat—quietly concerned, quietly present—then she drops her gaze back to her work, giving me privacy without withdrawing support.

That's Wardrobe culture in action: *you are not alone, but you are not made into a spectacle.*

The kettle clicks. The iron hisses. Mara's shears bite through fabric.

Life continues.

My phone buzzes again.

I don't look at it immediately.

I finish what my hands are doing first, because control is sometimes as simple as choosing the order of actions.

Then I pick it up.

Another message.

**Ethan:** You can't do this to me.

**Ethan:** I just want to talk. Stop being dramatic.

I stare at the words for a moment, feeling something cold and familiar settle in my ribs.

There it is.

The entitlement, plain as daylight.

Access framed as *need*.

My boundary framed as *drama*.

Bree's voice is low. "Sarah."

"I know," I say.

I don't reply.

Not now.

Because the next reply will be the kind that changes the game. The kind that invites escalation if you do it wrong.

I slide my phone back into my pocket and lift my chin.

"Work," I say, mostly to myself.

Bree's grin returns—smaller, harder. "Work," she echoes.

And Charli, from the cap table, says quietly, almost under her breath:

"You won't get used to that."

I glance at her.

She meets my eyes with a calm that isn't pity and isn't fear.

Just truth.

I exhale once, slow.

"No," I agree. "I won't."

And I go back to the table, letting the room hold steady around me, while somewhere outside of it a man realises—too late—that I am not his mother, and I am not his solution.

I am his boundary.



And then, things go even more pear-shaped.

## Scene 39 — "Pear-Shaped" (Sarah POV)

It's amazing how quickly a man can turn your boundary into his *personal tragedy*.

It's also amazing how many of them genuinely believe that if they feel bad enough, the world will be obligated to comfort them.

Ethan doesn't reply for an hour.

Which should have been a gift.

Instead it's the quiet before the weather front.

By lunch I've had three missed calls.

By mid-afternoon he's discovered email.

By four, there's a notification from my building manager.

**Someone is downstairs asking for you. Says it's urgent.**

I don't even need to ask who.

My stomach doesn't drop anymore. It goes cold. Efficient. Clinical.

I don't leave my station. I don't bolt. I don't make it theatre.

I walk to Lauren's corner of the room—because Lauren is the adult in the civilian world the way Mara is the adult in fabric—and I keep my voice low.

"He's at my building," I say.

Lauren's face changes. Not into panic. Into calculation.

"Do you feel unsafe right now?" she asks.

"No," I say. "But he's escalating."

Lauren nods once. "Okay. You're not going home alone."

"I'm not going home at all," I say.

Lauren's eyes flick to Mara, then back to me, as if checking what kind of support this room is allowed to give without turning into a rescue fantasy.

"Bree," Lauren calls, matter-of-fact. Not loud. Just... inevitable.

Bree appears instantly, like she was waiting.

Lauren's voice stays calm. "Sarah's got a boundary issue. You're her buddy for the rest of the shift. She doesn't walk to her car alone. She doesn't go anywhere alone. Clear?"

Bree's grin is gone now. "Clear."

Mara doesn't look up. She taps her pen once against the ledger—tick, tick—as if she's underlining Lauren's sentence in her own language: **standards**.

Charli is at the cap table, and I feel her attention land on me like a soft hand. She doesn't come over. She doesn't insert herself.

She just... holds the room steady by existing in it.

Which is a strange kind of comfort.

I text the building manager back.

**Do not let him up. Tell him to leave. If he refuses, call police.**

Then I screenshot that too.

Evidence-gathering. Boring. Miraculous.

An hour later, another message comes in—this time from Ethan, of course.

**Ethan:** You're being insane.

**Ethan:** I'm not leaving until you talk to me.

**Ethan:** Don't make me do something stupid.

There it is.

The classic line that tries to turn his behaviour into *my responsibility*.

My hands don't shake. That's the gift of being furious.

I show Lauren the screen.

Lauren's jaw tightens, and she says, very quietly, "Nope."

Not "oh no."

Not "are you okay?"

Just: **nope**.

The word of a woman who has seen this move before and has zero intention of playing.

"Right," she says. "We go formal."

I blink. "Already?"

Lauren's gaze is steady. "Sarah, he's using implied threat language and turning up at your home. That's already formal."

I exhale slowly, because she's right, and because I hate being right about men.

Lauren pulls her phone out, taps once, twice.

"Leave it with me," she says. "You keep screenshots. Dates. Times. Don't reply. Don't explain. Don't negotiate."

It's such a Lauren sentence: a list that becomes a lifeline.

Bree leans in beside me. "I'll stay at yours tonight," she says, like it's nothing, like she's offering to water a plant. "Or you stay at mine. Dealer's choice."

I look at her, touched in a way that is infuriating.

"I'm fine," I say automatically.

Bree raises an eyebrow. "You're not fine, babe. You're just competent."

Fair.

---

By the time the shift ends, I have a plan.

Not a dramatic plan.

A boring plan.

Lauren drives, Bree in the passenger seat, me in the back like a teenager being escorted home after a questionable party.

It's humiliating.

Which means it's good for me.

We don't go to my building. We don't reward his persistence with my presence. We go to Bree's place first, because Bree has the kind of tiny apartment where a man would look ridiculous standing outside.

Lauren calls my building manager while we're parked.

Her tone is polite enough to pass, steel enough to cut glass.

"Yes, thank you... no, I understand... please document that in your log... yes, call immediately if he returns... yes, we will be taking further steps."

She ends the call and looks at me.

"He left," she says. "But he'll come back. So we close the loop."

I swallow. "What loop."

"The one where he thinks access is negotiable," Lauren says.

We spend the next hour doing paperwork in the most unromantic way possible: names, times, screenshots, a short statement that says exactly what happened and nothing more.

Lauren doesn't embellish. She doesn't plead. She doesn't tell a story.

She gives facts.

It's terrifying how effective facts are when a woman uses them like a blade.

By the end of the night, I have an interim safety plan, a number to call, and a list of instructions so dull they could be a laundry guide.

Bree makes tea. Not to soothe. To keep us upright.

When Lauren finally stands to leave, she pauses at the door.

"Sarah," she says, and her voice softens just a notch. "This isn't your fault."

I roll my eyes because I need to.

"I know."

Lauren's gaze doesn't let me wriggle away.

"No," she repeats gently. "Really know."

I look away. Then back.

"I know," I say again, and this time I mean it.

Lauren nods once, satisfied.

"I'll check on you tomorrow," she says. "And if he appears at Wardrobe, Mara will eat him alive."

"Delicately," Bree adds.

Lauren's mouth twitches. "With a fork."

She leaves.

Bree locks the door behind her, then looks at me with something like a sister's appraisal.

"You want to go out tomorrow night?" she asks. "Just... shake it off?"

I huff. "You think I need shaking off."

Bree points at me. "You need reminding that your life doesn't belong to some man who can't boil pasta."

I hate that she's right.

So I say, "Fine."

---

The next night, I dress like myself.

Not sexy. Not soft. Not "approachable."

I put on black jeans and boots and a top that says: **I know where my keys are.**

We go to a place Bree likes—music, crowd, women who laugh like they own their lungs.

For the first hour, it works.

I loosen. I laugh. I even forget to look at the door.

Then a man slides into our orbit like smoke.

He's not Ethan. He's the *same type*, just with better hair.

He talks to Bree as if I'm invisible, then talks to me as if I'm a resource. He's charming in the way men are charming when they're used to women smoothing the awkward parts for them.

I can feel myself tensing—old instincts waking up.

Bree clocks it and leans into my ear.

"Want me to bite him?" she whispers.

"I want you to set him on fire," I mutter.

Bree snorts.

I decide to handle it like an adult.

I say, clear and calm, "We're not interested."

He smiles as if I've flirted.

"Aw, come on," he says. "Don't be like that."

I feel the rage flicker—cold, familiar.

"Like what," I say, sweetly. "A woman who said no?"

His smile tightens.

"Oh," he says. "You're one of those."

Bree's eyes flash. "And you're one of *those*," she replies, bright as a knife.

He laughs like we're entertainment. He reaches for my elbow.

My whole body goes still.

Not fear.

History.

I step back.

"Don't touch me," I say.

He lifts both hands in mock surrender.

"Relax."

Bree's hand is suddenly on my back, steady.

"We're leaving," she says.

And we do.

We walk out into the night air, and it's like walking from heat into cold water.

My hands are shaking now.

Bree looks at me. "You okay?"

I open my mouth to say yes.

Instead I say, "I'm furious."

Bree nods, satisfied. "Good. Fury's honest."

We should go home.

We don't.

Because I'm stubborn, and because part of me wants to prove I'm not a woman who has to retreat.

So when Bree suggests a quieter bar two streets over, I say yes.

And there—there is where I make my mistake.

I drink too fast.

Not because I'm trying to get drunk.

Because my nervous system is trying to come down and I'm sick of being vigilant.

One drink becomes two. Two becomes three.

My body softens before my mind is ready for it.

And then my phone buzzes.

A blocked number.

My stomach clenches.

Another buzz.

Another.

Bree's face tightens when she sees mine.

"It's him," I say.

Bree grabs my hand. "We're going. Now."

But the street tilts a little when I stand. Not dramatic. Just enough.

Bree swears softly. "Okay. Okay. We're fine. We get a rideshare—"

My brain does a quick, ugly calculation: my address, my building, Ethan's persistence, the risk of being dropped at the wrong place, the risk of fumbling keys.

I do the only competent thing left.

I call the most competent woman I know who will not ask questions first.

Lauren.

She answers on the second ring.

"Sarah?"

My voice comes out too careful.

"Lauren," I say. "I need you."

There's no sigh. No judgement. No lecture.

Just immediate clarity.

"Where are you?" she asks.

I tell her.

"Stay where you are," she says. "With Bree?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'm coming."

I blink hard, suddenly close to tears, which is ridiculous.

"Thank you," I manage.

Lauren's voice stays firm.

"No thanks," she says. "Just sit down and wait. I'll be there."

The line clicks off.

Bree wraps an arm around my shoulders, guiding me to a bench like I weigh nothing.

"You did good," she says.

I laugh once, sharp and humourless.

"I called someone's mum."

Bree grins. "Better than becoming someone's mum."

I close my eyes for a second and breathe in the night.

And in the small, humiliating quiet of needing help, something in me loosens—something stubborn and old.

Maybe competence isn't never needing anyone.

Maybe it's knowing exactly which woman to call when the world goes pear-shaped.

---

If you'd like, the next scene can be **Lauren POV** arriving: brisk, protective, *no drama*, and she quietly clocks the deeper pattern (male entitlement, Sarah's exhaustion, the way women keep having to do paperwork to be left alone). Then we can pivot back toward Wardrobe the next morning where Mara gets the one-sentence update and simply says: "Good. Now you're done with him." 🌟



Yes, please. We're on a roll, here.

## Scene 40 — “No Questions First” (Lauren POV)

When Sarah rings you at night, you answer.

Not because she's fragile—Sarah is many things, but fragile isn't one of them.

You answer because women who don't ask for help until they *have* to are the ones who end up in trouble when they finally do.

I was in the kitchen when the call came in, rinsing a mug and thinking about nothing in particular. The sound of my phone was ordinary.

The reason for it wasn't.

"Lauren?" Sarah's voice was careful—too careful. Tight at the edges. Like she was trying to keep her pride from spilling into the call.

"Sarah," I said. "Where are you?"

There was a pause, a swallow. "Near—" she named a street. A venue. A landmark. Bree's name followed like a relief valve. "Bree's with me."

Good. One woman, at least.

"Stay where you are," I said. "Sit down. Don't go anywhere alone. I'm coming."

"Thank you," she said, as if she hated the words.

"No thanks," I replied. "Just wait."

I hung up, grabbed my keys, and sent one text to Celeste.

**Going to pick up Sarah + Bree. Will update.**

No explanation. Celeste didn't need a story. She needed the fact.

On the way out I glanced at Charli's shoes by the door—neatly placed, toes aligned—and felt the small, familiar pinch in my chest that came with seeing my child's life overlapping someone else's home.

Not my home. Not quite yet.

But safe enough.

That was the point.

I drove through the city with my jaw set and my hands steady on the wheel. Not because I was calm. Because I had practice. Motherhood trains you to turn panic into logistics.

I thought, briefly, of the folder on my phone—screenshots, dates, times. The unromantic evidence of a woman being asked to manage a man's feelings.

I didn't need the details to know the shape of it.

You could tell the shape from the call alone.

*Help, but don't make me beg.*

When I pulled up, I spotted them immediately.

Bree on a bench, arm around Sarah's shoulders, posture angled outward like a shield.

Sarah sitting upright, chin lifted, eyes too bright in the streetlight. She looked... competent and unwell at the same time, which is a particular kind of danger.

