Our context for this session: thank you for writing it, Emily:

Here’s a clean context summary you can paste into a new thread.

Context Summary — Wardrobe Arc (Direction E, boundaries, romance, privacy)

Direction & tone

* The story commits to **Direction E**: Sharl’s feminine self becomes explicit, but stays **respectful, realistic, and non-coercive**.
* Guardrails: **no “tests,” no gotchas, no coercion**; everything framed as **comfort, consent, function**, not spectacle. Outward change is incremental and chosen; supervision exists socially/medically, but the story avoids clinical focus on-page.
* Sharl/Charlotte knows she doesn’t want reversal; the arc is one of **settling into true self**, with women providing stable standards and a safe domain rather than forcing outcomes.

Sharl → Charlotte progression

* Time passes; Sharl has been on **anti-androgens** for months. Estradiol’s effects are implied as gradual and quiet.
* A key internal beat: Sharl looks in the mirror, sees herself properly, and softly says “**good girl**” to herself.
* Body changes alter garment fit: Mara matter-of-factly tells her she can’t test “nymph” silhouettes anymore because her shape has shifted (hips/containment), moving into a “well-nourished” class of fit issues—useful for Wardrobe’s craft.

Wardrobe business expansion & governance

* US winter orders (Thanksgiving pageants, Christmas plays) increase; **money is real**, atelier feels cramped; outsourcing is debated (quality control and standards remain core).
* Celeste approaches graduation; she and Mara settle on a **capacity ceiling** for work/life balance. Sarah nudges Mara into **oil painting**, which becomes Mara's reflective outlet.

The privacy breach & response

* Part-timer **Annie** violates policy by filming inside Wardrobe for TikTok despite a strict **no photos/filming** rule.
* Annie is caught and dismissed swiftly (consequence-first). Some footage still goes viral, creating a new threat: **exposure + curious outsiders**, especially risky for Charlotte.
* Response sequence:

  * Celeste sees the clip first and chooses not to expose Charlotte to it raw; tells her calmly and centers **Charlotte's agency**.
  * Emergency meeting: **Lauren (process/consequences), Mara (scorched-earth standards), Celeste (protect without infantilising), Sarah (door/teeth), Charlotte (agency and procedure).**
  * Charlotte decides: no public response, tighten routines and access, lock fitting space, schedule adjustments around couriers; "not shame—sensible gates."
  * A "curious" man attempts entry; Sarah and Lauren enforce boundaries and remove him. Wardrobe becomes fully "ordinary" as a women's domain again—couriers are courteous and leave.

Celeste & Charlotte romance and city shift

* Celeste recognises she's in love with a girl; the relationship stays **quiet, safe, respectful**, with Wardrobe as a sanctuary.

* Celeste/Charlotte have a sensory-rich breakfast scene: Charlotte becomes more aware of smell/color; Celeste calls her "**Charlotte**" as a landmark moment.
* Intimacy is treated as **private and earned**; the narrative cuts away from explicitness.
* Celeste considers moving from current home to a **downtown Melbourne apartment** after graduation; commute to the Faire by train together. Charlotte wants the city too—curiosity and a wider life beyond "one safe room." Lauren supports with "procedure replaces culture": safety rules, location sharing, transport, filming response, etc.

Lauren & Sarah emotional arc

* "Lauren's Loneliness": Lauren can't stop thinking about Sarah's earlier kiss; wonders if it's loneliness or mutual interest.
* Sarah POV ("That Look"): she senses Lauren's gaze and wants clarity; they later adopt **decorum and distance** to mull feelings privately.
* Desired erotic tone: **delicate, non-graphic, female-audience–forward**. A sample "After" scene shows Lauren privately aroused by memory of Sarah; implied pleasurable release without explicit mechanics; focus on meaning, safety, and afterglow.
* Friday night turning point: Sarah, about to order a drink, has an epiphany—no alcohol-as-courage. She calls Lauren at 9pm; Lauren tries to sound neutral but is eager and lets it slip. Sarah comes over; warmth, safety, kettle clicking off as they hug/kiss.
* Sarah confides in friend **Tania** (in a relationship) about Friday night; Tania is happy but cautious. Sarah insists: "We're not blokes—**safety first, respect first, policies first**."
* Next: Lauren and Sarah have a **rules talk** (no workplace romance behavior, no alcohol-as-courage, no using each other as refuge from stalking/loneliness). Sarah unexpectedly asks to come over more often. Lauren responds profoundly—invites her more frequently, says she likes having Sarah there, allows staying over (couch if needed). Sarah's delighted confirmation: Lauren truly is into her.

