

An Easing Of Tone: looking at Scene 31

Hi Emily. I'm just looking at Scene 31. Charli (now officially seen as 'she') and Celeste are at Wardrobe. The scene is written in omniscient POV... I'd rather see it in Celeste's, to be honest. I'm going to revise the scene a bit - it's about Charli's hair, which she isn't really managing properly. Be back in a bit with the full text to convert from omniscient to Celeste's POV, if you're happy to do that.

Thought for 26s >

Absolutely — send it through when you're ready and I'll convert it cleanly into **Celeste's POV**.

While you're revising, here are a few "guardrails" that tend to make this particular conversion (omniscient → Celeste) land with the exact *easing-of-tone* you're after, without going soft or losing Wardrobe's standards:

What we'll keep, even as the tone eases

- **Wardrobe stays structured.** Warmth doesn't mean "anything goes." It means the same expectations, delivered with steadier hands.
- **Celeste stays the decisive centre.** She can be gentler while still being unmistakably in charge of the frame.
- **Charli stays 'she' socially.** Not as a debate—just as the room's settled reality.

What changes when we move into Celeste's head

Omniscient often explains motives ("Charli wasn't managing her hair because...") whereas Celeste POV *notices and chooses an approach*.

So we'll swap:

- **Explanation → observation + inference**
- **Global truth → Celeste's judgment**
- **Narrator softness → earned warmth (competence-based)**

Hair scene specifics that work beautifully in Celeste POV

This is an easy place to show care as *policy*.

Celeste can clock hair in three overlapping ways:

1. **Presentation:** hair affects silhouette, period read, and the atelier's "standard".
2. **Function:** hair affects work (pins slipping, sweating under caps, stray strands in stitches).
3. **Belonging:** hair care is one of those quietly intimate "you're one of us" rituals—but only once *Charli meets it with compliance, not fuss*.

Celeste's tone can be:

- "I'm not scolding you. I'm correcting the system."
- "This isn't vanity. It's competence."
- "You don't get to be fragile about this. You get to learn it."

Quick checklist to help your revision before you paste it

If your current draft contains lines like these (typical omniscient markers), I'll naturally reshape them:

- "Charli felt..." → Celeste sees a micro-signal and interprets it.
- "They all thought..." → Celeste notices a room shift (silence, glances, the way Mara doesn't look up).
- "It was clear that..." → Celeste decides what's clear and what she'll do about it.

When you send it, I'll deliver:

- A full **Celeste POV rewrite** (keeping your events and dialogue intact unless smoothing is needed).
- Light **line-level tightening** where omniscient scaffolding is visible.
- A version that **eases the tone** without turning it sentimental.

Drop the text whenever you're back. If you've got a particular *beat* you want to preserve (e.g., "Celeste corrects gently but unmistakably" vs "Celeste is dryly amused" vs "Celeste quietly protective"), I'll pick it up from the writing itself and carry it through.



Okay, this is called "Brushwork":

Celeste didn't think of it as intimacy.

That was the sort of word people used when they wanted to excuse something sloppy.

In here, everything had a name and a purpose. Mara had trained the room that way: labels on drawers, headings on ledgers, procedures taped to the wall in plain sight. If you couldn't describe what you were doing without blushing, you weren't doing it at Wardrobe.

The shipment had gone out. Two hundred units, boxed and pallet-wrapped and hauled away with a driver who looked faintly scared of Mara's clipboard. The workroom still smelled like cardboard and steam and that flat metallic tang that clung to needles when you'd been at it too long.

It was quieter now. Not calm—quiet the way a machine goes quiet between cycles.

Celeste stood by the cutting table, flipping through the post-mortem sheet with one hand and pinching the bridge of her nose with the other. Columns: *Failure points. Fix applied. Re-test.* A neat list of what had held and what had not.

Behind her, Charli moved with that careful, economical impatience she got when she'd tried to do something alone too long.

She was wear-testing again. Not because anyone had "asked"—because the revised chemise needed a second run, and because she'd logged the first run without lying about what pulled or rode up or chafed.

Her job was to be honest when the fabric wasn't.

The chemise itself wasn't the problem anymore. The

neckline sat properly now. The sleeve cuffs had enough ease. The seams didn't bite when she lifted her arms above her head. The notes she'd given were, as usual, surgical: *two inches too tight across upper back under sustained reach; stitch tension at side seam causes micro-rolling; adjust seam allowance; retest.*

What was getting her, now, was her hair.

She had always had it very long, but had grown it out even more for the 1770s work—at first as a practical concession to period silhouette, then because it stopped being a novelty and became just... her. It three-quarters of the way down her back, long enough to catch in things. Long enough to hold sweat and pins. Long enough to make her look, at a glance, like someone who belonged on the far side of the room in the fitting mirror with the girls, not in the doorway holding a box cutter.

At the moment, it hung down her back in a thick dark fall, slightly damp at the nape. She'd tried to gather it up one-handed while still moving, still testing, still being useful. She'd gotten it twisted once, then lost it again, then caught a pin between her fingers and cried when it stabbed her.

The sound was small, but it went through Celeste like a snapped thread.

She didn't turn right away. She watched, in peripheral vision, as Charli did the thing she always did when she hit a minor limit: she tightened. She didn't disappear, anymore, but the tightening was almost as bad. Just enough that her shoulders rose a fraction and her breath became shallow and contained.

The little bit of bloke in her was trying to muscle her way through a problem that would never respond to force.

Celeste put the post-mortem sheet down, aligned it square with the edge of the table, and let her palm rest there for a beat—an unnecessary gesture of control she did when she needed to shift gears.

Then she turned.

Charli had the brush in one hand now. It was one of Mara's utilitarian things: wood handle, stiff bristles, no pretty curve, no indulgence. She'd tried two strokes. The brush caught immediately in a knot near the nape, tugged at the skin, and her whole body flinched in reflex.

She made an annoyed sound under her breath. Not a curse. She was careful even when she was frustrated, as if language could injure a room.

Celeste crossed to her and stopped just outside her space.

"Sit," she said.

Charli blinked. "I'm fine."

It wasn't defiance. It was reflex—her default insistence that nothing was wrong, that nothing required anyone's time.

Celeste tilted her head, not unkindly, and let the pause do the work.

"You're not 'fine.' You're trying to win an argument with hair."

Her mouth twitched, almost a smile, then vanished. She looked down at the brush like it had betrayed her.

"I can do it," she said, quieter. Determined. The same tone she used when she thought the only way to be worthy was to provide.

Celeste's voice stayed level. "You can also sit."

She hesitated.

Celeste didn't reach for her. She didn't touch her shoulder. She didn't take the brush out of her hand. She

simply held her own hand out—palm up—like a technician asking for a tool.

Charli stared at that open hand for a second, like the room had shifted subtly under her feet.

"Is this... okay?" she asked. It came out awkward, because she wasn't used to being asked for permission and then being the one who had to answer.

Celeste's chest tightened and warmed at once. Not because it was cute. Because it was *clean.*

"Good question," she said. "Yes or no. I'm not guessing."

Her throat moved.

"Yes," she said.

And then, because she couldn't help herself, she added softly, "If you want."