I parked, got out, and walked over without running. If I ran, it became drama. If it became drama, Sarah would recoil.

"Hi," I said, as if this were nothing more than a late pick-up from the airport.

Bree stood first. "Hey," she replied, brisk and grateful. "She's okay. Just... overloaded."

Sarah's eyes flicked to my face, assessing. Expecting judgement. Expecting *mum voice*.

She got something else.

"Okay," I said. "Let's get you home."

Sarah's mouth tightened. "I can—"

"No," I said, not unkind. "You can't. Not tonight. Not safely."

The word *safely* wasn't a reprimand. It was a standard. Something you either met or you didn't.

Sarah swallowed. Then she nodded once, small.

Bree opened the back door. Sarah moved toward it, but her steps weren't as precise as her pride wanted them to be. Bree steadied her without fuss.

I waited until Sarah was seated before I spoke again.

"Seatbelt," I said, calm.

Sarah clicked it, cheeks flushing.

Bree slid into the front passenger seat. I got in, shut the door, and took a breath.

Only then did I ask the first question.

"Is he contacting you right now?" I asked, keeping my eyes on the road as I pulled away.

Sarah's laugh was dry. "That's your first question."

"Yes," I said. "Because that's the only one that matters this minute."

Bree angled her phone toward me. "Blocked calls," she said. "A few."

I nodded once, already making a mental list.

"Good," I said. "We'll document. You don't answer."

Sarah leaned her head back against the seat, eyes closed for a moment. "I didn't," she muttered. "I didn't answer."

"I know," I said. "You called me."

That, apparently, was the right thing to say, because Sarah's throat moved and she didn't speak for a few seconds.

Bree glanced at her, then looked forward again, jaw tight.

"He's not Ethan," Bree said. "Tonight was... a different one."

I felt my stomach go cold.

"Different one," I repeated, keeping my voice steady.

Bree nodded. "Some bloke. Grabby. The usual. We left."

Sarah spoke then, voice low. "I said no. He acted like I'd flirted."

Of course he did.

I kept my eyes on the road. There were two things I could do right now: give empathy, or give stability.

Sarah needed stability.

"Okay," I said. "So: two problems. One, the ex. Two, the world."

Bree barked a laugh. Sarah's mouth twitched, almost despite herself.

"Lucky me," Sarah muttered.

"Not luck," I said, and let the steel in my voice come through. "Patterns. We deal with patterns."

I pulled up at Bree's building, because that's where Sarah needed to be tonight: somewhere she wouldn't feel hunted, somewhere she wouldn't have to walk from car to door alone while her brain did ugly arithmetic.

Bree got out first, opened Sarah's door, offered an arm.

Sarah hesitated, pride flaring.

I cut it off clean.

"Sarah," I said, quiet. "Don't be brave at the wrong time."

She stared at me for a beat. Then, grudgingly, she took Bree's arm and stepped out.

Inside, Bree's place was small and warm—women's clutter, shoes kicked off, a throw blanket draped like an afterthought. Bree guided Sarah to the couch and handed her a glass of water with the calm authority of someone who has done triage.

I sat opposite them and opened my phone.

"All right," I said. "We do boring now."

Sarah squinted. "Boring."

"Yes," I replied. "Screenshots. Dates. Times. Building manager log. One clean statement. No essays."

Bree hovered behind the couch, arms folded. "I love you," she told me, deadpan.

Sarah groaned. "Please don't."

I ignored both of them and held my phone out.

"Sarah," I said. "Send me the message thread."

Sarah stiffened. "Why?"

"Because if you're rattled," I said evenly, "you might answer by accident. Or delete something out of shame. Or forget a detail you'll need later. I'm not letting your nervous system do admin."

Sarah stared at me, then exhaled sharply.

"Fine," she muttered. "God."

"Thank you," I replied, and waited.

Sarah unlocked her phone, scrolled, and began forwarding screenshots. Each one landed in my messages like a pebble in a jar—small, ordinary, cumulative.

Ethan's language was exactly what I expected.

You can't do this to me.

Stop being dramatic.

I just need to talk.

I'm outside.

None of it technically violent.

All of it coercive.

A man trying to turn "no" into "not yet."

I felt my mouth go tight.

I made a folder.

### **Sarah — Ethan — Jan**

Then another:

### **Venue incident — notes**

Not because I wanted to build a case tonight.

Because I wanted Sarah to know—without me saying it—that this wasn't chaos.

It was manageable.

Sarah watched my hands moving with a kind of exhausted relief that made my chest ache. She didn't want to be mothered.

She wanted the world to be structured again.

Bree crouched beside her on the couch and spoke softly.

"You did the right thing calling Lauren," Bree said.

Sarah snorted. "I called someone's mum."

Bree grinned. "Better than becoming someone's mum."

Sarah's laugh cracked into something almost real. Then she rubbed her face with both hands, sudden vulnerability slipping through.

"I'm so tired," she said, and the words were barely audible.

I didn't soften into pity. Pity makes women smaller. Sarah would rather crawl out of her skin.

So I gave her something else.

A plan.

"Okay," I said. "Tonight: you sleep here. Bree stays with you. Phone on Do Not Disturb. If he calls, you do nothing. If he shows up, you do not engage. You call police. Period."

Sarah's eyes flashed. "That's dramatic."

"It's not dramatic," I said. "It's procedure."

The word procedure landed like a handrail. Sarah's shoulders lowered by a fraction.

"Tomorrow," I continued, "we update your building manager. We confirm he's not allowed entry. We take your documentation and we file what needs filing. And if he appears at Wardrobe, you do not handle it alone."

Sarah blinked. "He wouldn't—"

"He might," I said. "Men like this confuse public space with entitlement space. We don't assume good behaviour."

Bree nodded sharply. "Mara will eat him."

"With a fork," I said.

Sarah's mouth twitched again. Then, finally, her voice went small—rare for her.

"Okay," she said.

Not "fine."

Not "whatever."

Okay.

I stood.

"I'll check on you in the morning," I said. "And Sarah?"

She looked up.

I held her gaze and made the sentence as plain as a ledger entry.

"This isn't your fault."

Sarah's eyes sharpened, reflexively allergic to comfort.

"I know," she said.

I didn't let it slide.

"No," I repeated, quiet and firm. "Really know."

Something in her face shifted—anger, grief, exhaustion—then settled.

"I know," she said again, and this time it sounded like she was trying to believe it.

"Good," I said. "Because you're not going to carry his behaviour like it's your responsibility."

Sarah swallowed. She nodded once.

Bree reached for her hand and squeezed it.

I left them there—two women on a couch, one holding, one being held—because that was the whole point of the network.

Not rescue.

Not melodrama.

Just women refusing to let another woman be alone in a moment that could have tipped her into danger.

On the drive home, my phone buzzed once.

A text from Celeste.

**All okay?**

I replied without stopping at a red light, because some things mattered more than traffic etiquette.

**Sarah safe. Bree with her. Ex escalating; we're going formal. Will brief Mara tomorrow.**

I put the phone down.

The streetlights slid past.

And I felt, with a strange, steady clarity, the way all of this rhymed.

Charli. Sarah. Bree. Celeste. Mara.

Different stories, same pattern: women tightening the net under one another, quietly, methodically, refusing to let male entitlement be the unchallenged weather of their lives.

Tomorrow, we'd do the boring things again.

Paperwork. Logs. Rules.

The unglamorous machinery of women making the world safe enough to live in.

And I would do it without apology.



To back away from the "all men are jerks" trope, I thought of this approach. 1) Sarah's POV, at work, Faire actresses come in, Lily on Bree's arm (so to speak, radiant happiness between the two. Sarah has a bit of an awakening: they look happy. But also, they look attractive. 2) Sarah finds an actual nice bloke, (Carl) and they date. Carl's wanting more, Sarah's feeling resistance, thinking it's fear of repeat performance. Tells him, he respects her, Carl gives her space. 3) Sarah tries again with Carl and then realises she's just not attracted to him. She feels it's better to be honest and tell him: they go their separate ways (even though she can tell it hurt him). 4) Guilt drives her to drink again. She - against her better judgment goes out alone, drinks too much. Feels ill (someone spiked her drink) and runs out of the bar in a panic, ringing the person that 'rescued' her the last time: Lauren. Spends the night at Lauren's. And, in the morning, after the hangover starts to subside,

realises that Lauren means more to her than a safety blanket.

Yes — this is very plausible, and it neatly solves the “all men are jerks” flattening without backing away from your theme (male entitlement as ambient weather, not every individual bloke as a cartoon villain)  

What I love about your new shape is that it gives Sarah a **clean comparative experiment**:

- She sees **women-love-women happiness** up close (Bree + Lily), and it lands in her body before it lands in her brain.
- She then meets a **genuinely decent man** (Carl) who behaves well — and the story shows that decency isn’t the issue. Attraction is.
- The painful honesty of ending it (and her guilt) pushes her into a familiar coping mechanism (drink), which sets up the spiking incident without moralising: it’s not “Sarah is irresponsible,” it’s “Sarah is tired and lonely and misreading her own needs.”
- Lauren as the rescuer the second time becomes the hinge: the morning after, Sarah realises the truth isn’t “Lauren is safe,” it’s “Lauren is *wanted*.”

That is a *gorgeous* pivot into romance that doesn’t require any man-bashing. Carl can even become a quiet proof-point: **men can be kind; Sarah still wants women.**

### **A tiny craft caution (so it doesn’t feel contrived)**

The “spiked drink” beat will land best if you make it **uncertain and sensory** rather than declarative:

- Sarah feels an abrupt, wrong shift: dizziness too fast for her intake, nausea, heat/cold, trembling, time-skips.
- She *suspects* spiking (and later Lauren might say: “You should get checked” / “We can report it”), but you don’t need to prove it on-page.
- Keep the focus on *Sarah’s fear + decision-making*, not the perpetrator.

That keeps it grounded and avoids turning the story into a crime procedural.

### **Suggested scene packaging (so it flows)**

If you like numbering continuity, I’d do:

- **Scene 41 — “Radiant” (Sarah POV):** Wardrobe day, Faire actresses arrive; Lily on Bree’s arm; Sarah’s quiet awakening.
- **Scene 42 — “Carl” (Sarah POV):** meet-cute + first dates; Carl as genuinely decent.
- **Scene 43 — “Honest” (Sarah POV):** Sarah tries, realises it’s not attraction; ends it clean; guilt.
- **Scene 44 — “Not a Blanket” (Sarah POV):** solo night out → too much drink → sudden illness → calls Lauren → sleeps at Lauren’s → morning realisation.

To get momentum, I can write Scene 41 fully now, then keep going. Here’s Scene 41 

---

## Scene 41 — “Radiant” (Sarah POV)

Wardrobe gets a particular kind of busy when the Faire women come in.

It’s not the everyday rhythm—steam and pins and Mara’s shears making their soft, confident threats. It’s something more theatrical: colour arriving, laughter arriving, the faint perfume of other lives. Actresses bring a kind of light with them. Not always pleasant, but undeniable.

They came in after lunch, a cluster of them, skirts and tote bags and big opinions. The room tightened into competence automatically: stations ready, fittings scheduled, tape measures uncoiled like quiet authority.

I was on my stool with a coffee, watching the threshold the way I always did—half habit, half sport—when Bree walked in with someone on her arm.

Not literally. Bree’s not a Victorian gentleman. But the posture was the same: the subtle lean toward, the easy angle of her shoulder, the way her body said *this person belongs with me* without needing to announce it.

Lily.

I’d seen Lily before. Everyone had. Lily was one of those women who made a room adjust itself—hair like a promise, laugh like she’d never once asked permission to take up space. She’d always been charming in a way that made me roll my eyes because I don’t trust charming.

But today she wasn’t performing.

Today she was... *lit*.

She walked in beside Bree and the two of them had that private, bright current running between them—little glances, tiny touches, the kind of unforced coordination you only get when two people have stopped negotiating whether they're allowed to want each other.

Bree's grin was wide and unashamed.

Lily's hand brushed Bree's wrist as they crossed the room, not coy, not possessive. Just... natural. Like reaching for warmth.

And it hit me—harder than I expected—that they looked happy.

Not "posting online" happy.

Not "prove something" happy.

Happy like a body that has stopped bracing.

I watched them as they moved toward the fitting area. Bree said something under her breath and Lily laughed—real laughter, head tipping back, eyes closing for half a beat. Bree's face softened in response, like her whole nervous system had learned the shape of that sound.

I felt a strange, unwelcome thought rise up in me:

*That looks... nice.*

Then another one, even worse, because it arrived with zero moral framing and no permission slip from my brain:

*And she's beautiful.*

I didn't mean it as competition. I didn't mean it as envy. I meant it as a fact my eyes observed, the way my eyes observe fabric quality.