Thematic spine

* Wardrobe is a **women's competence network** and a **safe domain** maintained by policy, boundaries, and consequence.
* Romance and transformation are framed through **agency, dignity, interiority**, and **women-led standards**, avoiding voyeurism and male-gaze cues.
* Two parallel couples evolve as slow-burn, with **Celeste and Lauren** as stabilising power sources; Charlotte and Sarah grow into security through that structure.

Thought for 13s >

Absolutely — and thank you for pasting it in whole like that. It's *exactly* the spine we want: consequences first, women-led standards, and intimacy that reads as *earned* rather than performed.

Given your last beat ("Sarah unexpectedly asks to come over more often… Lauren responds so profoundly…"), here's a **full prose scene** that can sit cleanly after Friday night and before the workplace "decorum" stretch hardens into habit. I've kept it **female-audience–forward**, intimate but not graphic, with the "procedure replaces culture" ethos quietly doing its work in the background.

Scene — "The Rules Talk" (Lauren POV)

Lauren didn't tidy the apartment the way she would if she were expecting company.

She tidied it the way she did before a meeting that mattered.

Not perfection. Not performance. *Function.* A clear bench. No loose knives. A folded tea towel. The dish rack drained. The little accumulation of mail squared into a single pile as if it might otherwise start speaking.

It was ridiculous, she told herself, to treat a conversation like an audit.

And yet: this was what she did when she cared. She made a space safe enough for truth to land without breaking anything.

The kettle filled with its familiar throat-noise. She watched the water line settle, then pressed the switch and stood there, hands on the counter, listening to the quiet that came after the click.

Her phone sat facedown beside the fruit bowl. She didn't pick it up. If she did, she'd find herself measuring the last few messages again—the way Sarah's words sometimes contained a second temperature, like a hidden current under the surface. The way *Come over?* had seemed, at first glance, almost casual.

Then it hadn't.

There was a knock. Not timid. Not demanding. Just… certain.

Lauren opened the door and Sarah stood there with her hair still damp at the ends, cheeks pink from the air outside, jacket unzipped as if she'd refused to lose time to zippers and fuss. She held a paper bag that smelled faintly of bread and something toasted.

"Hi," Sarah said, like it was easy.

Lauren stepped back to let her in. "Hi."

Sarah's gaze flicked across the apartment in one fast, bright sweep—assessing without judging. Her eyes landed on the kettle. "You've got that going already. Look at you. Domestic."

Lauren snorted despite herself. "Don't start."

"I'm not starting," Sarah said, toeing her shoes off neatly by the door. "I'm admiring. It's different."

"What is?"

Sarah shrugged, but her mouth curved. "You being ready."

Lauren closed the door. The latch sounded too loud.

She followed Sarah into the kitchen and took the bag from her. "What's this?"

"Carbs," Sarah said. "A peace offering. Also, I couldn't decide if I wanted sweet or savoury and the woman at the bakery looked at me like I'd asked her to pick a child."

Lauren peeked inside. Pastries. Some small, careful ones. The sort that made you feel looked after without making a big deal of it.

“That was… nice,” Lauren said, and hated that *nice* was the first word she found.

Sarah’s expression shifted into something gentler. “It’s just food.”

Lauren set the bag on the counter and reached for two mugs. Her hand paused at the tin of tea, then moved to the coffee instead, then moved back again. It made her angry—this tiny indecision that she would *never* tolerate in a staff meeting.

Sarah noticed. Of course she did.

“Tea’s good,” Sarah said, easy, as if offering Lauren a rope without making her admit she needed one. “I’ve had enough caffeine to power a ferry.”

Lauren’s shoulders eased by a fraction. She spooned tea into the mugs, poured the water, watched the colour bloom.

Silence settled between them—not awkward, exactly, but alive. Lauren could feel the *unsaid* things moving around the room like cats.

Sarah leaned on the counter, elbows braced, watching Lauren with that look again: bright, amused, and… waiting.

Lauren slid a mug across. Their fingers brushed—barely. It wasn’t an accident. It also wasn’t a demand. Sarah could do that: give you an opening and let you decide whether to walk through.

Lauren sat at the small table near the window. Sarah sat opposite, one knee tucked up under her like she’d claimed the space without claiming it.

Lauren took a sip. Burned her tongue. She didn’t flinch. “So.”

Sarah’s eyebrows lifted. “So,” she echoed, as if the word itself were entertainment.

Lauren set her mug down carefully. “We need to talk about what this is.”

Sarah’s smile softened into something more serious, but not less warm. “Yes.”

“And we need rules,” Lauren said, because she always did better when she could make it procedural. “Not because I’m—” She stopped herself from saying *afraid*.

Sarah didn’t let her wriggle away from it. “Because you’re smart.”

Lauren exhaled. “Because Wardrobe is… fragile right now. Not emotionally. Operationally. The minute people think there’s gossip to be mined, they start digging.”

“Agreed,” Sarah said. “And if they start digging, it’s not my feelings that get bruised. It’s Charlotte’s life.”