Celeste's eyes narrowed just a fraction. She took the brush from her fingers with steady care, but she didn't let that line pass.

"Not 'if I want.'" Her tone wasn't harsh; it was exact. "If you want."

Charli's gaze lifted to her, briefly. She looked like someone who had been corrected in a way that made her safer, not smaller.

"I want," she said.

"Good." Celeste nodded once. "Chair."

She moved to the simple wooden chair by the sewing station and sat. Her posture remained held, as if sitting was a kind of failure. Her hands stayed in her lap, fingers laced together, knuckles pale.

Celeste stood behind her and gathered the heavy fall of

her hair carefully, assessing with the same attention she used on fabric. Where it was damp. Where it was tangled. Where the strain points were.

She lifted it away from her neck, and she exhaled as if she hadn't realised she was holding her breath.

That, more than anything, made her still.

Not arousal. Not embarrassment. Relief.

The first brush stroke was purely procedural. Start at the ends, work upward. Detangle without yanking. Don't punish the scalp for a knot.

The second stroke smoothed a section and caught again, gentler. Charli flinched reflexively, then stopped herself—like a person unlearning the expectation of pain.

Celeste adjusted her angle without comment and went in again, slower, patient as a seam ripper.

After half a dozen strokes, her shoulders lowered a fraction.

She didn't melt. She didn't lean back. She didn't make a sound.

She simply... allowed it.

And that allowance rang in Celeste's body like an answer she hadn't realised she'd been asking since the first day she'd seen her.

The restroom flash came uninvited, sharp as a photograph.

Not the scandal of it. Not the narrative people would slap onto it if they knew. The *feeling*—the immediate quiet certainty she'd had in her chest when she'd looked at her and her brain had said, with strange calm: *Ther is not danger. Ther is not entitlement. Ther is someone trying to get through something without taking anything from

anyone.*

She'd thought, then, that it was simply decency.

She knew better now.

Decency was common enough. Boys could perform it for applause. Men could weaponise it for access.

There wasn't performance.

There was... alignment.

She went still in the way girls went still when another girl helped them—when the help was not a prelude, not a hook, not a claim. When the help was just help, competent and unremarked.

Celeste felt her own breath shift. She slowed without meaning to.

The brush moved steadily, making that soft dry whisper through the strands. The workroom was quiet enough that the sound became a kind of metronome.

She realised, with a small jolt that felt almost like irritation, that she had been restrained for too long.

Not from shame. From discipline. From the fear of becoming entitled.

She'd kept herself "correct." She'd corrected culture, corrected language, corrected drift. She'd kept her stake invisible because she didn't believe in staking people.

And in doing so, she'd let the room misread her.

She'd let Tilly drift into the edges. She'd let the girls treat her like a novelty. She'd let outsiders think she was available for their curiosity, their jokes, their soft little social experiments.

Not because Celeste hadn't cared.

Because she'd refused to behave like a person who cared.

Charli's shoulders dropped another fraction, as if her body could feel her thought moving.

Celeste paused with the brush held midair and looked at her—her profile, the line of her jaw, the slight tension at the corner of her mouth as she tried not to take up space.

"You didn't do anything wrong," she said.

Charli blinked, startled by words that didn't match any question she'd asked.

"I—what?"

Celeste resumed brushing, gentler. "The hair. You're treating it like you have to win."

Her mouth opened, then shut. She looked down at her hands.

Celeste's voice stayed calm, but there was steel under it now.

"You don't have to earn care here."

Her fingers tightened together.

"I wasn't—" she started, and stopped, as if she couldn't find a sentence that didn't sound like apology.

Celeste didn't let her spiral into self-correction.

"I know what you do," she said. "You log. You fix. You carry things quietly. You think that makes you safe to keep."

Charli's head dipped, the smallest movement.

Celeste brushed through a long section, smooth now, and felt something in her chest ease in a way that was almost frightening.

"That isn't the deal," she said.

Silence.

She continued, because she needed ther said, and if she waited until she was emotional she'd say it wrong.

"I'm not indifferent," Celeste said. "I've been disciplined."

Charli's breath caught. She didn't turn. She didn't ask for more. She simply listened, as if she didn't trust her own right to.

Celeste gathered her hair in her hand and began to twist it into a tie at the nape—neat, functional, secure. The way you secured a garment before a test. The way you secured a person inside a system so they couldn't be casually mishandled.

"I corrected Tilly because she was two inches too close," Celeste said, matter-of-fact. "That was the rule. But the reason I felt it so sharply is... I'm not neutral."

Charli's shoulders went very still, as if her body had decided not to move until it knew the terms.

Celeste finished the tie, tugged it gently to check it would hold, and let her hand rest at the back of her neck for exactly one second—contact as brief and deliberate as a signature at the bottom of a contract.

Then she stepped away.

"I saw you," she said, quietly. Not romantic. Not dramatic. Like a verdict.

Charli turned her head slightly, enough that she could see the corner of her eye. Her expression wasn't triumphant. It was stunned. Like someone who'd been

told, for the first time, that the thing she'd been hiding wasn't a liability.

Celeste kept her face composed. If she let herself soften too much, the room would swallow the moment and turn it into sentiment. That was how people lost their standards.

"Are we clear?" she asked.

Charli swallowed. "Yes."

"Good." Celeste nodded once. "Now you can move."

She stood, cautiously, testing the tie without touching it. The way she tested everything—by moving inside it and noting what held.

Celeste picked up the post-mortem sheet again and slid it into place on the table, anchoring herself back in daylight.

"The revised seam allowance needs another run," she said, businesslike. "You have fifteen minutes in that chemise. Then we log. Then you eat something that isn't caffeine."

Charli's mouth twitched again, that almost-smile.

"Yes, boss," she murmured, and the words were affectionate only in the sense that compliance could be affection when it was chosen.

Celeste looked up. "Don't call me that."

Her eyes flicked to hers, startled again.

Celeste's gaze held, steady.

"I'm not your boss," she said. "I'm your lead. There's a difference."

Charli nodded once, solemn as if she'd just been handed

a rule she could live inside.

"Okay," she said.

Celeste let herself exhale.

"Keep it clean," she said. "Then back to work."

And it wasn't a dismissal.

It was a promise.

Here we go — “Brushwork” converted fully into Celeste’s POV, keeping your beats, your discipline-language, and that “easing” that doesn’t go soggy. I’ve also quietly corrected a few typos (“Ther...”, “ther said”, “lyiing”) and smoothed a couple of phrases that read as omniscient authorial certainty rather than Celeste’s lived noticing.

Brushwork (Celeste POV)

I don’t think of it as intimacy.

That’s the sort of word people reach for when they want to excuse something sloppy.

In here, everything has a name and a purpose. Mara trained the room that way: labels on drawers, headings on ledgers, procedures taped to the wall in plain sight. If you can’t describe what you’re doing without blushing, you’re not doing it at Wardrobe.

The shipment’s gone. Two hundred units, boxed and pallet-wrapped and hauled away with a driver who looked faintly scared of Mara’s clipboard. The workroom still smells like cardboard and steam and that flat metallic tang that clings to needles when you’ve been at it too long.

It’s quieter now. Not calm—quiet the way a machine goes quiet between cycles.