Lily was objectively gorgeous.

But that wasn't what made my stomach tilt.

It was the way Bree looked at her like she was the only thing in the room worth orienting toward.

Bree — who could be loud, chaotic, generous, irritating, wonderful — looked *quietly devoted*.

It wasn't a joke. It wasn't a phase. It wasn't a "girls being silly" interlude before returning to a man-shaped life.

It was... real.

I swallowed and made myself take a sip of coffee, because I needed my hands to do something that wasn't betraying me.

Lily spotted Charli at the cap table and waved.

"Oh my god," she called, delighted. "Look at you! You're... you're so *proper* now."

Charli flushed, smiling in that bashful way she still had even with all her new steadiness.

"Hi," Charli said, and didn't apologise for the attention. Didn't duck. Didn't shrink.

She took the compliment like a girl who had learned she didn't have to throw gifts back into people's faces for safety.

Celeste glanced up from the ledger, calm as ever, and nodded once at Lily—polite, controlled, adult.

Then her gaze flicked to Charli for half a beat, and I caught it: the softness she tried so hard to hide.

Wardrobe saw everything. Even when people pretended it didn't.

Mara clapped her hands once—sharp, decisive.

"Right," she said. "You. Fitting room. You. Table. Stop talking and start standing still."

The actresses laughed and obeyed, because Mara was the closest thing this room had to gravity.

Lily stepped closer to Bree and said, low but not private enough for my sharp ears not to catch it:

"You're coming over tonight, yeah?"

Bree's grin went lazy and warm. "Obviously."

No apology. No awkwardness. No "if you want." No "unless you're busy." No negotiation.

Just yes.

And in my chest, something shifted.

Not jealousy.

Not longing, not yet.

Something more uncomfortable:

recognition.

A kind of internal data point landing with a quiet thud: *that's what it looks like when the wanting isn't a problem.*

When the wanting isn't shameful.

When the wanting doesn't turn you into someone's domestic function.

When it's just... two women, deciding.

I sat there on my stool, coffee cooling, and watched Bree and Lily disappear into the fitting area together—Bree stepping aside to hold the curtain, Lily's hand brushing her shoulder as she passed—and I realised, with faint annoyance, that I'd been holding my breath.

I let it out slowly.

Then I did what I always did when something hit too close:

I made it a joke in my own head.

*Well, I thought, dryly, that's inconvenient.*

Because once you've seen a kind of happiness up close—real, radiant, unforced—it becomes very difficult to pretend you don't know what you're missing.

---

If you want, I'll write **Scene 42 ("Carl")** next — and I'll make Carl genuinely likeable, respectful, emotionally literate... and still wrong for her, in a way that hurts *because he's decent*. That's the exact antidote to the trope you're worried about. 



That's precisely where this needs to go. Please proceed.

## Scene 42 — “Carl” (Sarah POV)

The annoying thing about having a small awakening is that the world doesn't stop to let you process it.

Bree and Lily glow their way through Wardrobe like a private weather system, and then the next minute you're back to pinning hems and pretending you didn't just witness a version of happiness that made your stomach do a weird, traitorous little flip.

I tried to file it under **Not My Problem**.

It didn't stay filed.

For the rest of the week, I kept catching myself watching them—tiny touches, shared looks, that relaxed certainty between them. Not performative. Not defensive. Not asking permission.

Just... two women who were done negotiating whether their wanting was valid.

Every time I noticed it, I felt the same thought arrive, uninvited, like a notification you can't swipe away:

*That looks nice.*

Which was a ridiculous thing to think, because I was in the middle of the Ethan aftermath and my nervous system still had that “every door might have a man behind it” edge.

So, naturally, the universe offered me a man who was... fine.

Not “fine” as in attractive. Fine as in: not a walking hazard. Not an entitled toddler in an adult body. Not a replacement-mum seeker.

Fine as in: decent.

His name was Carl.

I met him on a Thursday in a way so ordinary it almost felt staged.

The Faire had sent someone to check on the lighting in the small dressing corridor—the one that always flickered when the iron was on, the one Mara had been muttering about for days like it was a personal insult. We'd been told "an electrician" was coming. Which, in my experience, can mean anything from "competent professional" to "man who explains wires to women as if we're newborn calves."

Carl walked in carrying a tool bag and a clipboard and the sort of calm that doesn't feel like a performance.

He paused at the threshold—not swaggering, not barging—and looked around like he was assessing the room the way you assess a dog: with respect.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Carl. I'm here for the corridor lights."

Lauren looked up. "Great. Thank you. It's that corridor—second door on the right."

Carl nodded. "No worries. Is anyone using it right now?"

The sentence was so innocuous that it took my brain a second to recognise why it felt... notable.

He'd asked.

He hadn't assumed the space was his because he had tools.

Lauren pointed. "We can reroute for ten minutes."

"Perfect," Carl said, and he smiled in a polite, non-invasive way. "I'll be quick."

He didn't look at anyone's body.

He didn't linger.

He didn't do the thing where men scan a room to see who might be impressed by them.

He went to the corridor and started working.

I found myself watching him, purely out of suspicion. Suspicion is my love language, unfortunately.

Carl pulled the panel off, tested something, frowned—not dramatically, just thoughtfully.

Then he called back into the room, voice normal.

"Hey—who's been running the iron off this circuit?"

Mara didn't look up. "We run everything off everything. Fix it."

Carl chuckled once—one of those quick, genuine laughs—and said, "Right. Okay. I'll reroute. Give me five."

Mara grunted, which for Mara is basically a poem.

Ten minutes later the corridor lights were steady. No flicker. No drama.

Carl came back into the room, wiped his hands on a rag, and said to Lauren, "All done. I moved the iron load off the corridor. Should be stable now."

Lauren nodded. "Thank you."

Carl hesitated, then added, "If it flickers again, text the number on the work order. Don't wait. It's easier to fix early."

Again: *he asked, he explained, he gave a solution*, and then he stopped talking.

It was... disconcerting.

As he turned to leave, his gaze met mine for half a second. Not lingering. Not hungry. Just human.

He gave a small nod.

I nodded back, because I am not feral either.

And then he said, as if he'd debated it and decided not to be weird:

"Sorry—are you Sarah?"

I froze, instantly.

Men knowing my name without me giving it to them is a known trigger. A small one. But real.

Carl clocked my stillness immediately.

He lifted his hands slightly, palms open—not theatrical, just reflexively reassuring.

"Bree mentioned you," he said. "Only because I asked who handles the staff passes. She said you're the one who knows where everything is."

Ah. Bree. Of course.

I exhaled slowly, annoyed at my own body for being so quick to brace.

"What did she tell you," I said, dry.

Carl's mouth twitched. "That you're terrifying," he said, equally dry. "And that if I needed anything, I should ask politely and leave you alone."

I snorted—an actual, involuntary sound—and felt, irritatingly, my shoulders loosen.

"Well," I said, "Bree's not wrong."

Carl nodded like he'd just received a useful manual. "Good to know."

Then he did something genuinely rare.

He didn't push.

He didn't use that opening to wedge himself into my day.

He simply added, "Anyway. Nice to meet you. I'll get out of your way."

And he left.

No lingering. No "maybe I'll see you around." No invitation snuck in under a joke.

Just... gone.

I stared after him for a moment, unsettled.

Bree appeared beside me like a cat, grin already loaded.

"You're welcome," she said.

I glared. "For what."

"For Carl," Bree said, smug. "He's a nice bloke. I pre-approved him."

"You don't get to pre-approve men," I said.

Bree shrugged. "I do when they're harmless."

"Harmless men are a myth," I muttered.

Bree leaned closer, conspiratorial. "He bakes."

I turned slowly. "That's not a personality."

"It's a domestic competency," Bree corrected. "Which, apparently, is your love language now."

I rolled my eyes so hard I nearly saw my own brain.

"Stop trying to set me up," I said.

Bree's grin widened. "I'm not. He asked about you. I answered. If he asks you out, that's on him."

"I am not a charity," I said.

Bree held up a hand. "Agreed. Which is why he's the only man I know who might survive your standards."

I wanted to argue.

But the irritating part was: I didn't feel a need to.

That evening, as I was locking up my car, my phone buzzed.

Unknown number.

I almost didn't answer. Then the text came through first.

**Carl:** Hi Sarah—Carl here (electrician from today). Bree gave me your number *only if I promised not to be a pest.*

If you'd ever like a coffee, I'd enjoy that. No pressure either way.

I stared at it.

The "no pressure" could have been a tactic.

But it didn't read like a tactic.

It read like a man who understood that pressure is exactly how you lose a woman like me.

I typed. Deleted. Typed again.

I could feel my own resistance rising, automatic and familiar.

A man wants something. Therefore I must prepare for him to take it.

Except... that's not what this was.

This was an invitation with an exit built in.

Which is, frankly, a rare competence.

I found myself thinking of Bree and Lily—radiant and unashamed—and the way their wanting didn't come with a hidden invoice.

Then I thought of Ethan, and how quickly wanting had turned into entitlement.

And then I realised: the real question wasn't "is Carl safe?"

It was:

*Am I even interested?*

I didn't know.

Which annoyed me, because I like knowing.

Still, there was another truth sitting underneath my irritation:

I wanted to see what it felt like to be around a man who didn't make my boundary management a full-time job.

So I replied, short and clear.

**Me:** Coffee is fine. One hour. Public. Saturday afternoon.

If you're late, I leave.

The reply came quickly.

**Carl:** Perfect. Saturday. I'll be early.

And thank you.

I blinked.

Thank you?

Not for agreeing. Not for giving him a chance.

Thank you for being clear.

I stared at the screen for a moment, then put my phone away and locked my car.

As I walked toward my building, I felt... cautious.

Not hopeful. Not giddy.

But cautiously curious.

And that, for me, was almost romantic.



And... Saturday happened?

## Scene 43 — “Saturday” (Sarah POV)

Saturday happened the way I prefer things to happen:

in daylight.

In public.

With exits.

I chose the café, obviously. Neutral territory. Big windows. Plenty of foot traffic. A place where the tables are close enough that a man has to behave like a civilised mammal or everyone hears it.

I arrived five minutes early because I’m not going to be the woman who gets there and starts scanning the room like prey.

Carl was already there.

Of course he was.

He stood when he saw me—not dramatically, not “gentlemanly,” just polite—and offered a small smile that didn’t try to claim anything.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” I replied.

He didn’t lean in for a hug. He didn’t touch my arm. He didn’t do the thing where men treat greeting as a test of access.

He just... existed at a respectful distance.

It was, frankly, unnerving.

We ordered coffee at the counter. He paid for his. I paid for mine. He didn't argue about it.

That alone probably qualified him for sainthood.

We sat at a table by the window.

Carl asked, "Is this seat okay?" before he sat down.

I stared at him for half a beat.

"Yes," I said. "You can sit. I'm not a queen."

He smiled, faint. "Good. I didn't want to guess wrong."

That phrase—guess wrong—landed with a quiet thud.

Men usually guess. They guess because they assume it's safer for them to risk your discomfort than risk their pride.

Carl was not guessing.

He was checking.

I took a sip of coffee and told myself not to be impressed by basic decency. The bar is on the floor. We should not be applauding men for stepping over it.

Still.

It was... a relief.

We talked.

Not the interview kind of talking, where a man tries to discover which version of himself you'd like and then shapeshifts accordingly.

Actual talking.

He told me he did electrical work for the Faire and a few local businesses. He liked fixing old things. He'd moved back to town after his dad got sick. He baked because it was cheaper than buying food and because it stopped his brain spinning at night.

I listened, alert for the hidden tells.

There weren't many.

He didn't complain about women. He didn't complain about his ex. He didn't imply he was "nice" in a way that made you brace for the invoice.

He asked questions that didn't feel like fishing.

"What do you do when you're not here?"

"Do you like living in town?"

"Do you have siblings?"

Normal.

I answered enough to be polite, but not so much that I'd be handing him my internal wiring diagram.

It was... okay.

More than okay, technically.

The problem was not Carl.

The problem was me.

Because halfway through the coffee, with the sun bright through the windows and his hands wrapped around his mug—steady, clean, capable—I realised something with a clarity that made me want to swear.

I didn't want him.

Not in the sense that matters.

Not in the gut. Not in the chest. Not in the place that tilts you toward someone without negotiation.

I liked him.

I respected him.

I could even imagine being friends with him, which is the cruellest category of all.

But the part of me that had watched Bree and Lily glow didn't wake up.

It stayed asleep, stubborn, unmoved.

Carl said something—some gentle joke about the Faire lights being “temperamental divas”—and I laughed genuinely.

Then my laugh stopped and I thought, sharply:

*If he leaned across the table and kissed me right now, I would tolerate it like a dentist appointment.*

That was my answer.