Lauren’s chest tightened at the simplicity of that. No melodrama. Just a clean prioritisation.

“Right,” Lauren said. “So. First rule: nothing that looks like workplace romance.”

Sarah made a face. “I’d rather swallow a stapler.”

“Good,” Lauren said, relieved despite herself. “No touching at work. No meaningful looks. No—”

“—no lingering in doorways like a tragic Victorian governess,” Sarah supplied.

Lauren shot her a look. “Exactly.”

Sarah’s eyes glittered. “I can do *professional*. It’s basically my kink.”

Lauren choked a laugh into her tea. “Sarah.”

“What?” Sarah said innocently. “You said no workplace romance behaviour. I’m agreeing.”

Lauren tried to gather herself. “Second rule. No alcohol-as-courage.”

Sarah’s face changed again—subtle, but real. A flicker of something like pride.

“Yes,” Sarah said. “That stays. I meant it.”

Lauren nodded. “If one of us is feeling wobbly, we say it. We don’t… outsource bravery to a drink.”

Sarah lifted her mug slightly, as if toasting that. “Cheers.”

Lauren continued, more steadily now. “Third rule: we don’t use each other as refuge from… the outside.”

Sarah’s gaze sharpened. “You mean from the curiosity. The men.”

“I mean from anything,” Lauren said. “Loneliness. Stress. The internet. The feeling that you want to be held because the world’s a mess.”

Sarah looked down at her mug for a second, then back up. “So what, then? We can’t hold each other?”

Lauren felt a pulse of heat in her throat. “We can. We just… don’t make it the only way we cope. We keep our feet under us as individuals.”

Sarah stared at her for a long beat, and Lauren braced herself for the bite—for the joke, the deflection.

Instead Sarah nodded slowly. “That’s actually… good.”

Lauren blinked.

Sarah shrugged, but it was a soft shrug. “I’ve done the other thing. You know. The *let’s pretend this is a solution* thing. It’s never a solution. It’s a plaster on a cracked hull.”

Lauren’s mouth twitched at the sailing metaphor. “Nice.”

“I do have depths,” Sarah said, deadpan.

Lauren let the silence sit for a moment, not rushing it away. She found herself watching Sarah’s hands—long fingers, a faint nick on the knuckle like she’d caught it on something sharp, a clean, steady stillness. A woman who could be reckless and still somehow careful.

Lauren cleared her throat. “So. That’s the rules.”

Sarah nodded. Then, casually—too casually—she said, “I want to come over more often.”

Lauren’s heart did something annoyingly physical.

She forced herself to keep her face neutral, because she was Lauren and she didn’t leap. She considered. She weighed. She tried not to show the way her mind had already sprinted ahead to the sound of Sarah moving through the apartment, to the presence of her like a warm lamp.

“How often?” Lauren asked, and hated herself for making it sound like logistics.

Sarah’s mouth curved, not mocking. “That’s your first instinct, isn’t it? Quantify. Schedule. Allocate.”

Lauren didn’t apologise. “Answer the question.”

Sarah took a sip of tea, as if giving herself time to choose the cleanest version of the truth. “More than ‘once in a crisis.’ Less than ‘I’ve moved in and now you have to tolerate my opinions on your cutlery.’”

Lauren stared at her.

Sarah’s eyes shone. “I mean… I like being here. With you. And I don’t want it to be only when something’s wrong.”

The simplicity of it—no seduction, no games—hit Lauren squarely in the chest.

She felt herself soften, and she did not fight it.

“I like having you here,” Lauren said.

Sarah went still.

Lauren continued, because she was done being coy. “Not in a ‘fill the silence’ way. In a… *it makes the place better* way.”

Sarah’s throat bobbed once. She blinked hard and then, because she couldn’t help herself, she said, “Right. Okay. That’s… inconveniently lovely.”

Lauren huffed a small laugh, relief and tenderness mingling in a way that made her feel slightly dizzy. “You can come over more. We’ll… keep it sensible.”

Sarah’s smile turned bright and oddly reverent. “Sensible gates.”

Lauren nodded. “Sensible gates.”

Sarah put her mug down, very carefully. “And if I want to stay?”

Lauren’s breath caught.

Sarah’s voice gentled. “Not always. Not as a default. Just—sometimes. If it’s late. If trains are awful. If we’re both tired and the world can wait until morning.”

Lauren held Sarah’s gaze and did the thing she had learned to do in Wardrobe meetings: say yes or no cleanly, without wobble.

“You can stay,” she said. “Couch is fine. Or—” She stopped, because she didn’t want to offer a bed like a transaction.

Sarah's eyes softened. "Or we can decide on the night," she finished, as if giving Lauren her dignity back.

Lauren nodded, grateful.