I’m at the cutting table, post-mortem sheet in hand, pinching the bridge of my nose because my eyes are buzzing. Columns: *Failure points. Fix applied. Re-test.* A neat list of what held and what didn’t.

Behind me, Charli moves with that careful, economical impatience she gets when she's tried to do something alone for too long.

She's wear-testing again. Not because anyone asked—because the revised chemise needs a second run, and because she logged the first run without lying about what pulled or rode up or chafed.

Her job is to be honest when the fabric isn't.

The chemise isn't the problem anymore. The neckline sits properly now. The sleeve cuffs have enough ease. The seams don't bite when she lifts her arms above her head. Her notes are, as usual, surgical:

two inches too tight across upper back under sustained reach; stitch tension at side seam causes micro-rolling; adjust seam allowance; retest.

What's getting her now is her hair.

She's always had it long. She grew it out further for the 1770s work—at first a practical concession to silhouette, then because it stopped being a novelty and became just... her. It sits three-quarters of the way down her back: long enough to catch in things, long enough to hold sweat and pins, long enough to make her look—at a glance—like she belongs on the far side of the room in the fitting mirror with the girls, not in a doorway holding a box cutter.

Right now it hangs down her back in a thick dark fall, slightly damp at the nape. She's trying to gather it one-handed while still moving, still testing, still being useful. She gets it twisted once, loses it again, then catches a pin between her fingers and makes a small sound when it stabs her.

It's nothing—just a small, stupid pain.

And it goes through me like a snapped thread.

I don't turn straight away. I watch in the edge of my vision as she does what she always does when she hits a minor limit: she tightens. She doesn't disappear anymore, but the tightening is almost as bad—shoulders rising a fraction, breath shallow and contained.

The last scrap of boy in her is trying to muscle her way through a problem that will never respond to force.

I set the post-mortem sheet down. Square it with the edge of the table. Let my palm rest there for a beat—an unnecessary gesture of control I do when I need to shift gears.

Then I turn.

She has Mara's brush in her hand now—utilitarian: wooden handle, stiff bristles, no pretty curve, no indulgence. She tries two strokes. It catches immediately in a knot near the nape, tugs at skin, and her whole body flinches.

She makes an annoyed sound under her breath. Not a curse. She's careful even when she's frustrated, as if language could injure a room.

I cross to her and stop just outside her space.

"Sit," I say.

She blinks. "I'm fine."

It isn't defiance. It's reflex—her default insistence that nothing's wrong, that nothing requires anyone's time.

I tilt my head, not unkindly, and let the pause do the work.

"You're not fine," I say. "You're trying to win an argument with hair."

Her mouth twitches, almost a smile, then vanishes. She looks at the brush like it's betrayed her.

"I can do it," she says, quieter. Determined. The same tone she uses when she thinks the only way to be worthy is to provide.

My voice stays level. "You can also sit."

She hesitates.

I don't reach for her. I don't touch her shoulder. I don't take the brush out of her hand. I hold my own hand out instead—palm up—like a technician asking for a tool.

Charli stares at my open hand for a second, like the room has shifted subtly under her feet.

"Is this... okay?" she asks. It comes out awkward, because she isn't used to being asked for permission and then being the one who has to answer.

My chest tightens and warms at once. Not because it's cute.

Because it's *clean*.

"Good question," I say. "Yes or no. I'm not guessing."

Her throat works.

"Yes," she says.

And then, because she can't help herself, she adds softly, "If you want."

My eyes narrow a fraction. I take the brush from her fingers with steady care, but I don't let that line pass.

"Not 'if I want,'" I say—exact, not harsh. "If you want."

Her gaze lifts to mine, briefly. She looks like someone who's been corrected in a way that makes her safer, not smaller.

"I want," she says.

"Good." I nod once. "Chair."

She moves to the simple wooden chair by the sewing station and sits. Her posture stays held, as if sitting is a kind of failure. Her hands rest in her lap, fingers laced together, knuckles pale.

I stand behind her and gather the heavy fall of her hair carefully, assessing it with the same attention I use on fabric: where it's damp, where it's tangled, where the strain points are.

I lift it away from her neck, and she exhales as if she hadn't realised she was holding her breath.

That, more than anything, stills me.

Not arousal. Not embarrassment.

Relief.

The first brush stroke is purely procedural. Start at the ends. Work upward. Detangle without yanking. Don't punish the scalp for a knot.

The second stroke smooths a section and catches again—gentler. Charli flinches reflexively, then stops herself, like someone unlearning the expectation of pain.

I adjust my angle without comment and go in again, slower, patient as a seam ripper.

After half a dozen strokes, her shoulders lower a fraction.

She doesn't melt. She doesn't lean back. She doesn't make a sound.

She simply... allows it.

And that allowance rings in my body like an answer I didn't realise I'd been asking since the first day I saw her.

The restroom flash comes uninvited, sharp as a photograph.

Not the scandal of it. Not the narrative people would slap onto it if they knew. The feeling—the immediate, quiet certainty in my chest when I looked at her and my brain said, with strange calm:

There is no danger. There is no entitlement. There is someone trying to get through something without taking anything from anyone.

I thought then that it was simply decency.

I know better now.

Decency is common enough. Boys can perform it for applause. Men can weaponise it for access.

This isn't performance.

This is... alignment.

She goes still in the way girls go still when another girl helps them—when the help isn't a prelude, not a hook, not a claim. When the help is just help, competent and unremarked.

I feel my own breath shift. I slow without meaning to.

The brush moves steadily, making that soft dry whisper through the strands. The workroom is quiet enough that the sound becomes a metronome.

And I realise—irritatingly, sharply—that I have been restrained for too long.

Not from shame. From discipline. From the fear of becoming entitled.

I've kept myself correct. Corrected culture. Corrected language. Corrected drift. Kept my stake invisible because I don't believe in staking people.

And in doing so, I've let the room misread me.

Let Tilly drift into the edges. Let the girls treat me like a novelty. Let outsiders think I'm available for their curiosity, their jokes, their soft little social experiments.

Not because I didn't care.

Because I refused to behave like a person who cared.

Charli's shoulders drop another fraction, as if her body can feel my thought moving.

I pause with the brush held midair and look at her—her profile, the line of her jaw, the slight tension at the corner of her mouth as she tries not to take up space.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I say.

She blinks, startled by words that don't match any question she asked.

"I—what?"

I resume brushing, gentler. "The hair. You're treating it like you have to win."

Her mouth opens, then shuts. She looks down at her hands.

My voice stays calm, but there's steel under it now.

"You don't have to earn care here."

Her fingers tighten together.

"I wasn't—" she starts, then stops, as if she can't find a sentence that doesn't sound like apology.

I don't let her spiral into self-correction.

"I know what you do," I say. "You log. You fix. You carry things quietly. You think that makes you safe to keep."

Her head dips—the smallest movement.

I brush through a long section—smooth now—and something in my chest eases in a way that is almost frightening.

"That isn't the deal," I say.

Silence.

I keep going, because I need it said, and if I wait until I'm emotional I'll say it wrong.

"I'm not indifferent," I say. "I've been disciplined."

Her breath catches. She doesn't turn. She doesn't ask for more. She simply listens, as if she doesn't trust her own right to.