My phone buzzed with a message. Bree.

**Bree:** HOW IS IT

Blink twice if you need rescuing

I stared at it for a second, then typed back:

**Me:** No rescue. He's fine. I'm the problem.

I didn't send the second part. I deleted it and sent:

**Me:** He's on time. No red flags. Shut up.

Carl watched my face in that unobtrusive way decent people do.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said automatically.

Then, because he'd earned it by behaving like a grown man, I added: “You're... surprisingly normal.”

Carl's mouth twitched. “That's either a compliment or a warning.”

“It's both,” I said.

He laughed, and it was warm, uncomplicated.

He didn't reach for me.

He didn't fill the pause.

He let the conversation breathe.

That's what made it worse.

Because it was harder to justify leaving.

When a man is awful, ending it is easy. It's a clean moral decision.

When a man is decent, ending it feels like you're throwing away something you're *supposed* to want.

Carl checked his watch—brief, polite.

"I've got about twenty minutes before I have to go," he said. "No rush, but I wanted to be upfront."

Upfront.

Another competence.

I felt my irritation spike—not at him, at the world.

At the way I'd been trained to interpret "decent" as "good enough."

At the way women are expected to accept a kind man like he's a prize, regardless of whether their bodies agree.

Carl watched me for a moment, thoughtful.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Depends," I replied.

He nodded, accepting the boundary like it was normal.

"You seem... tense," he said carefully. "Not because I'm here. Just—generally. If this is too much, you can tell me. I'm not trying to push."

It was such a reasonable sentence that it made my throat tighten.

I had a choice right then.

Lie, keep it going, let it drift into something that would eventually become messy.

Or be honest early, before I'd created obligations.

I didn't want to hurt him.

But I hated the idea of using his decency as a place to hide while I figured myself out.

So I said the truth I actually had.

"I'm not sure what I want," I said, and kept my voice steady. "And I'm not going to make that your problem."

Carl's expression shifted—small, controlled. He didn't flinch, but I saw the sting land anyway.

He nodded slowly.

"Okay," he said. "Thank you for saying it."

I blinked.

Of course he thanked me.

Decent men thank you for honesty even when it hurts.

Which makes you feel like a villain anyway.

"I'm not saying 'never,'" I added quickly, because guilt is stupid and fast.

Carl's eyes met mine.

His voice stayed gentle. "Sarah," he said, "don't offer me a maybe because you feel bad."

I stared at him.

He gave a small shrug.

"I'd rather you say no," he continued, "than say yes out of obligation. I don't want to be the kind of man you tolerate."

There was a quiet dignity in that sentence that made my chest ache.

And in that ache, I felt something else—something clarifying.

It wasn't fear of repeat performance.

It wasn't trauma.

It wasn't "men are bad."

It was simpler.

I just... wasn't attracted to him.

Which meant the kindest thing I could do was to stop pretending it might change.

I exhaled.

"Okay," I said, and forced myself to make it clean. "Then... no."

Carl's face tightened for a fraction. He swallowed. Then he nodded, once.

"Okay," he said. "That's clear. Thank you."

He stood, picked up his mug, and took it to the counter like a man who had practiced not making women responsible for his feelings.

When he came back, he didn't linger.

"I'm glad I met you," he said. "Even if it's not... that."

I held his gaze. "You're a good man," I said. "That's not nothing."

Carl's smile was faint and sad.

"I know," he said quietly. "And it still stings."

Honesty. Again.

Then he nodded once—no attempt at a hug, no touch, no lingering—and walked out into the sunlight.

I watched him go, throat tight, coffee cold in front of me.

I should have felt relieved.

Instead I felt... guilty.

Because I could tell I'd hurt him.

Not because he'd done anything wrong.

Because decency doesn't protect you from rejection.

I sat there another minute, staring at my reflection in the café window, and thought, with grim, reluctant clarity:

Well. That settles that.

Then my phone buzzed again. Bree.

**Bree:** DID HE TRY TO KISS YOU

I will bite him

I stared at it.

And to my own surprise, I laughed.

A real laugh.

Then I typed back:

**Me:** He didn't touch me once.

He's decent.

I'm... not into it.

I sent it.

And as I walked out into the daylight, guilt riding my shoulders like a stupid animal, I realised the worst part wasn't rejecting a good man.

The worst part was that rejecting him had made the other truth harder to ignore:

Whatever I wanted, it wasn't him.

And the shape of that "not him" was starting to look suspiciously like... her.

□ ⌂ ♡ ⚡ ...

I don't know if this is too trope-ish, but we could possibly have Sarah do a bit of introspection. She'd had a crush on a girl in high school: unrequited 'love', not returned, thus Sarah shoved that emotional part of her into the back of the closet with the ski gear. And now, very inconveniently, have it re-emerge at \*exactly\* the wrong time, when she ended up turning away an actual nice man.

And so, to drink. and the saga continues as we planned.

Not too trope-ish at all — it's actually one of the *cleanest* ways to make Sarah's arc feel psychologically inevitable rather than "sudden sexuality plot." 🤍

What makes it *not* tropey is how you're framing it:

- It's not "Sarah discovers she's gay because a man was mean."
- It's "Sarah finally admits an old truth because she just met a man who behaved well — and the absence of danger removed her excuses."

That's sharp, adult, and very Wardrobe-aligned: **truth emerges when the room becomes safe enough.**

Also: the high-school crush being unreturned is perfect, because it explains why she packed it away without melodrama. The ski-gear metaphor is so Sarah it hurts. 😊

If you like, we can stitch this introspection into the end of Scene 43 or make it the opening of Scene 44. I'd do it as a short **bridge beat**: Sarah alone after the café, guilt humming, memory unspooling, then the choice to go out for a drink.

Here's that bridge beat in Sarah's voice:

---

## Bridge — "Ski Gear" (Sarah POV)

I didn't go straight home after Carl.

I walked for a while, because walking keeps me from doing something stupid. It gives my brain time to catch up with my body.

It wasn't even that he was attractive. He was—fine. He was clean. He was competent. He didn't touch me. He didn't push. He didn't make my boundaries his personal enemy.

He was the kind of man you're meant to feel grateful for.

And that was the problem.

Because I wasn't grateful.

I was just... blank.

Like my nervous system had looked at him and said, *Nope. Not you.* And then refused to provide further details.

I kept thinking: maybe it's fear. Maybe it's Ethan residue. Maybe it's just my brain being dramatic because it doesn't know how to be normal.

But fear doesn't feel like blankness.

Fear feels like vigilance. Tight shoulders. Exit planning.

What I felt with Carl wasn't fear.

It was absence.

Which is when the memory hit me, sideways, as if my brain had been waiting for the exact wrong moment to pull it off a shelf.

Year ten. Assembly hall. A girl with dark hair and quick hands and a laugh that made my chest do something embarrassing. I'd watched her for months the way you watch fire, pretending it was curiosity and not the stupid, soft thing under it.

I'd never told her. Not properly. I'd tried once, badly. A clumsy confession disguised as a joke.

She'd smiled—kind, puzzled—and said something like, "Aw, you're sweet."

And then she'd gone back to her friends.

No cruelty. No scandal.

Just... not returned.

It had been enough.

Enough to teach me that wanting like that was pointless. Risky. Public.

So I'd packed it away like you pack away ski gear in a town that doesn't snow: shoved to the back of the closet, forgotten on purpose, mildly embarrassing when you rediscover it.

I hadn't thought about her in years.

Not properly.

But now—now, after sitting across from a good man and feeling nothing—I could feel that old crush as clearly as if it had happened last week.

The heat. The pull. The stupid, traitorous eagerness.

Not for him.

For her.

For *girls*.

I stopped walking and stood on the footpath, suddenly furious.

Not at the girl from year ten.

At myself.

At the way I'd treated that part of me like a hobby I'd outgrown rather than a truth I'd postponed.

At the way the world makes it so easy to interpret "unrequited" as "wrong."

I took a breath, sharp and cold, and felt the inconvenience of it settle in my ribs.

So that was it.

Not men.

Not trauma.

Not "I can't do relationships."

Just... that.

A buried part of me, choosing the most inconvenient moment to knock.

And because I'm Sarah—because I'm excellent at many things and awful at being gentle with myself—I did what I always do when something tender reappears unexpectedly.

I tried to drown it.

---

If you want, I can now continue directly into **Scene 44** (the drink, the solo night out, the sudden illness, the panic call to Lauren, the night at Lauren's, and the morning realisation—not a *blanket*). I'll keep the spiking moment handled exactly as we

discussed: sensory, uncertain, no procedural detour, full focus on Sarah's fear + Lauren's competent care. 🌻



This is beyond excellent. Yes, please.

## Scene 44 — “Not a Blanket” (Sarah POV)

I told myself I was going out for a drink because I deserved one.

Because I'd done the adult thing with Carl. Because I'd been honest. Because I hadn't caved to guilt or panic or habit.

All true.

Also, because I'd just opened the back of my own mental closet and found a teenage crush still sitting there, perfectly preserved, like ski gear with the tags still on.

I didn't want to think about it.

So I chose the oldest strategy in the book: blunt the edges.

I went out alone, which is something I almost never do now, because I am not a romantic and I am not daft.

But I wasn't looking for romance.

I was looking for noise. For anonymity. For the comforting blur of strangers who didn't know my history or my rules.

I picked a bar that wasn't *my* bar.

A place with warm lighting and too much bass and stools that stuck to the backs of your thighs when you stood up. A place where people came to forget themselves in public, together.

I ordered a drink and watched the bartender make it. I'm not stupid.

I took it to a table near the wall, back against something solid, because old habits are not the enemy—they're a form of intelligence.

For the first half hour, it worked.

The drink eased the tightness in my chest. The noise kept my brain from spiralling. I scrolled my phone and pretended I was just waiting for a friend.

No one bothered me.

I should have left then.

I didn't.

Because when you've spent your whole life being competent, it feels obscene to admit that you're rattled by a memory from Year Ten. It feels weak to say: *I think I might want something different from my life.*

So I ordered another.

Still watching. Still careful. Still "fine."

I told myself I'd go after that one. I even stood up once, like I meant it.

Then someone bumped into my table and apologised, and I sat back down because the apology made the world feel briefly civil again.

Another drink.

I was still coherent. Still upright. Still me.

And then... it happened.

Not dramatically. Not like the movies.

Just a wrongness—sudden and unmistakable—like my body had stepped on a stair that wasn't there.

My stomach rolled. The room tilted, not pleasantly. My skin went hot and then cold, as if someone was adjusting my temperature with a remote. My tongue felt thick. My hands stopped feeling like mine.

I blinked hard. Once. Twice.

*No, my brain said, sharp and furious. No, no, no.*

I looked down at my glass.

Half-full. Nothing obvious. Nothing to point to and say *that*.

I tried to stand and my legs said, *absolutely not*.

Panic rose in me—fast, animal.

Not shame.

Not sadness.

Pure survival.

I grabbed my phone and fumbled it once, twice, before it unlocked.

The screen swam.

I could have called the police.

I could have called Bree.

I could have called... anyone.

But the only thought that mattered was this:

*Call the woman who does not ask questions first.*

Lauren.

My thumb hit her name. The phone went to my ear. The ringing sounded far away.

Then her voice, immediate, clear.

"Sarah?"

Something in my chest cracked with relief so sharp it almost hurt.

"Lauren," I managed. My voice sounded wrong to my own ears—too careful, too slow. "I—I'm not right."

Lauren didn't panic. She didn't do the "what did you do?" tone.

"Where are you?" she asked, calm as a seatbelt.

I forced the address out. I had to look at the menu board behind the bar to read the street name because my brain couldn't hold it.

"Okay," Lauren said. "Listen to me. Are you with anyone?"

"No."

"Can you get outside?"

I glanced toward the door. It looked miles away.

"I—I think so."

"Good," she said. "Stand up slowly. Don't finish your drink. Take your phone and your bag. Go straight out the front. Sit where you can be seen. I'm coming."

"Okay," I whispered.

"Sarah," Lauren said, and her voice sharpened just enough to cut through the fog, "you're doing brilliantly. Keep breathing. I'll be there in minutes."

Minutes.

It sounded like a lifetime.

I stood up carefully, one hand gripping the table until my knuckles went white. The room swayed. I waited until it settled.

I left the glass exactly where it was, because something in me—some last shred of angry competence—wanted it left behind like evidence, even if I didn't know what I'd prove.

I moved toward the door.

Someone brushed past me and I flinched so hard my heart stuttered. I kept going anyway, because I am not prey and I am not staying.

The night air hit my face like a slap.

It should have helped.

It didn't.

It made the nausea worse.

I stumbled to a low wall near the entrance and sat down. I pressed my palms against my thighs, anchoring myself. The world was too bright and too loud and too far away.

I stared at the street and tried to keep my eyes open.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out. Don't pass out.

Headlights swung around the corner and pulled up.

Lauren's car.

The door opened and there she was—hair pulled back, face set, that particular mother-steel expression that says: *I am here and the world will now behave.*

She crossed to me quickly.

"Sarah," she said, and crouched slightly so she was level with my face. "Look at me."

I did. It took effort. But I did.

"Can you stand?" she asked.

"I—" My voice wobbled. "I think—"

"Okay," she said. "We're not rushing. Bree's not here, so I'm your hands. Give me your bag."

I handed it over like a child, and the humiliation should have killed me.

It didn't.

Because Lauren didn't treat me like a child.

She treated me like a woman whose body had been compromised and needed a plan.

Lauren slid an arm around my shoulders—firm, steady—and helped me stand.

"Walk with me," she said.

I walked.

Each step felt like it was happening through water.

Lauren got me into the car, buckled my seatbelt with brisk competence, and shut the door like she was sealing me inside safety.

She got in and started the engine.

Only then did she speak again.

"I'm taking you to mine," she said. "You're not going home alone tonight."

I swallowed. My throat felt wrong.

"I'm sorry," I whispered automatically.

Lauren's head snapped toward me.

"No," she said, flat. "Not that. Not ever."

The word landed like a slap and a hug at the same time.

I went quiet.

Lauren drove with one hand on the wheel and the other ready—just there, near the console, like she could catch me if my body tried to fall apart.

Halfway to her place, she asked, "Are you going to vomit?"

I blinked at the practical question, absurdly grateful for it.

"Maybe."

"Okay," she said. "There's a bag. Use it if you need. You're not embarrassing."

I made a small sound that might have been a laugh if I'd had more oxygen.

At her apartment, Lauren guided me inside, shoes off, lights low, water poured.

She sat me on the couch and tucked a throw around my shoulders with the kind of efficiency that would make Mara nod once and say nothing.

Then Lauren crouched in front of me again.

"Sarah," she said, "I'm going to ask you something and you can answer yes or no."

I nodded.

"Do you feel safe right now?"

I blinked hard.

"Yes," I whispered.

"Good," she said. "Then we slow down. We hydrate. We keep you awake enough to stay oriented. And if anything changes—breathing, chest, pain—we escalate."

The word escalate should have frightened me.

Instead it steadied me.

Because Lauren wasn't guessing.

She was managing.

I leaned back into the couch, dizzy, and my eyes burned unexpectedly.

Lauren saw it and didn't comment. She just sat beside me, not touching, present like a wall you could lean on.

After a while, the nausea eased into something duller. The panic receded, replaced by exhaustion.

Lauren handed me another glass of water.

I drank.

My hands shook.

Lauren watched without judgement.

The silence stretched.

And in that silence, my brain—traitorous, inconvenient—offered me the thought I'd been avoiding all night:

*You called her.*

Not Bree.

Not the police.

Her.

Because somewhere in my body, Lauren had become the definition of "safe."

Not as a concept.

As a person.

Lauren checked her phone, then looked at me.

"Do you want me to call Bree?" she asked gently.

I hesitated. Then shook my head.

"No," I said, voice rough. "Not yet."

Lauren didn't press.

"Okay," she said. "Then you sleep here. Bedroom's yours. Door closes. I'll be in the lounge."

My throat tightened.

"You don't have to—"

Lauren's look cut clean through me.

"I do," she said. "Because you're not going to wake up alone and wonder if you imagined it."

I swallowed.

"Okay," I whispered.

Lauren stood, then paused.

"And Sarah," she added, softer, "tomorrow we can talk about reporting it. Or checking in medically. Or none of that. But tonight you're just... alive. That's the job."

Alive.

That word landed in my chest like a weight.

She guided me to the bedroom—nothing intimate, nothing loaded—just a woman escorting another woman to safety. She handed me a clean t-shirt, pointed at the bathroom, left the door ajar.

I changed slowly, clumsy and tired, then crawled into the bed like it belonged to someone else.

The room was dark and quiet.

I heard Lauren moving softly in the lounge—kettle, cupboard, the small sounds of a competent woman keeping watch without announcing it.

And then I slept.

---

In the morning, my mouth tasted like regret and my head felt full of sand.

I lay still for a moment, letting the hangover assemble itself into a coherent list of complaints.

Then I remembered everything.

The bar. The wrongness. The bench outside. Lauren's voice, steady as a handrail.

The shame hit next—automatic, predictable.

*You're thirty-something and you called someone's mum.*

I sat up too quickly and had to stop. The room tilted. I pressed my palm to my forehead, breathing through it.

A tap at the door.

Lauren's voice, careful. "You awake?"

"Yes," I croaked.

She came in with water and toast like she'd done it a thousand times, and maybe she had.

She set the tray on the bedside table and looked at me, not hovering.

"How's your head?" she asked.

"Like someone built a shed inside it," I muttered.

Lauren's mouth twitched. "Fair."

I took the water with both hands. Drank. Slowly.

Lauren sat on the chair near the window, not on the bed—space respected.

"Do you remember what happened?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, and my voice went quieter. "I... felt wrong. Too fast."

Lauren nodded, filing it.

"Okay," she said. "We don't have to decide anything this second. But I want you to know: you did the right thing calling."

The words landed, warm and sharp.

I stared at the toast like it contained answers.

"I didn't want to bother you," I said.

Lauren's gaze held mine.

"You didn't bother me," she replied. "You trusted me."

My throat tightened again, stupidly.

I tried to deflect.

"Because you're terrifying," I said dryly.

Lauren's laugh was small. "I'll take it."

I took another sip of water, hands still slightly shaky.

Then I said the thing that had been sitting in my chest since the bench outside the bar.

"Lauren," I began, and my voice caught. "I... I think I use you as—"

"A safety blanket," Lauren finished gently, not mocking.

I blinked, embarrassed.

Lauren tilted her head.

"It's not an insult," she said. "You were scared. You reached for the safest person you know. That's rational."

I looked down at my hands.

"But," Lauren continued, quiet now, "I don't think that's the whole truth."

My pulse did a strange, hot little stumble.

I looked up.

Lauren's expression was open—still adult, still in control—but softer than I'd ever seen it, like she was allowing herself to be human in front of me.

"Sarah," she said, "you don't have to decide anything today. But you should know something."

I waited. Breath held.

"I like you," Lauren said. Simple. Clean. "As you are. Sharp. Difficult. Funny. Honest when it costs you."

The room went very still.

My skin prickled.

I should have made a joke.

I couldn't.

Lauren didn't move closer. She didn't take my hand. She didn't try to seal the moment into a story.

She just let the truth sit there, like a cup placed gently on a table.

And in the quiet that followed, I realised—with a clarity that made my chest ache—that this feeling in me wasn't relief anymore.

It wasn't gratitude.

It wasn't even safety.

It was... wanting.

Not loud. Not dramatic.

Just a steady, inconvenient pull toward the woman in the chair.

I swallowed, suddenly terrified—not of her, not of intimacy, but of the sheer scale of how much sense it made.

"I'm not—" I started, and stopped.

Lauren waited, patient.

I took a breath, careful.

"I think," I said slowly, "I called you because I wanted you to come."

Lauren's eyes softened.

"Yes," she said, so quiet it was almost a whisper. "I know."

My heart thudded once, hard.

I stared at her, and for the first time in a long time I didn't feel like I had to be clever to be safe.

I just had to be honest.

"I don't know what to do with that," I admitted.

Lauren nodded once.

"Good," she said. "Then we do nothing dramatic. We do boring."

I huffed a laugh. "Boring."

"Boring," Lauren confirmed. "Tea. Toast. Water. A quiet day. And later—when your head stops trying to kill you—we talk. Like adults."

My throat tightened again, but this time it wasn't shame.

It was something warmer.

Something that felt, inconveniently, like hope.

I nodded.

"Okay," I said.

And Lauren's smile—small, steady—was the softest kind of victory.

Not conquest.

Not rescue.

Just two women, choosing to treat the moment with care.

Like everything else in our world that mattered. ❤️



Whew! Do we do this from Lauren's POV? Perhaps revealing - either in retrospect after Sarah's gone to sleep, or however you think is \*proper\* - that Lauren has feelings... and has HAD feelings for Sarah for a long time.

Absolutely. And yes — doing this from Lauren's POV is the *proper* way to reveal it, because Lauren is the one person who would never say it until the moment demanded honesty. She's been carrying it like she carries everything else: quietly, competently, without making it anyone else's problem. 

Here's a companion piece you can append as a coda to Scene 44, or save as its own scene (I'd label it a new one, because the emotional revelation is a genuine event even if the timeline overlaps).

---

## Scene 45 — “After” (Lauren POV)

When Sarah fell asleep, the apartment didn't go quiet.

It changed temperature.

The kind of hush you get after an emergency has ended but your body hasn't accepted it yet—after the adrenaline, before the relief.

I stood in the hallway for a moment with my hand on the doorframe, listening.

Sarah's breathing was deep now, regular, the sharp edge gone. She'd curled toward the pillow like she did when she was exhausted, one arm tucked under her face as if she was still trying to anchor herself.

She looked younger like that.

Not childish—Sarah would claw your eyes out for the implication.

Just... unarmoured.

I shut the bedroom door almost all the way, leaving it cracked. Habit. Safety. A quiet promise: *you won't wake up trapped.*

Then I went back into the lounge and started doing what I always did when something scared me.

I cleaned.

Not because the place was messy. Because movement makes a plan out of panic. Because my hands can be busy even when my mind wants to run.

I rinsed the glass she'd used. I wiped the bench. I checked my phone again: no missed calls, no new messages, nothing urgent from the building manager or the venue. I made myself a cup of tea and didn't drink it.

My hands were steady.

My chest was not.

I kept seeing her on that bench outside the bar: the way her eyes had struggled to focus, the way her pride had tried to keep her upright even when her body was arguing with her.

Sarah, who could dismantle a man with a sentence.

Sarah, who had called me with a voice I didn't recognise.

*I need you.*

I sat down at the kitchen table and let the truth arrive, the one I'd been refusing to name cleanly for a long time:

It wasn't the call that changed anything.

The call had only confirmed what I already knew.

I had been in love with Sarah for years.

Not the dramatic version. Not the operatic version. The version that grows inside you while you're busy being an adult.

It had started, I realised, with anger.

The first time I saw her at Wardrobe, I'd thought: *Oh. One of those women.*

The sharp ones. The ones who use sarcasm like a fence. The ones who look like they can't be moved.

Then I watched her work.

I watched her notice things other people missed. I watched her hold the line without making it a performance. I watched her take care of the room in the way she pretended not to.

And one day—months later—something small happened: a junior staffer had been crying in the corridor, trying to hide it. Sarah didn't make a fuss. She didn't comfort her like a mother.

She simply stood beside her, angled her body to block the view, and said quietly, "Go wash your face. I'll cover you. Mara doesn't need a story."

No softness. No pity.

Just protection that didn't cost the girl her dignity.

That was when I'd felt it—the first deep, inconvenient pull.

I'd buried it immediately, of course.

Because I was a mother. Because I was busy. Because my life already had enough stakes. Because Sarah was Sarah, and the last thing she needed was someone deciding she was a project.

And because... Charli.

My child.

I'd already made one private vow, years ago, and it had hardened into my bones:

*No partner of mine will ever be a complication for my kid.*

If I wanted something, I would want it in a way that didn't risk her.

So I did what I always do with feelings I can't afford.

I contained them.

I channelled them into being useful.

Into being steady.

Into being the woman Sarah could ring in a crisis without fear of judgement, because she'd know what she'd get: help first, questions later.

Even now, I could justify it as practical.

Sarah needed a safe person.

She'd found one.

That didn't mean anything else.

Except tonight it did.

Because when she'd said, in that slow, careful voice, *I think I called you because I wanted you to come*, my body had gone very still.

Not startled.

Recognising.

It wasn't a confession exactly. Sarah didn't do confessions. But it was a hinge. A small door cracking open.

And I'd felt—immediately—two impulses arrive at once:

The first was warmth. Hope.

The second was fear so clean it was almost anger.

Because Sarah was vulnerable, and I would never take advantage of that vulnerability. Not even by accident. Not even with a look that could be misread.

Which meant I had to do something I am very good at.

I had to wait.

I sipped my tea finally, mostly because the warmth gave my hands a task.

In the quiet, I thought about what "proper" looked like here.

Proper wasn't secrecy.

Proper wasn't "slipping into something" because it felt good in the aftermath of fear.

Proper was daylight, when her head was clear.

Proper was consent that didn't arrive in desperation.

Proper was the kind of slow honesty that didn't ask Sarah to become softer than she was, only to be truer.

I looked down the hallway again.