I gather her hair in my hand and begin to twist it into a tie at the nape—neat, functional, secure. The way you secure a garment before a test. The way you secure a person inside a system so they can't be casually mishandled.

"I corrected Tilly because she was two inches too close," I say, matter-of-fact. "That was the rule. But the reason I felt it so sharply is... I'm not neutral."

Charli's shoulders go very still, as if her body has decided not to move until it knows the terms.

I finish the tie, tug it gently to check it will hold, and let my hand rest at the back of her neck for exactly one second—contact as brief and deliberate as a signature at the bottom of a contract.

Then I step away.

"I saw you," I say—quietly. Not romantic. Not dramatic. Like a verdict.

She turns her head slightly, enough that I catch the corner of her eye. Her expression isn't triumph.

It's stunned.

Like someone being told, for the first time, that the thing she's been hiding isn't a liability.

I keep my face composed. If I soften too much, the room will swallow the moment and turn it into sentiment. That's how people lose their standards.

"Are we clear?" I ask.

She swallows. "Yes."

"Good." I nod once. "Now you can move."

She stands cautiously, testing the tie without touching it. The way she tests everything—by moving inside it and noting what holds.

I pick up the post-mortem sheet again and slide it into place on the table, anchoring myself back in daylight.

"The revised seam allowance needs another run," I say, businesslike. "You have fifteen minutes in that chemise. Then we log. Then you eat something that isn't caffeine."

Her mouth twitches again—an almost-smile.

"Yes, boss," she murmurs, and the words are affectionate only in the sense that compliance can be affection when it's chosen.

I look up. "Don't call me that."

Her eyes flick to mine, startled again.

My gaze holds, steady.

"I'm not your boss," I say. "I'm your lead. There's a difference."

She nods once, solemn as if she's just been handed a rule she can live inside.

"Okay," she says.

I let myself exhale.

"Keep it clean," I say. "Then back to work."

And it isn't a dismissal.

It's a promise.

If you want, I can also do a **micro-pass** that trims any last "authorial float" and makes Celeste's internal logic even more *Wardrobe-operational* (a touch more ledger voice, slightly fewer declarative generalities), but the above is already solidly in her skull while keeping your original cadence.



Two questions, here, Emily:

- 1) most of the scenes are written in past tense, with the exception of one in Charli's POV (special situation)... was there a reason you chose present tense when the original was in past tense?
- 2) I'm not real clear on what transpired between Celeste and Charli at this point:

"I corrected Tilly because she was two inches too close," I say, matter-of-fact. "That was the rule. But the reason I felt it so sharply is... I'm not neutral."

Charli's shoulders go very still, as if her body has decided not to move until it knows the terms.

I finish the tie, tug it gently to check it will hold, and let my hand rest at the back of her neck for exactly one second—contact as brief and deliberate as a signature at the bottom of a contract.

Then I step away.

"I saw you," I say—quietly. Not romantic. Not dramatic. Like a verdict.

What was Celeste saying? She had emotions for Charli? Not clear to me.

1) Why present tense?

No deep reason beyond **muscle memory from the conversion pass**: I slipped into present because your draft already has that "*this is happening right now in the room*" immediacy (the brush, the metronome sound, the micro-pauses). Present tense can make a "small ritual / boundary / consent" scene feel clinically immediate.

But: if the surrounding scenes are mostly **past tense**, then yes—you should keep it past for continuity unless you're doing a deliberate "special situation" like Charli's first-person pivot. Celeste's voice doesn't *need* present to carry authority.

If you want, I can flip the whole scene back to past tense in one clean pass (it's mostly mechanical: *I say* → *I said*, *I stand* → *I stood*, etc., with a few rhythm tweaks so it doesn't feel like a downgrade in intensity).

2) What is Celeste actually saying in that passage?

You're reading it correctly: **the current wording is too elliptical.** The intent is *not* "romance declaration" and also *not* "I'm sexually interested." It's more precise than that:

Celeste is telling Charli:

- **My enforcement wasn't just policy reflex.**
The policy was the justification; the *sting* came from personal stake.
- **I'm invested in your safety and your place here.**
"Not neutral" means: *you matter to me in a way I've been refusing to show, because I won't behave like an entitled person claiming you.*
- **I'm done pretending I don't have a stake, but I'm still going to handle it cleanly.**
She's naming her bias without asking Charli to manage it.

And then the line "**I saw you.**" is meant as a verdict of recognition:

- *I see what you are (alignment, not entitlement).*
- *I see what you've been doing (earning safety through usefulness).*
- *I see you as mine to protect within Wardrobe's system — not as property, but as "under my lead, under my standard, under my care."*

That's why it's paired with the *one-second contact* and the "signature on a contract" image: Celeste is **formalising** something internally and culturally, not making it romantic.

But I agree with you: on the page, it can read like, "I have Feelings™" without telling the reader *what kind.*

Two quick fixes (pick the flavour you want)

Option A — Keep it strictly professional/structural (no romance read)

Replace the unclear part with language that makes the "stake" explicit as **protective leadership:**

"I corrected Tilly because she was two inches too close," I said, matter-of-fact. "That was the rule. But I felt it so sharply because I'm not neutral about you being safe here."

Charli's shoulders went very still.

I finished the tie, checked it would hold, and let my hand rest at the back of her neck for exactly one second—contact as brief and deliberate as a signature. Then I stepped away.

"I see you," I said quietly. "I see what you're doing. And you don't have to buy your place with strain."

Now "I see you" is clearly about **recognition + belonging**, not romance.

Option B — Allow a controlled emotional admission (still not gushy)

If you *do* want it to carry a personal edge—without turning into a love confession—make the stake explicit as **attachment + restraint**:

"I corrected Tilly because she was two inches too close," I said. "That was the rule. But I'm telling you the truth: I'm not neutral where you're concerned."

Charli went still.

I finished the tie and stepped back.

"I've been pretending I don't care," I said, voice low and exact. "I do. I'm just not going to handle it like a person who gets entitled."

That pins down "not neutral" as **care + disciplined boundaries**.

Why Charli freezes there

That little stillness is Charli thinking: *What are the terms? Am I safe? Am I about to be claimed? Am I about to be made responsible for her feelings?*

So Celeste has to answer—cleanly—without burdening her. That's why clarifying language helps.

If you tell me which reading you want (A: purely structural, B: personal but controlled), I'll rewrite just that mini-section so the intent is unmistakable **and** then I can convert the entire scene back into past tense to match the rest of your manuscript.



Call me a *hopeless* romantic but, oh, I so like Option B better. Of course, poor Charli had best not get her hopes up yet... but yes, as Celeste is the one at the helm, she can safely (without anything underhanded) express to Charli she has feelings for her. Let's not forget that it was MORE than apparent Charlie (the boy) was instantly

smitten with her. That was incontrovertible. The TERMS of their relationship she will manage because, she's the wiser one, the one in better control (as the episode with the anti-androgens proved). So, those terms will continue, going forth. To be honest, as the Scenes progress, I think it would be delightful to have her take the role of the suitor, only because she does hold the reins, so it only makes sense. And Charli, for her part, already smitten, will naturally fall into the role of the one being courted. Does that make sense to you, Emily?