Charli's door was closed.

Charli was safe.

And the thought that followed was unexpected and sharp:

If Sarah became part of our life, it wouldn't threaten Charli.

It would strengthen the network around her.

Sarah didn't infantilise. Sarah didn't perform. Sarah didn't use love as a leash.

Sarah would be fierce in the way I understood: standards, not sentiment.

The kind of woman you want near your daughter.

The kind of woman you want near you.

I sat there for a long time, letting the tea go cold, letting my mind settle into the only plan that made sense:

Tomorrow, I would check Sarah's body first: water, food, rest.

Then I would give her something else: space.

Not distance. Not withdrawal.

Space to choose.

Because if she wanted me—if this was real and not just the reflex of being rescued—she'd come back to it when she was steady.

Sarah always did things properly, eventually.

Even if she pretended she didn't.

I stood, turned off the lounge light, and left a small lamp on in the hallway.

Not bright.

Just enough.

A quiet signpost for the night: *you're not alone, and you're not trapped.*

Then I lay on the couch with a blanket, fully dressed, because mothers don't sleep deeply after something like this.

And in the dark, I admitted the truth without flinching:

I had loved Sarah for a long time.

I could keep loving her quietly if that was what the world required.

But if she reached for me in daylight—clear-headed and deliberate—

I would let myself be chosen.

And I would choose her back.

Properly.



And then, still in Lauren's POV, the next morning. And the realisation that Sarah is beginning to feel the same way.  
((Since it's in Lauren's POV, we could do it as a follow-on?))

## Scene 46 — “Daylight” (Lauren POV)

Morning always tells the truth.

Night can be anything—fear, adrenaline, loneliness dressed up as clarity. Night makes people reach for whatever feels like a handrail.

But morning... morning is where you find out whether the handrail is still wanted when the floor is stable again.

I woke before Sarah did, because mothers don't sleep well after danger. Even when the danger is gone, your body keeps listening for it like an animal.

The apartment was quiet in the clean way it gets quiet when someone safe is asleep in the next room.

I lay still on the couch for a moment and listened.

No coughing. No restless pacing. Just Sarah's breathing, deep and steady through the cracked door.

Good.

I made tea first, because boiling water is a kind of prayer: something you do with your hands while your mind measures the day.

Toast followed. Not because toast is magic, but because it's non-threatening. It's what you feed someone when you want them to feel cared for without feeling managed.

While the kettle worked, I checked my phone.

No new messages from the venue. No update from the building manager. No fresh nonsense from a blocked number.

Still, I made a note to myself: **encourage medical check**. Not because I wanted to escalate things into drama, but because women don't get to rely on luck.

I heard a shift from the bedroom—sheet rustle, a small exhale, the sound of someone waking and trying to decide if they're in a place that's allowed.

Then the door opened.

Sarah stood in the doorway in my spare t-shirt, hair a mess, eyes narrowed like she was judging the light for being too cheerful.

She looked... human.

Which, for Sarah, is an intimate state.

She didn't step all the way in. She stayed on the threshold like she might still bolt out of politeness.

"Morning," she said, voice rough.

"Morning," I replied. "Water first."

She made a face that was half annoyance, half obedience, and came to the kitchen.

I poured her a glass and handed it over without ceremony.

Sarah took it with both hands and drank like someone who'd been taught, at some point, to trust procedure.

Remembering it now.

When she finished, she set the glass down and glanced at the toast.

"Are you trying to make me a Victorian invalid," she muttered.

I let my mouth twitch. "Yes. It's my long-term plan."

Sarah huffed a laugh—small, but real—and slid onto the chair by the window.

Not the couch.

The chair.

Distance maintained.

Control reclaimed.

Good.

I placed the toast in front of her and sat opposite, keeping my posture relaxed, my voice ordinary.

"How's your head?" I asked.

Sarah grimaced. "Like someone's rewired it badly."

"Fair," I said. "Nausea? Dizziness?"

"Less," she admitted. "Still... wrong. But less."

I nodded, filing it.

"I'd like you to get checked today," I said gently. "Even if it's just a GP. Blood pressure, basics. If you think someone put something in your drink—"

Sarah's eyes sharpened. Instantly defensive.

"I don't know they did," she said.

"I know," I replied. "You don't have to prove it. You only have to take care of your body."

Sarah stared at the toast like it had offended her.

Then, quietly: "Okay."

Not "fine."

Not "whatever."

Okay.

A second "okay" in less than twelve hours.

That was... notable.

I didn't push. I didn't turn it into a lecture. I let it sit like a small win.

For a minute, the only sound was her chewing and the kettle cooling, the familiar domestic noises that make a life feel possible.

Then Sarah cleared her throat.

Here it comes, I thought. Pride.

And it did.

"I'm sorry," she said, automatically. Fast, as if she could throw it at the floor and move on.

I looked at her, calm.

"No," I said. "Not that."

Sarah's jaw tightened. "Lauren—"

"No," I repeated, not unkind. "You don't apologise for being in danger. You don't apologise for calling someone. You did the correct thing."

Sarah's eyes flicked up to mine, then away. The smallest hint of colour climbed her cheeks—anger at being seen, probably.

"I hate needing help," she said.

"I know," I said.

That was all. No pep talk. No insistence.

Just acknowledgement.

Sarah took another bite of toast, slower now, as if her body was remembering it could accept care without owing anything in return.

She swallowed. Then, after a pause that felt like a door opening by a millimetre, she said:

"I remember what I said last night."

My chest went very still.

I kept my face calm.

"Yes," I replied, careful. "Me too."

Sarah's fingers tightened around the mug I'd given her, knuckles whitening slightly. She didn't drink. She just held it like an anchor.

"I meant it," she said, voice low.

The words were simple, but Sarah saying *I meant it* was... enormous.

Because Sarah doesn't say anything she can't defend in court.

My pulse quickened. I didn't move closer. I didn't rush.

This had to stay clean. Proper.

"I'm glad," I said softly.

Sarah looked up then, properly, meeting my eyes.

Her expression wasn't soft. Sarah wasn't suddenly a different person.

But something in her gaze had changed.

Less armour.

More decision.

"It wasn't just because I was scared," she said, as if she resented the need to clarify it. "I mean, I was scared. But that's not why I—"

She stopped, frustrated with language.

I waited.

She exhaled sharply, then said it in the most Sarah way possible—like she was stating a fact she'd verified twice:

"I wanted you to come."

The sentence landed in the kitchen like a bell.

I felt warmth rise through me—quiet, steady—and I held it there, contained. Not because I wanted to hide it, but because Sarah would recoil if I made her the centre of a romantic spectacle.

"I did come," I said. "Every time you call, I'll come."

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "That's not what I'm asking."

I blinked once.

"No," I agreed, and let my voice soften a fraction. "It isn't."

Sarah sat very still, as if her body had decided that moving might make the moment break.

Then she said, with a kind of blunt honesty that nearly undid me:

"I don't know what to do with it."

I nodded.

"That's okay," I said. "We don't have to do anything dramatic."

Sarah's mouth twitched. "Your obsession with boring is unbearable."

"It works," I replied.

She held my gaze, and in that look I saw it: the beginning of the same thing I'd been carrying for years.

Not as a lightning strike.

As a slow, inevitable shift of gravity.

Sarah wasn't reaching for me as a mother.

She was reaching for me as... me.

A woman.

A possibility.

The realisation didn't make me giddy. It made me careful.

Because if Sarah was beginning to feel it, she'd be terrified of it. Not because she was ashamed of women—Sarah didn't do shame that way.

But because wanting someone meant giving them leverage.

And Sarah hated leverage.

I stood and rinsed a plate to give my hands something to do.

When I turned back, Sarah was watching me.

Not suspicious.

Just... present.

"You can go home whenever you want," I said gently. "No pressure. No expectations."

Sarah's eyes flicked to the hallway, to the door, to the light on the counter.

Then back to me.

"I know," she said.

A pause.

Then: "Can I stay a bit longer?"

The request was quiet, but it was the most intimate thing she'd said all morning.

My chest tightened.

"Yes," I said simply. "Of course."

Sarah exhaled, a long breath that sounded like surrender—not to me, but to the fact that she wanted what she wanted.

I poured more tea, because tea is what you do when you're making a new shape of life.

And as Sarah sat at my kitchen table in my spare t-shirt, eating toast like it was a contract she hadn't yet signed, I felt the truth settle more firmly inside me:

This wasn't a night thing.

This wasn't fear.

This wasn't rescue.

This was daylight.

And Sarah, inconvenient and sharp and brave, was beginning to reach for me on purpose.

Properly.



This is a slightly different story arc than the one we'd done before. Better, actually. More cohesive. I also feel that what we did in the beginning of the story served primarily - and very effectively - to illustrate the work (and \*life\*) environment the stories of these women takes place in. Very solid, emphasising not just the craft but how the women have formed a web of protection for themselves.

Last time, I think at this stage I'd asked you 1) where we were on the arc and 2) were there any other stones to turn over. Same question applies today.

Thought for 12s >

Yes — and I agree with your read: the early stretch has done its real job. It *built the habitat* (Wardrobe as a living, standards-driven organism) and proved the **women's web** is practical, scalable, and emotionally believable — not "girlboss vibes," but systems. 



Since the personal context search didn't surface the older outline we'd referenced, I'll treat **today's arc** as canonical and answer your two questions cleanly, plus "stones to turn over."

## 1) Where are we on the arc right now?

### What's been achieved (big structural beats)

- **Wardrobe is established as a women-governed domain:** craft + policy + quiet enforcement. The safe-space logic is now earned and internalized.
- **Charli's belonging moved from conditional to embodied** (the "proper" glow, the room matching her body, structure replacing fear).
- **Sarah's lens has become a valid secondary engine:** she's not just "snark"; she's now a character with a coherent emotional trajectory.
- **Sarah → Lauren is now seeded properly:** not a "rescuer crush," but daylight-choice territory. The romance is positioned as *adult*, not impulsive.

### Where that puts us on a classical story curve

You're around the end of **Act 2A / entering Act 2B** of a novel-ish structure:

- Act 1: Wardrobe + culture + stakes + Charli's integration.
- Act 2A: complications + proof of the web + personal arcs emerge.
- **Act 2B (next):** intimacy and desire begin colliding with policy, reputation, and self-concept — the "can I want this and still be myself?" phase.

So: we're **past setup, past first proof**, and now we're at the point where *the network gets tested emotionally*, not just operationally.

---

## 2) Other stones to turn over (high-value threads to mine)

Here are the best "stones" — ones that add depth without derailing your tone or turning into melodrama.

### Stone A: The Wardrobe rule that romance must obey

You already implied it: **not at work**. But it's worth one explicit scene where the *policy and the heart* meet:

- Lauren and Sarah agree on boundaries (no workplace signals, no gossip fuel).
- Mara is informed in exactly one sentence (or she infers, and simply sets a standard).
- The web proves it can hold *love* without letting love turn into chaos.

This strengthens your "women's competence network" theme: romance doesn't dissolve professionalism; it's folded into it.

### Stone B: Sarah's identity integration (without a label lecture)

Sarah doesn't need to "come out" like it's 1997. She needs:

- one private reckoning (already seeded: the high-school crush),
- one honest conversation with Bree (who is gay, and will be kind-but-not-sentimental),
- one moment of *choice* that isn't guilt-driven (daylight, calm, deliberate).

This avoids trope and keeps Sarah *Sarah: sharp, slightly allergic to earnestness.*

### **Stone C: Carl as a “good man” who stays good**

This is gold for avoiding caricature. You can use Carl again briefly, later, to prove:

- he doesn't retaliate,
- he doesn't become a villain,
- he remains decent (and maybe even becomes an ally in a practical way, e.g., quietly fixes something at Wardrobe without drama).

It shows the story's critique is about **structures + entitlement**, not “men are inherently evil.”

### **Stone D: The spiking incident's after-echo**

Not procedural. Not courtroom. But one or two *realistic* consequences:

- Sarah becomes hypervigilant for a week (annoyed at herself).
- Lauren quietly upgrades safety habits (rideshare plan, check-ins).
- Bree cracks jokes, but also gets serious for one line.

This turns it from a plot device into a character-forging event.

### **Stone E: Charli + Celeste romance progression (parallel track)**

Right now the emotional spotlight has swung to Sarah/Lauren — which is great — but you'll want **one small beat** that keeps Charli/Celeste alive in the reader's mind:

- a micro-scene showing Celeste softening “one notch further,”
- Charli receiving structure as affection,
- and the romance moving by **permission + ritual**, not fireworks.

Otherwise readers can feel whiplash: “Wait—what about *that couple?*”

### **Stone F: The “web” faces a non-male stressor**

To avoid the sense that men are the only threat vector, give Wardrobe one challenge that is:

- a supplier failure,
- a schedule crunch,
- a client boundary issue that's not gendered,

- or a woman who is chaotic/unsafe in a different way (you've done versions of this before; it's always strong).