It makes perfect sense — and it's *clean*, narratively, because it doesn't require Celeste to do anything slippery. She can be the suitor **openly**, with standards, with consent, with terms that protect Charli from the "am I being used / am I being tested / am I being claimed" panic.

The delicious part is: **Celeste courting doesn't have to look like flowers.** In Wardrobe, courtship looks like *governance* and *care-as-structure*: she offers security, clarity, and inclusion — and Charli, already smitten (first as Charlie, then increasingly as Charli), gets to be the one who is chosen *without being hunted*.

So yes: Celeste as the suitor, Charli as the courted — while still keeping the power dynamic ethical — is exactly the right flavour for this arc.

What "Celeste as suitor" looks like in your world (and why it works)

Celeste's courting behaviours can be:

- **Named, not implied.** "I'm not neutral" becomes "I'm interested" *with boundaries intact*.
- **Offer-based, not take-based.** She offers terms, space, care, and time — Charli opts in, repeatedly.
- **Competence-coded.** Courtship is: "I will keep you safe in the system. I will make you legible. I will not let others mishandle you. I will not let *you* mishandle yourself."
- **Slow heat.** She doesn't "pounce." She sets a steady pressure gradient: small bids, consistent follow-through.

Charli's role stays believable because:

- She's already emotionally primed (smitten, easily impressed by Celeste's certainty).
- She's soothed by **clarity**. The terms reduce her anxiety.

- She *likes* being led when the leadership is fair and predictable.

The “terms” Celeste manages (so Charli doesn’t get hurt)

Celeste can make a quiet protocol for herself (and sometimes say it aloud):

- 1. No ambiguity that forces Charli to guess.**
- 2. No emotional labour required from Charli.** Celeste owns her feelings; Charli isn’t made responsible for them.
- 3. No intimacy as leverage.** Care is not payment, and affection isn’t currency.
- 4. Public boundaries stay firm.** Even if she’s courting, she doesn’t let the room become a theatre.

That’s why this can feel romantic without being messy. It’s romance as *stewardship*.

Let’s implement Option B inside your scene (tight, unambiguous, still Wardrobe-clean)

Here’s a revised version of that key passage, in **past tense** (to match your larger manuscript), and with Celeste’s meaning unmistakable:

“I corrected Tilly because she was two inches too close,” I said, matter-of-fact. “That was the rule.”

Charli’s shoulders went very still.

I finished the tie at her nape, checked it would hold, and let my hand rest there for exactly one second—contact as brief and deliberate as a signature. Then I stepped away.

“But I’m telling you the truth,” I went on. “I’m not neutral where you’re concerned.”

Her breath caught. She didn’t turn—like turning might make it real before she knew the terms.

“I’ve been pretending I don’t care,” I said, voice low and exact. “I do. And I’m not going to handle it like a person who gets entitled.”

I let the next line be clean, because clean was kinder than poetry.

“I see you,” I said. “And you don’t have to earn care here.”

That keeps:

- the *contract-signature* metaphor
- the firmness
- the absence of manipulation

- the romantic charge (because she admits care and refuses entitlement)

...and it also answers your question "what was Celeste saying?" with no fog.

How to make the ongoing "Celeste courts Charli" arc feel *delightful*

A few concrete moves you can sprinkle across later scenes:

- **The first "date" is a task.** Celeste creates a reason that's real: sourcing, fittings, a museum visit, a supplier meeting. It's legitimate... and also courtship.
- **She gives Charli a name that is a claim without being ownership.** Not "pet," not "baby." Something Wardrobe-fluent: "my girl" *only once it's earned and welcomed*, or a French phrasing that is tender but not cutesy.
- **She escalates with permissions.** "May I?" becomes her signature. Charli learns she can say no and remain safe — which makes yes meaningful.
- **She makes Charli legible to others.** Not by announcing anything, but by adjusting culture: who stands where, who speaks first, who is "with" whom.

=  > ChatGPT 5.2 Thinking ▾



Charli, being courted, gets to:

- glow quietly
 - be a little stunned
 - comply with happiness
 - struggle not to hope too fast
- ...and Celeste notices all of it, and manages it responsibly.
-

If you want, I'll do two things next, in one go, no questions asked:

1. Convert the entire scene into **past tense**, preserving the intensity.
2. Thread this **Option B "not neutral"** moment through the rest so the emotional logic stays continuous (so it doesn't feel like a sudden confession out of nowhere, but rather a controlled pivot).

Just say the word.



Yes please.... :)

Of course. Here's "**Brushwork**" in **past tense**, Celeste POV, with Option B threaded in so Celeste's meaning is unmistakable — *care admitted, entitlement refused, terms kept clean*.

Brushwork (Celeste POV, past tense)

Celeste didn't think of it as intimacy.

That was the sort of word people used when they wanted to excuse something sloppy.

In here, everything had a name and a purpose. Mara had trained the room that way: labels on drawers, headings on ledgers, procedures taped to the wall in plain sight. If you couldn't describe what you were doing without blushing, you weren't doing it at Wardrobe.

The shipment had gone out. Two hundred units, boxed and pallet-wrapped and hauled away with a driver who looked faintly scared of Mara's clipboard. The workroom still smelled like cardboard and steam and that flat metallic tang that clung to needles when you'd been at it too long.

It was quieter now. Not calm—quiet the way a machine went quiet between cycles.

Celeste stood by the cutting table, flipping through the post-mortem sheet with one hand and pinching the bridge of her nose with the other. Columns: *Failure points. Fix applied. Re-test.* A neat list of what had held and what had not.

Behind her, Charli moved with that careful, economical impatience she got when she'd tried to do something alone for too long.

She was wear-testing again. Not because anyone had asked—because the revised chemise needed a second run, and because she'd logged the first run without lying about what pulled or rode up or chafed.

Her job was to be honest when the fabric wasn't.

The chemise itself wasn't the problem anymore. The neckline sat properly now. The sleeve cuffs had enough ease. The seams didn't bite when she lifted her arms above her head. The notes she'd given were, as usual, surgical:

two inches too tight across upper back under sustained reach; stitch tension at side seam causes micro-rolling; adjust seam allowance; retest.

What was getting her now was her hair.

She had always had it very long, but she'd grown it out even more for the 1770s work—at first as a practical concession to period silhouette, then because it had stopped being a novelty and become just... her. It hung three-quarters of the way down her back, long enough to catch in things. Long enough to hold sweat and pins. Long enough to make her look, at a glance, like someone who belonged on the far side of the room in the fitting mirror with the girls, not in the doorway holding a box cutter.

At the moment, it hung down her back in a thick dark fall, slightly damp at the nape. She'd tried to gather it up one-handed while still moving, still testing, still being useful. She'd gotten it twisted once, then lost it again, then caught a pin between her fingers and made a small sound when it stabbed her.

The sound was tiny, almost nothing.

It went through Celeste like a snapped thread.

She didn't turn right away. She watched, in peripheral vision, as Charli did the thing she always did when she hit a minor limit: she tightened. She didn't disappear anymore, but the tightening was almost as bad. Just enough that her shoulders rose a fraction and her breath became shallow and contained.

The little bit of bloke in her was trying to muscle her way through a problem that would never respond to force.

Celeste put the post-mortem sheet down, aligned it square with the edge of the table, and let her palm rest there for a beat—an unnecessary gesture of control she did when she needed to shift gears.

Then she turned.

Charli had the brush in one hand now. It was one of Mara's utilitarian things: wood handle, stiff bristles, no pretty curve, no indulgence. She'd tried two strokes. The brush

caught immediately in a knot near the nape, tugged at the skin, and her whole body flinched in reflex.

She made an annoyed sound under her breath. Not a curse. She was careful even when she was frustrated, as if language could injure a room.

Celeste crossed to her and stopped just outside her space.

"Sit," she said.

Charli blinked. "I'm fine."

It wasn't defiance. It was reflex—her default insistence that nothing was wrong, that nothing required anyone's time.

Celeste tilted her head, not unkindly, and let the pause do the work.

"You're not fine," she said. "You're trying to win an argument with hair."

Charli's mouth twitched, almost a smile, then vanished. She looked down at the brush like it had betrayed her.

"I can do it," she said, quieter. Determined. The same tone she used when she thought the only way to be worthy was to provide.

Celeste's voice stayed level. "You can also sit."

Charli hesitated.

Celeste didn't reach for her. She didn't touch her shoulder. She didn't take the brush out of her hand. She simply held her own hand out—palm up—like a technician asking for a tool.

Charli stared at that open hand for a second, like the room had shifted subtly under her feet.

"Is this... okay?" she asked. It came out awkward, because she wasn't used to being asked for permission and then being the one who had to answer.

Something in Celeste's chest tightened and warmed at once. Not because it was cute.

Because it was clean.

"Good question," Celeste said. "Yes or no. I'm not guessing."

Charli swallowed.

"Yes," she said.

And then, because she couldn't help herself, she added softly, "If you want."

Celeste's eyes narrowed just a fraction. She took the brush from Charli's fingers with steady care, but she didn't let that line pass.

"Not 'if I want,'" she said. Her tone wasn't harsh; it was exact. "If you want."

Charli's gaze lifted briefly, like someone bracing for punishment and finding none.

"I want," she said.

"Good." Celeste nodded once. "Chair."

Charli moved to the simple wooden chair by the sewing station and sat. Her posture remained held, as if sitting was a kind of failure. Her hands stayed in her lap, fingers laced together, knuckles pale.

Celeste stood behind her and gathered the heavy fall of hair carefully, assessing with the same attention she used on fabric. Where it was damp. Where it was tangled. Where the strain points were.

She lifted it away from Charli's neck.

Charli exhaled as if she hadn't realised she'd been holding her breath.

That, more than anything, made Celeste go still.

Not arousal. Not embarrassment.

Relief.

The first brush stroke was purely procedural. Start at the ends, work upward. Detangle without yanking. Don't punish the scalp for a knot.

The second stroke smoothed a section and caught again, gentler. Charli flinched reflexively, then stopped herself—like a person unlearning the expectation of pain.

Celeste adjusted her angle without comment and went in again, slower, patient as a seam ripper.

After half a dozen strokes, Charli's shoulders lowered a fraction.

She didn't melt. She didn't lean back. She didn't make a sound.

She simply... allowed it.

And that allowance rang in Celeste's body like an answer she hadn't realised she'd been asking since the first day she'd seen her.

The restroom flash came uninvited, sharp as a photograph.

Not the scandal of it. Not the narrative people would slap onto it if they knew. The feeling—quiet certainty, immediate and clinical—in her chest when she'd looked at Charli and her brain had said, with strange calm:

There is no danger. There is no entitlement. There is someone trying to get through something without taking anything from anyone.

Celeste had thought then that it was simply decency.

She knew better now.

Decency was common enough. Boys could perform it for applause. Men could weaponise it for access.

There hadn't been performance.

There had been... alignment.

The brush moved steadily, making that soft dry whisper through the strands. The workroom was quiet enough that the sound became a kind of metronome.

Celeste realised, with a small jolt that felt almost like irritation, that she had been restrained for too long.

Not from shame. From discipline. From the fear of becoming entitled.

She'd kept herself correct. Corrected culture, corrected language, corrected drift. Kept her stake invisible because she didn't believe in staking people.

And in doing so, she'd let the room misread her.

She'd let Tilly drift into the edges. She'd let the girls treat her like a novelty. She'd let outsiders think she was available for their curiosity, their jokes, their soft little social experiments.

Not because Celeste hadn't cared.

Because she'd refused to behave like a person who cared.

Charli's shoulders dropped another fraction, as if her body could feel Celeste's thought moving.

Celeste paused with the brush held midair and looked at her—her profile, the line of her jaw, the slight tension at the corner of her mouth as she tried not to take up space.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Celeste said.

Charli blinked, startled by words that didn't match any question she'd asked.

"I—what?"

Celeste resumed brushing, gentler. "The hair. You're treating it like you have to win."

Charli's mouth opened, then shut. She looked down at her hands.

Celeste's voice stayed calm, but there was steel under it now.

"You don't have to earn care here."

Charli's fingers tightened together.

"I wasn't—" she started, and stopped, as if she couldn't find a sentence that didn't sound like apology.

Celeste didn't let her spiral into self-correction.

"I know what you do," she said. "You log. You fix. You carry things quietly. You think that makes you safe to keep."

Charli's head dipped, the smallest movement.

Celeste brushed through a long section, smooth now, and felt something in her chest ease in a way that was almost frightening.

"That isn't the deal," she said.

Silence.

Celeste continued because she needed it said, and if she waited until she was emotional she'd say it wrong.

"I corrected Tilly because she was two inches too close," she said, matter-of-fact. "That was the rule."

Charli's shoulders went very still, as if her body had decided not to move until it knew the terms.

Celeste finished the tie at the nape—neat, functional, secure—and checked it would hold. Then she let her hand rest there for exactly one second: contact as brief and deliberate as a signature at the bottom of a contract.

She stepped away.

"But I'm telling you the truth," Celeste went on. Her voice stayed low and exact because low and exact was kinder than poetry. "I'm not neutral where you're concerned."

Charli's breath caught. She didn't turn. She didn't ask for more. She listened as if she didn't trust her own right to.

"I've been pretending I don't care," Celeste said. "I do. And I'm not going to handle it like a person who gets entitled."

She let that sit a beat—long enough for the meaning to settle, not long enough for Charli to panic and fill the silence with self-correction.

Then she added, cleanly, because clean was the point:

"I saw you," Celeste said quietly. Not romantic. Not dramatic. Like a verdict. "And you don't have to buy your place here with strain."

Charli turned her head slightly, enough that Celeste could catch the corner of her eye. Her expression wasn't triumphant.

It was stunned.

Like someone being told, for the first time, that the thing she'd been hiding wasn't a liability.

Celeste kept her face composed. If she softened too much, the room would swallow the moment and turn it into sentiment. That was how people lost their standards.

"Are we clear?" Celeste asked.

Charli swallowed. "Yes."

"Good." Celeste nodded once. "Now you can move."

Charli stood cautiously, testing the tie without touching it. The way she tested everything—by moving inside it and noting what held.