Then show the web holding.

It proves the system is about **standards**, not about "us vs men."

## Stone G: Lauren's motherhood boundary

This one is emotionally rich:

- Lauren must ensure Sarah is not "joining the family" as a dependency — Sarah would hate that too.
  - Charli's safety remains primary, but not as a wedge.  
A single scene where Lauren privately checks herself ("no mixing roles; no making Sarah a second parent; keep it clean") would be powerful.
- 

## A practical "map" from here (3–5 scenes worth)

If you want a near-term run that feels cohesive:

1. **Bree/Sarah truth-talk** (one scene; light humour, one sincere line)
  2. **Lauren + Sarah: boundaries agreement** (daylight, boring, adult)
  3. **Wardrobe: micro-proof the romance stays off-clock** (Mara standard-setting in one sentence)
  4. **Charli/Celeste: one gentle beat** (parallel romance, not stealing focus)
  5. **A non-male operational stress test** (the web holds; competence porn 😊 )
- 

If you tell me which couple you want to be the "spine" of the next 3 scenes (Sarah/Lauren vs Charli/Celeste), I'll pick the tightest ordering. If you'd rather not decide, I can just choose the strongest sequence and start drafting immediately. ❤️

... Sources

I tend to agree that we should return to Celeste and Charli (their story, after all). And yes, their intimacy does need to blossom a bit into desire (again, more about Celeste at this point, her hesitation, fear of ... all the things she worries about ... but balanced with an

increasing desire for touch: Charli's touch. She discovers quite by accident that Charli's touch is so delicate, so gentle, unbelievably so, Celeste wants it. More of it. (So, we're not talking s\*x, here... \*touch\*). And kisses. And cuddling. And... well... more... it's all touch. Only touch, even when it results in bliss. Celeste has finally let the floodgates open.

And devoted Charli - always caring, eager, fills her cup to the brim. But, injudiciously, fails to do the appropriate thing in a work environment, where it's unsafe for Celeste.

And: consequences.

Yes. This is *exactly* the right kind of blossom for them: **touch as truth**, not sex as plot device. And the "workplace slip" is *perfect* because it lets you prove (again) that Wardrobe's safety isn't vibes — it's **standards**, and standards have consequences even when the love is real. 

Below is a clean run of **three scenes** that do what you've asked:

- **Scene 47 (Celeste POV):** floodgates open by accident — Charli's touch is revealed as *unbearably* gentle; Celeste wants more.
- **Scene 48 (Celeste POV):** Charli slips at work (small, "innocent," but unsafe), and the risk becomes real.
- **Scene 49 (Celeste POV):** consequences — not cruelty, not punishment theatre: *structure*. Celeste leads, sets boundary, and re-anchors Wardrobe's safety. Charli learns.

---

## Scene 47 — "The Floodgates" (Celeste POV)

It started the way most dangerous things start.

Quietly.

We were in the kitchen after dinner, the apartment dim and ordinary, the kind of evening that didn't feel like it was making history. The kettle had clicked off a minute ago. The sink was full of dishes we would both pretend we didn't see for ten minutes.

Charli was at the table with the ledger notebook open—not Wardrobe's ledger, *hers*: the small private one where she copied recipes, wrote lists, rehearsed the shapes of competence the way other people rehearsed speeches.

She had her hair up, still damp from her shower. No cap, no kerchief, no pinned discipline—just herself. A girl in a t-shirt with a pen in her hand, trying to be useful in the only way she knew how: by preparing.

I leaned on the counter and watched her without meaning to.

I didn't *intend* to be like this.

I'd told myself a hundred times: keep it clean. Keep it professional. Keep it safe. I'd been good at that. I'd built it into my bones the way I'd built Wardrobe's rules into my mouth: calm voice, clear line, no ambiguity.

But somewhere over the last weeks, that discipline had started to cost me.

Because Charli wasn't a project anymore.

She wasn't "an interesting case."

She wasn't even "my responsibility."

She was... *mine*, in a way my body understood before my mind allowed it.

She looked up and caught me looking.

Her smile arrived softly, like it had to be earned.

"You're thinking," she said.

"I'm always thinking," I replied.

Charli's eyes warmed—no argument, no flinch. She went back to her notebook, and I realised what I was actually watching: her hands.

Long-fingered. Careful. Precise. A person who touched paper the way she touched fabric: as if it had feelings.

I said, mostly to give myself something to do, "Show me what you're writing."

Charli hesitated—a small, old reflex of fear—then she slid the notebook toward me. Not defensive. Not secretive. Just offering.

I walked around to the table and leaned in to read.

A list.

Simple.

**GP appointment**

**bloods**

**script pick-up**

**hair pins (more)**

**salt (for pasta water)**

**thank Lauren?** (crossed out, then rewritten: **tell Lauren.**)

My chest tightened at that last line. Not because of Lauren. Because of the way Charli kept learning: not theatrically. Not with speeches. With small corrections. With practice.

I tapped the page lightly.

"This is good," I said.

Charli's shoulders lifted and lowered, a quiet exhale.

"I don't want to forget," she murmured.

"You won't" I said, and then—without planning to—added, "You're not alone."

Charli went still.

Not frightened. Not startled.

Just... struck.

Her eyes came up to mine, wide and bright, and for a moment she looked so young I felt something inside me soften dangerously.

She didn't speak. She didn't need to.

The wanting in her face was not sexual. It was worse than that.

It was trust.

It was devotion.

It was the look of someone who had been starving and didn't quite believe food was allowed.

I should have looked away.

I didn't.

Charli's hand lifted—slow, tentative—as if she was asking permission from the air.

She reached toward my wrist where it rested on the table.

I felt the pause in her fingers before contact: that careful millimetre where she waited to see if I would pull away.

I didn't.

Her fingertips touched my skin.

And my whole body reacted as if she'd turned on a light.

It wasn't heat. Not exactly.

It was... relief.

Touch so gentle it didn't feel like a claim. Touch so careful it felt like reverence. The smallest pressure, a feather of contact, but it landed inside me like certainty.

Charli's thumb made one slow, tentative stroke across the inside of my wrist.

I inhaled sharply.

Charli froze, immediately—eyes flashing with panic.

"Sorry—" she began.

"No," I said, too fast.

The word came out rougher than I intended.

Charli's mouth closed. She watched my face, braced for correction, for withdrawal, for the old rules.

I forced myself to slow down.

"Don't apologise," I said, quieter. "Just... don't stop."

Charli's eyes widened.

A flush rose in her cheeks, soft and disbelieving.

"Are you sure?" she whispered.

I hated how much I needed her to do it again.

"Yes," I said, flat, because if I tried to make it pretty I'd lose control. "I'm sure."

Charli's hand returned, slower this time, as if she was learning me the way she learned fabric: testing tension, reading response, adjusting.

Her thumb traced the same small stroke again.

My skin prickled. My throat tightened. Something in my chest gave way with a quiet, internal sound—like a knot finally untying.

I had spent so long holding myself back—out of caution, out of responsibility, out of fear of becoming the kind of woman who takes what she wants without considering the cost.

But this didn't feel like taking.

It felt like being met.

I looked down at her hand on mine and realised, with a shock that was almost comic, that Charli's touch was not demanding.

It was offering.

Which made my own hunger feel unbearable.

I turned my palm over, slowly, and let my fingers curl around hers.

Not tight.

Not possessive.

Just... answering.

Charli's breath hitched.

Her eyes shone, the way they did when she wanted to cry but refused to perform it.

"Celeste," she whispered, like my name was a place.

I swallowed.

"This," I said, trying to make my voice steady, "is not a reward."

Charli blinked.

"It's not something you earn by being good," I continued. "Do you understand me?"

Her expression shifted—confused, then dawning.

"You mean..." she began.

"I mean," I said, and my voice softened despite myself, "I want it too."

Charli's lips parted slightly, stunned.

I could have left it there. I should have.

Instead, I leaned down—slowly, deliberately—and kissed her.

Not hungry.

Not urgent.

A small kiss, precise as a pin placed correctly. A kiss that asked a question and waited for the answer.

Charli answered by making the smallest sound in her throat and lifting her free hand to my waist—light, careful, as if she was afraid I'd dissolve.

Her touch there was just as gentle.

And it nearly undid me.

I broke the kiss and rested my forehead lightly against hers.

"Touch," I murmured, the word half a confession. "That's all I want tonight."

Charli nodded quickly, almost frantic with relief.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes. I can—yes."

I guided her up from the table and toward the couch. We sat, close, and she curled against me with the cautious joy of someone waiting for the rules to change back.

They didn't.

I wrapped an arm around her and let her settle.

Charli's hand slid along my forearm, then my shoulder, then my collarbone—each touch a question, each pause a check-in.

It was unbearably sweet.

It was... bliss, in the simplest sense: my body unclenching, my mind quieting, the world narrowing to the fact of her presence.

Charli kissed my cheek once, then my jaw, then—very carefully—my throat, as if she'd learned I might break there.

I closed my eyes.

The floodgates opened with no drama at all.

Just a steady, unstoppable softness.

And in the dark, held by the gentlest hands I'd ever known, I realised the truth I'd been skirting for months:

I wasn't losing control.

I was finally allowing myself to be loved.

---

## Scene 48 — “Unsafe” (Celeste POV)

The next day at Wardrobe, I walked in wearing my usual face.

Calm. Clear. Adult.

But my body had changed overnight in a way I couldn't hide from myself: it remembered Charli's touch.

It wanted it.

Even in the bright clatter of morning, even with steam in the air and Mara's shears already snicking like punctuation, my skin carried the echo of her fingers the way fabric carries perfume.

Charli arrived ten minutes after me.

She came in quieter than usual, as if she was trying to be respectful of something she didn't fully understand yet: that intimacy changes gravity.

Her eyes met mine for half a beat, and her mouth softened.

Not a grin.

Not a performance.

Just... a private warmth.

I kept my expression neutral and turned back to the ledger.

We had actresses coming in mid-morning. A fitting schedule. A collar repair. A cap batch that needed tying.

Everything normal.

Which meant everything fragile.

Because Wardrobe isn't just a workplace. It's a structure. A shelter. It's women's safety engineered into habits.

And safety is not compatible with visible romance.

Not here.

Not yet.

Charli moved to the cap table, began sorting ties, checking angles with her new competence. Mara barked a correction; Charli absorbed it without flinching. Lauren strode through with her clipboard. Sarah looked like she'd slept badly but held her posture like a weapon.

I was grateful for the noise. It kept me composed.

Then—because life loves irony—an actress arrived early, cheerful and loud, bringing the energy of an audience.

"Morning! Oh my god, this place is like a *beehive*!"

Mara's mouth tightened. "Stand still. Talk later."

The actress laughed, compliant.

Charli turned to fetch something from the shelf behind her, and she brushed past me in the narrow aisle between tables.

I felt her pause.

I didn't look up.

Then her fingers—light as breath—touched the back of my hand.

A tiny, secret stroke. A *private* affection.

It lasted less than a second.

It was enough.

Because my body reacted before my mind could stop it: a small shiver under my skin, a tightening in my throat, a pulse spike that made me suddenly aware of my own mouth.

It was a human response.

Which is exactly why it was dangerous.

Charli's eyes flicked up to my face, bright with that same hopeful devotion from last night, and she smiled—small, pleased—because she'd felt my reaction and interpreted it as permission.

I held very still.

Across the room, Sarah's gaze snapped toward us.

Not jealous.

Not judging.

Alert.

She had the instincts of a woman who knows what men—and gossip—do with information.

And two tables away, the actress's eyes slid over us with curiosity.

The wrong kind.

A glance too long. A faint tilt of the mouth. Interest.

Data being collected.

I felt my stomach go cold.

Charli didn't see any of that. She was still living in the softness of last night, still floating in the relief of being wanted.

She reached—without thinking—and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

A gesture so gentle, so domestic, so *girlfriend*, it might as well have been an announcement.

The room didn't stop.

But the temperature changed.

Sarah's posture sharpened.

Lauren's head lifted.

Mara's eyes flicked up, brief and hard.

And the actress smiled like she'd just found a delicious new subplot.

I turned my head slowly and looked at Charli.

Not angry.

Not cruel.

But my expression was enough.

Charli's face drained of colour.

Her hand fell away as if it had been burned.

I leaned closer—not to soften it, but to keep it private.

"Not here," I said, low.

Charli's eyes widened in horror.

"I—" she began.

"Not here," I repeated, firmer. "Never at work. Do you understand me?"

Charli swallowed hard.

"Yes," she whispered.

Her voice trembled. Her eyes shone.

She looked like someone who had just realised she'd walked into traffic.

I straightened and turned back to the ledger.

The actress chirped, oblivious or pretending to be. "Sorry—am I early?"

Lauren answered smoothly, saving the moment like she saved everything.

"You're early," Lauren said pleasantly. "But we'll take you. Fitting room, please."

The actress followed Lauren, still smiling.

Still storing.

Charli stood frozen at the cap table, hands hovering, afraid to touch anything.

I didn't look at her again.

Not because I didn't want to.

Because if I did, I might soften.

And softness at the wrong time is how women get hurt.

---

## Scene 49 — “Consequences” (Celeste POV)

I waited until lunch.

Not because I wanted to punish her with time.

Because if I spoke too soon, my voice would carry the wrong emotion.

I needed to be the adult.

And—this was the new part—I needed to be the adult while my body still wanted her hands on my skin.

That was the discipline now.

After lunch, I sent Charli a single message.

**Back room. Five minutes.**

No emoji. No softness. Structure.

Charli arrived exactly on time, of course.

She stood just inside the door like a schoolgirl, shoulders tight, hands clasped in front of her as if her fingers couldn't be trusted.

Her eyes were red-rimmed. She'd tried not to cry. She'd failed. Quietly.

I didn't comment on it.

I leaned against the table and kept my face calm.

"What happened this morning," I said, "was unsafe."

Charli flinched.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"No," I said, and held up a hand. "Not that word. You don't apologise to make yourself feel smaller. You listen."

Charli's mouth closed. She nodded once, hard.

I continued, steady.

"Wardrobe is a women's workplace. It is a safe space by design. That design depends on two things: privacy and clarity."

Charli stared at the floor, breathing shallowly.

"You touched me in a way that signalled intimacy," I said. "In front of staff. In front of a client."

Charli's throat moved. "I didn't—I didn't mean to signal—"

"I know," I said, and my voice softened *one notch* because it was true. "But intent is not the point."

Her head lifted slightly, eyes wet.

"The point," I continued, "is consequences. In a room like ours, intimacy becomes currency for other people. Gossip. Leverage. Narratives. And women pay for that."

Charli's face crumpled, not theatrically—just honest pain.

"I didn't think," she whispered.

"I know," I said again. "That's why we're talking."

I pushed off the table and stepped closer—not to comfort her, but to anchor her with fact.

"This is not me rejecting you," I said, very clearly. "This is me protecting you. And protecting Wardrobe."

Charli's eyes snapped up.

"You're... not...?" Her voice broke.

I held her gaze.

"No," I said. "I'm not."

She exhaled shakily, as if she'd been holding her breath since morning.

Then the devotion returned—too fast, too eager—and she stepped forward like she wanted to touch me to confirm it.

I stopped her with a small gesture.

Charli froze.

I let the silence do its work.

"This is part of being a woman in a women's space," I said. "You don't get to let your feelings spill wherever they want. You learn where it's safe."

Charli nodded rapidly, tears slipping now.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes. I can. I will."

"Good," I said.

Then I delivered the consequence, clean and boring, like policy.

"For the next two weeks," I said, "you and I behave at work as we always have. Professional. No private signals. No touches. No looks that linger. We don't feed anyone a story."

Charli's face tightened in fear.

Two weeks must have sounded like exile.

I watched her carefully.

"This is not punishment," I added, because I meant it. "It's training. It's protection. It's a reset."

Charli swallowed.

"Yes," she whispered, and I could see her trying to be brave.

"And," I continued, "if you feel the urge to touch me at work, you redirect it into craft."

Charli blinked.

I nodded toward the shelves.

"Pins," I said. "Ties. Tension. You put your devotion into the work. That is how women survive in public."

Charli's breath shuddered.

"Yes," she said again, steadier this time. "I understand."

I held her gaze for a long beat, then—because I am not cruel—I gave her one truthful softness.

"Last night," I said quietly, "was real."

Charli's eyes filled again, but this time the tears looked like relief.

"And it will continue," I added. "At home. After hours. Where it is safe."

Charli nodded, trembling.

"Yes," she breathed. "I'll be good."

I sighed—small, controlled.

"Don't say 'good' like that," I said. "Say 'careful!'"

Charli swallowed, corrected herself.

"I'll be careful."

"Better," I said.

I stepped back and opened the door.

"Now," I said, returning to the adult voice, "wash your face. Fix your posture. Go back out there. You're not in trouble. You're learning."

Charli wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hand, nodded, and turned to go.

At the doorway she paused—hesitated—then looked back at me with a question in her eyes.

Not asking for touch.

Asking for certainty.

I gave her a small nod.

The kind that says: *We are still us. Just not here.*

Charli exhaled and went back into Wardrobe.

I closed the door and stood alone in the back room for a moment longer than necessary, letting the ache in my chest settle into something I could carry.

Because this was the new truth:

I wanted her.

I wanted her touch.

And I would still choose the standards that kept her safe.

Even when it hurt.

Especially when it hurt.

---

If you like, the next scene can be the *evening after this consequence talk* — where Charli, determined to "be careful," becomes **almost comically** cautious... and Celeste has to guide her back into softness: "*Careful doesn't mean distant.*" That's a gorgeous way to show Celeste's floodgates staying open **in the correct place.** ❤️



I could not have dreamt of anything so eloquent. And that evening, Charli.... not just learns, but understands. And their love blossoms where it is safe.

## Scene 50 — “Where It’s Safe” (Celeste POV)

Charli came home like someone returning to a house after nearly losing it.

Quiet. Careful. Eyes too bright, posture a fraction too controlled. She took her shoes off by the door with obsessive neatness, as if straight lines could prevent mistakes. She hung her bag on the hook and stood there for a second too long, hands hovering, waiting for permission the way she used to.

I watched her from the kitchen.

Not hidden. Not testing.

Just... observing the new shape of her caution.

“Hi,” I said.

Charli’s gaze snapped to mine with a kind of hungry relief that she tried to swallow back immediately.

“Hi,” she whispered.

She didn’t move toward me.

That was the first sign she’d understood.

Not “I’m in trouble.”

Not “I’m unworthy.”

But: *this matters enough to protect.*

I set two mugs on the table, poured tea, and kept my movements ordinary on purpose.

Normality is a signal. It tells the body: no danger here.

Charli came to the table and sat in the chair opposite me like she was afraid the space between us was an exam.

She folded her hands in her lap.

Her eyes didn't linger on my mouth.

Her shoulders didn't soften the way they had last night.

She was trying so hard to be careful that she'd turned careful into distance.

I let her sit in that for a moment. Let her prove she could.

Then I said, gently, "You can look at me."

Charli blinked, startled—as if she'd been caught doing something wrong in reverse.

"I—" she began.

"Charli," I said, calm. "Looking is allowed."

Her eyes lifted slowly to my face. They were still red-rimmed from the day, but steadier now. Present. Listening.

"I'm proud of you," I said.

The sentence did something to her. Her breath caught. Her chin trembled once, just once, before she contained it.

"I messed up," she whispered.

"Yes," I said. "And then you learned."

Charli swallowed. "I didn't... I didn't understand. Not really. I thought—" She stopped, frustrated, then tried again. "I thought it was... little. Just... us."

"It was us," I said quietly. "And it was also a room full of women who have paid for men's stories about them."

Charli nodded, small and precise, like she was writing it into her bones.

"I saw Sarah," she murmured. "When she looked. Not... angry. Just..." She searched.

"Alert."

"Yes," I said.

"And Mara," Charli added, and the name came out with a little shiver of respect. "Mara didn't even need to say anything."

"No," I agreed. "Mara is a boundary with legs."

Charli made a tiny sound that might have been a laugh if she'd allowed herself more oxygen.

I waited until her shoulders lowered a fraction. Then I placed my hand on the table—palm up. Not reaching for her. Offering.

Charli's eyes dropped to my hand like it was a doorway.

Her throat moved.

She didn't take it.

Not yet.

"Remember what I said," I murmured. "Careful doesn't mean distant."

Charli's eyes flicked up to mine, questioning. Worry threaded through her expression.

"What if I—"

"You won't," I said, and the certainty in my voice made her go still. "Because now you understand."

Charli exhaled shakily.

Then—slowly, as if approaching a skittish animal—she lifted her hand from her lap and placed her fingertips into my palm.

The contact was so light it barely registered as pressure.

It registered as *trust*.

Her touch was even gentler than last night, if that was possible—like she was handling something fragile and beloved.

My chest tightened in a way I didn't fight.

"Like this?" she whispered.

"Yes," I said, and my voice came out softer than I intended. "Exactly like this."

Charli's thumb moved once across my palm—one careful stroke—and then stopped, waiting for the rule.

I let my fingers curl around hers.

Not tight.

Not claiming.

Answering.

Charli's breath hitched, and this time she didn't apologise for it. She simply let the feeling exist.

Good.

I drew her hand up slowly and pressed my lips to her knuckles.

It wasn't sexual. It wasn't dramatic.

It was... reverent.

Charli made a small sound in her throat that nearly broke me.

Her eyes shone. She blinked hard and held on.

"Celeste," she whispered.

"Yes," I replied.

"I... I want to be good at this," she said, the words careful but urgent. "At... us. I don't want to hurt you. I don't want to hurt Wardrobe."

"I know," I said.

Then I said the part she needed, the part she'd be too afraid to ask for.

"And you didn't," I added. "You created risk. We corrected it. That's what adults do."

Charli's shoulders eased, the tension turning into something softer, more livable.

I stood and held my hand out again.

"Come here," I said.

Charli rose immediately—obedient reflex—then checked herself, slowed down, as if remembering she was allowed to want without rushing.

She came to me and stopped just within reach, waiting.

I placed my hands lightly at her waist and guided her closer. The pressure was minimal. The intention wasn't.

Charli's hands hovered near my ribs, careful, as if she was afraid to touch the wrong place.

I took her left hand and placed it gently on my shoulder.

"Here," I said.

Then I took her right hand and placed it at my waist.

"And here."

Charli's fingers curved, tentative at first, then steadier as she felt I wasn't going to pull away.

Her touch was... exquisite.

Not because it was skilled.

Because it was pure. Because it carried no entitlement. No demand. Just devotion and awe and careful joy.

I leaned down and kissed her again, slow and clean.

Charli responded immediately, softening into it like she'd been thirsty and didn't know it.

Her hands tightened a fraction at my waist—still gentle, but certain now—and I felt my body go warm in a way that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with being wanted safely.

I broke the kiss and rested my forehead against hers.

"Tonight," I murmured, "you don't have to be careful like you're handling glass."

Charli's breath trembled. "But I—"

"You can be careful in the right way," I said. "Careful like you are with fabric you love. You don't avoid it. You learn it."

Charli nodded, eyes wet.

"Yes," she whispered. "I can do that."

I guided her to the couch.

We sat close, hips touching, shoulders touching, and I pulled a blanket over both of us, not because we were cold but because the weight of it made the world smaller.

Charli hesitated, then leaned into me.

Her head found my shoulder like it belonged there.

Her arm slid around my waist, cautious at first, then settling as my body welcomed it.

I kissed the top of her head.

Charli's breath shuddered, and she whispered, barely audible, "This is safe."

"Yes," I said.

She shifted slightly, turning her face toward my neck, and I felt the faint brush of her lips against my skin—more like a question than an act.

I answered by tipping my head gently, giving her access without words.

Charli kissed me again, still careful, still sweet, and her hand—her unbelievable hand—traced a slow line along my forearm.

Bliss arrived in my body like a quiet flood.

Not fireworks.

Not urgency.

A deep, easing warmth, the kind you feel when something inside you stops bracing.

I held her there, letting myself want without fear, letting the floodgates stay open because the river had found its proper bed.

After a while, Charli whispered, "I won't do it at work again."

"I know," I said.

"And if I forget," she added quickly, anxiety flaring, "if I get... carried away—"

I turned my head and kissed her temple.

"Then I will correct you," I said. "And you will learn again. That's what this is."

Charli went very still, then nodded against my shoulder.

"Yes," she breathed, and something in her softened—something old, something frightened.

A girl learning that love doesn't vanish because you make one mistake.

A girl learning that consequences aren't rejection.

They're care.

We stayed like that for a long time: no talking, no plans, no big declarations.

Just touch.

Hands. Breath. Quiet kisses.

A woman letting herself be held.

A girl discovering that her gentleness wasn't a liability—it was the very thing that made her irresistible.

And when Charli finally drifted toward sleep, curled against me with her fingers still resting lightly on my wrist as if she couldn't bear to lose contact entirely, I stared into the dim room and felt the calm settle into place.

Wardrobe was safe.

Charli was safe.

And here, in the private hush of our home, where no one could turn tenderness into gossip or leverage, love was allowed to be what it wanted to be:

soft.

steady.

and growing.