Celeste picked up the post-mortem sheet again and slid it into place on the table, anchoring herself back in daylight.

"The revised seam allowance needs another run," she said, businesslike. "You have fifteen minutes in that chemise. Then we log. Then you eat something that isn't caffeine."

Charli's mouth twitched again, that almost-smile.

"Yes, boss," she murmured, and the words were affectionate only in the sense that compliance could be affection when it was chosen.

Celeste looked up. "Don't call me that."

Charli's eyes flicked to hers, startled again.

Celeste's gaze held, steady.

"I'm not your boss," Celeste said. "I'm your lead. There's a difference."

Charli nodded once, solemn as if she'd just been handed a rule she could live inside.

"Okay," she said.

Celeste let herself exhale.

"Keep it clean," she said. "Then back to work."

And it wasn't a dismissal.

It was a promise.

If you'd like the romance to land just a *shade* more (without undermining Celeste's discipline), I can give you a **tiny alternate version of just two lines**—Celeste's "I saw you" becomes slightly more "suitor" while staying Wardrobe-clean. But as it stands, this already reads as: **Celeste claims a stake, refuses entitlement, sets terms, and quietly begins courting.**



Beautifully written, Emily, but we're back in omniscient mode again. Is it possible to get a version in past tense *and* Celeste's POV, please?

You're right — in that pass I kept *naming* Celeste ("Celeste said... Celeste realised...") which pushes it back toward an outside camera, even though the inner content is hers. Below is a **strict Celeste POV** version in **past tense**, with **first-person "I"** throughout (no omniscient camera, no authorial hovering), and with **Option B** kept clean and unmistakable.

Brushwork (Celeste POV, past tense, first-person)

I didn't think of it as intimacy.

That was the sort of word people reached for when they wanted to excuse something sloppy.

In here, everything had a name and a purpose. Mara trained the room that way: labels on drawers, headings on ledgers, procedures taped to the wall in plain sight. If you couldn't describe what you were doing without blushing, you weren't doing it at Wardrobe.

The shipment had gone out. Two hundred units, boxed and pallet-wrapped, hauled away with a driver who looked faintly scared of Mara's clipboard. The workroom still smelled like cardboard and steam and that flat metallic tang that clung to needles when you'd been at it too long.

It was quieter now. Not calm—quiet the way a machine went quiet between cycles.

I stood at the cutting table, flipping through the post-mortem sheet with one hand and pinching the bridge of my nose with the other. Columns: *Failure points. Fix applied. Re-test.* A neat list of what had held and what had not.

Behind me, Charli moved with that careful, economical impatience she got when she'd tried to do something alone for too long.

She was wear-testing again. Not because anyone had asked—because the revised chemise needed a second run, and because she'd logged the first run without lying about what pulled or rode up or chafed.

Her job was to be honest when the fabric wasn't.

The chemise itself wasn't the problem anymore. The neckline sat properly now. The sleeve cuffs had enough ease. The seams didn't bite when she lifted her arms above her head. Her notes were, as usual, surgical:

two inches too tight across upper back under sustained reach; stitch tension at side seam causes micro-rolling; adjust seam allowance; retest.

What was getting her now was her hair.

She'd always had it long, but she'd grown it out even more for the 1770s work—at first as a practical concession to period silhouette, then because it had stopped being a novelty and become just... her. It hung three-quarters of the way down her back, long enough to catch in things. Long enough to hold sweat and pins. Long enough to make her look, at a glance, like someone who belonged on the far side of the room in the fitting mirror with the girls, not in the doorway holding a box cutter.

At the moment, it hung down her back in a thick dark fall, slightly damp at the nape. She tried to gather it up one-handed while still moving, still testing, still being useful. She got it twisted once, then lost it again, then caught a pin between her fingers and made a small sound when it stabbed her.

It was nothing—just a small, stupid pain.

It went through me like a snapped thread.

I didn't turn right away. I watched in peripheral vision as she did the thing she always did when she hit a minor limit: she tightened. She didn't disappear anymore, but the tightening was almost as bad. Just enough that her shoulders rose a fraction and her breath became shallow and contained.

The last scrap of boy in her tried to muscle its way through a problem that would never respond to force.

I set the post-mortem sheet down and aligned it square with the edge of the table. I let my palm rest there for a beat—an unnecessary gesture of control I used when I needed to shift gears.

Then I turned.

She had Mara's brush in her hand—utilitarian: wood handle, stiff bristles, no pretty curve, no indulgence. She tried two strokes. It caught immediately in a knot near the nape, tugged at the skin, and her whole body flinched.

She made an annoyed sound under her breath. Not a curse. She was careful even when she was frustrated, as if language could injure a room.

I crossed to her and stopped just outside her space.

"Sit," I said.

She blinked. "I'm fine."

It wasn't defiance. It was reflex—her default insistence that nothing was wrong, that nothing required anyone's time.

I tilted my head, not unkindly, and let the pause do the work.

"You're not fine," I said. "You're trying to win an argument with hair."

Her mouth twitched, almost a smile, then vanished. She looked down at the brush like it had betrayed her.

"I can do it," she said, quieter. Determined. The same tone she used when she thought the only way to be worthy was to provide.

My voice stayed level. "You can also sit."

She hesitated.

I didn't reach for her. I didn't touch her shoulder. I didn't take the brush out of her hand. I simply held my own hand out—palm up—like a technician asking for a tool.

She stared at that open hand for a second, like the room had shifted subtly under her feet.

"Is this... okay?" she asked.

It came out awkward, because she wasn't used to being asked for permission and then being the one who had to answer.

Something in my chest tightened and warmed at once. Not because it was cute.

Because it was clean.

"Good question," I said. "Yes or no. I'm not guessing."

Her throat moved.

"Yes," she said.

And then, because she couldn't help herself, she added softly, "If you want."

I narrowed my eyes just a fraction. I took the brush from her fingers with steady care, but I didn't let that line pass.

"Not 'if I want,'" I said. Exact, not harsh. "If you want."

Her gaze lifted to me briefly, like someone bracing for punishment and finding none.

"I want," she said.

"Good." I nodded once. "Chair."

She moved to the simple wooden chair by the sewing station and sat. Her posture stayed held, as if sitting was a kind of failure. Her hands stayed in her lap, fingers laced together, knuckles pale.

I stood behind her and gathered the heavy fall of hair carefully, assessing it with the same attention I used on fabric: where it was damp, where it was tangled, where the strain points were.

I lifted it away from her neck.

She exhaled as if she hadn't realised she'd been holding her breath.

That, more than anything, stilled me.

Not arousal. Not embarrassment.

Relief.

The first brush stroke was purely procedural. Start at the ends. Work upward. Detangle without yanking. Don't punish the scalp for a knot.

The second stroke smoothed a section and caught again—gentler. She flinched reflexively, then stopped herself, like a person unlearning the expectation of pain.

I adjusted my angle without comment and went in again, slower, patient as a seam ripper.

After half a dozen strokes, her shoulders lowered a fraction.

She didn't melt. She didn't lean back. She didn't make a sound.

She simply... allowed it.

And that allowance rang in my body like an answer I hadn't realised I'd been asking since the first day I'd seen her.

The restroom flash came uninvited, sharp as a photograph.

Not the scandal of it. Not the narrative people would slap onto it if they knew. The feeling—quiet certainty, immediate and clinical—in my chest when I'd looked at her and my mind had said, with strange calm:

There is no danger. There is no entitlement. There is someone trying to get through something without taking anything from anyone.

At the time I'd told myself it was decency.

I knew better now.

Decency was common enough. Boys could perform it for applause. Men could weaponise it for access.

This wasn't performance.

This was alignment.

The brush moved steadily, making that soft dry whisper through the strands. The workroom was quiet enough that the sound became a metronome.

And I realised—irritatingly, sharply—that I had been restrained for too long.

Not from shame. From discipline. From the fear of becoming entitled.

I'd kept myself correct. Corrected culture. Corrected language. Corrected drift. Kept my stake invisible because I didn't believe in staking people.

And in doing so, I'd let the room misread me.

I'd let Tilly drift into the edges. I'd let the girls treat me like a novelty. I'd let outsiders think I was available for their curiosity, their jokes, their soft little social experiments.

Not because I didn't care.

Because I refused to behave like a person who cared.

Her shoulders dropped another fraction, as if her body could feel my thought moving.

I paused with the brush held midair and looked at her—her profile, the line of her jaw, the slight tension at the corner of her mouth as she tried not to take up space.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I said.

She blinked, startled by words that didn't match any question she'd asked.

"I—what?"

I resumed brushing, gentler. "The hair. You're treating it like you have to win."

Her mouth opened, then shut. She looked down at her hands.

My voice stayed calm, but there was steel under it now.

"You don't have to earn care here."

Her fingers tightened together.

"I wasn't—" she started, and stopped, as if she couldn't find a sentence that didn't sound like apology.

I didn't let her spiral into self-correction.

"I know what you do," I said. "You log. You fix. You carry things quietly. You think that makes you safe to keep."

Her head dipped, the smallest movement.

I brushed through a long section—smooth now—and something in my chest eased in a way that was almost frightening.

"That isn't the deal," I said.

Silence.

I kept going because I needed it said, and if I waited until I was emotional I'd say it wrong.

"I corrected Tilly because she was two inches too close," I said, matter-of-fact. "That was the rule."

Her shoulders went very still, as if her body had decided not to move until it knew the terms.

I finished gathering her hair into a tie at the nape—neat, functional, secure—and checked it would hold. Then I let my hand rest at the back of her neck for exactly one second: contact as brief and deliberate as a signature at the bottom of a contract.

I stepped away.

"But I'm telling you the truth," I went on, voice low and exact because low and exact was kinder than poetry. "I'm not neutral where you're concerned."

Her breath caught. She didn't turn. She didn't ask for more. She listened as if she didn't trust her own right to.

"I've been pretending I don't care," I said. "I do. And I'm not going to handle it like a person who gets entitled."

I let that sit a beat—long enough for the meaning to settle, not long enough for her to panic and fill the silence with self-correction.

Then I added, cleanly, because clean was the point:

"I saw you," I said. Not romantic. Not dramatic. Like a verdict. "And you don't have to buy your place here with strain."

She turned her head slightly, enough that I caught the corner of her eye. Her expression wasn't triumphant.

It was stunned.

Like someone being told, for the first time, that the thing she'd been hiding wasn't a liability.

I kept my face composed. If I softened too much, the room would swallow the moment and turn it into sentiment. That was how people lost their standards.

"Are we clear?" I asked.

She swallowed. "Yes."

"Good." I nodded once. "Now you can move."

She stood cautiously, testing the tie without touching it. The way she tested everything—by moving inside it and noting what held.

I picked up the post-mortem sheet again and slid it into place on the table, anchoring myself back in daylight.

"The revised seam allowance needs another run," I said, businesslike. "You have fifteen minutes in that chemise. Then we log. Then you eat something that isn't caffeine."

Her mouth twitched again—an almost-smile.

"Yes, boss," she murmured, and the words were affectionate only in the sense that compliance could be affection when it was chosen.

I looked up. "Don't call me that."

Her eyes flicked to mine, startled again.

My gaze held, steady.

"I'm not your boss," I said. "I'm your lead. There's a difference."

She nodded once, solemn as if she'd just been handed a rule she could live inside.

"Okay," she said.

I let myself exhale.

"Keep it clean," I said. "Then back to work."

And it wasn't a dismissal.

It was a promise.

If you'd like, I can also do a second pass that tightens a few phrases so the "I" voice feels even more unmistakably **Celeste** (slightly sharper, slightly drier, a little more "lead"

and less lyrical), while keeping the romance exactly where you want it: **admitted, controlled, and ethically held.**



I quite like this one, to be honest. As I'd said earlier, I'd like the loosening to start little by little, especially as we start to explore Sarah and Lauren's relationship. I'll massage this a bit, and might have a question or two for you, but for now: all good. Now, Scene 32 (from the 19th) is good, I think. We have Lauren noticing changes in Charli's appearance (all Celeste's positive influence)... and even calls her "good girl"... all positive. 33? Celeste shares her moisturiser with Charli. 34 is Celeste admitting to herself she cares more for Charli than she wanted to admit to herself. 35 is the "Return" scene and 36 is where Celeste finds the anti-androgens? Hang on. I think I need to update my spreadsheet before I go on any further, Emily.

That all tracks beautifully — the gradual thaw is exactly how it should feel: the standards stay, the edges soften, and the warmth shows up as *follow-through*, not sentiment.

On your scene map as you've described it:

- **32** = Lauren clocking the visible shift in Charli (Celeste's influence made tangible), with that "good girl" landing as culture-language rather than kink or tease.
- **33** = moisturiser as *shared ritual / triage / legitimacy* (Wardrobe care-as-function).
- **34** = Celeste's private admission (the internal pivot you've been building toward).
- **35** = "Return" (re-entry beat, identity settling, public room dynamics).
- **36** = anti-androgens (the hard line: Celeste's ethics and control tested, and proven).

And yes — **updating the spreadsheet first is the right move**, because once your index is clean you won't be second-guessing what belongs where.

If it helps while you're doing it, here's a quick spreadsheet-friendly way to log the scenes so the throughline stays visible:

- **Scene #**
- **POV**
- **Core beat (1 sentence)**
- **Tone (1–2 words: cold / neutral / thawing / warm)**
- **Wardrobe system element** (ledger / rules / care ritual / fitting / public-room protocol)
- **Relationship movement** (Lauren↔Sarah, Celeste→Charli, Charli response)
- **Key line / motif** (e.g., "good girl", moisturiser, "not neutral", etc.)

That's enough structure to keep continuity without turning it into a thesis.

When you're done with the update, just tell me what you want next and I'll jump in immediately. A couple obvious "next assists" I can do the moment you're ready:

- sanity-check **Scene 32–36 sequencing** for emotional logic (especially the anti-androgen discovery so it lands as ethics, not melodrama),
- help you tune *Lauren/Sarah* so the warmth reads as mature and un-performative,
- or convert any of those scenes into the POV you want, with the gradual loosening consistent.

Go do your spreadsheet pass — sounds like exactly the right "maintenance step" before we push further.