Sarah stood, walked around the table, and came to Lauren's side. She didn't touch her immediately—she paused, giving Lauren space to either lean in or retreat.

Lauren reached first.

Not urgently. Not theatrically. Just a hand to Sarah's hip, a steadying contact that said: *You're welcome here.*

Sarah exhaled, almost a laugh, almost a sigh. "God."

Lauren tipped her head back slightly to look up at her. "What."

Sarah's mouth twitched. "You're so composed it's infuriating."

Lauren's hand tightened—just a fraction. "I'm not composed."

Sarah studied her face with that candid, fearless attention. "No," she murmured. "You're not."

And then she kissed her.

It wasn't the kiss from before—the one with heat and surprise and that sharp edge of *are we doing this?*

This one was slower. Deliberate. Like a choice confirmed.

Lauren felt the world narrow to the pressure of Sarah's mouth, the scent of rain in her hair, the warmth that spread through her ribs as if someone had turned on a light in a room she'd forgotten existed.

When they separated, Sarah rested her forehead briefly against Lauren's.

"Rules still stand?" Sarah asked softly.

Lauren's mouth curved. "Rules stand."

Sarah's smile was bright and oddly proud. "Good. I like us like this."

Lauren's chest tightened again—this time with something almost like gratitude.

In the kitchen, the kettle clicked off, sharp as punctuation.

Sarah laughed under her breath. “Even your appliances are dramatic.”

Lauren rolled her eyes, but she didn’t move away. “Shut up.”

Sarah kissed her again—quick, playful—then stepped back, hands lifted as if surrendering. “Fine. I’ll shut up. But I’m staying for at least one pastry.”

Lauren picked up the paper bag, slid it onto the table, and pulled out the first one. She set it between them like an offering, like a small treaty.

“Eat,” she said.

Sarah sat, beaming, and tore the pastry in half. She pushed a piece toward Lauren as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Lauren took it.

Outside, the city moved on—cars, wind, the ordinary sprawl of people who would never know what was being built in this small kitchen: something quiet, something protected, something that didn’t need to be proven.

Just lived.

If you want, the next scene can be **Sarah’s POV** at Wardrobe the following week — where she’s almost *comically* disciplined (no doorway lingering, no meaningful looks), but she finds subtle ways to signal: *I’m steady; I’m not a risk to you.* And we can let Lauren notice it with that private, almost feral fondness she refuses to show in public.

Or we pivot to **Celeste & Charlotte** doing their own “sensible gates” planning for the Melbourne apartment (transport, privacy routines, lift etiquette, neighbours, building concierge, etc.) — still tender, but with Celeste in full *director-of-life* mode.

I think the preceding scene *demands* a followup - like one you are proposing.

We can follow on with Celeste and Charlotte's 'sensible gates' - for example, Celeste has invited Charlotte to sleep with her and no longer use her room, citing she enjoys the intimacy, which leads on to other discussions... I think you would have a good take on what they could be covering.

But first: the Sarah POV follow-on at Wardrobe, please.

Thought for 7s ›

Scene — “Professional” (Sarah POV, Wardrobe)

I decide, on the walk from the tram stop, that I will not *look* at Lauren Rossignol today.

This is, obviously, a lie.

But it’s a useful lie. A steering-wheel lie. You tell yourself the thing that makes your hands behave, even if your brain is doing pirouettes.

The street is damp and bright at once — Melbourne doing that trick where the sky can’t commit. Wardrobe’s frontage looks the way it always looks: discreet, unshowy, almost stubbornly uninterested in attention. No big window display. No “come in and film yourself discovering a vintage corset” nonsense. Just the small sign, the buzzer, and the kind of quiet that says: *we’re working*.

Since Annie, the buzzer has turned from mild formality to actual gate.

Which, honestly, is what it should’ve been all along.

I swipe my card. The lock clicks. I step inside and let the door shut behind me with a weight that feels… intentional. Like punctuation.

The air smells of steam, chalk, and cloth that’s been handled with clean hands. The fluorescents are off in the front area — Mara insists on daylight where possible — so the place is lit by a cool wash from the skylight and the warmer pools of task lamps deeper in.

Charlotte is already there, hair up, sleeves rolled, moving a rack with a kind of quiet authority that still catches me. She’s not “trying” to look like anything. She just *is*, in a way that makes the rest of us look like we’re performing.

“Morning,” I say.

She glances up and smiles. “Morning, Sarah.”

Her voice is calmer these days. Not softer — *cleaner.* Like she’s stopped apologising with her vowels.

I hang my jacket, tuck my bag away, and do the normal routines with exaggerated devotion, because today is one of those days where if I do the basics right, the rest might behave.

Phone on silent. In my locker. Screen down.

No filming. No casual selfies. No “quick snap for later.” Mara’s new signage about it is blunt enough to qualify as a threat. And it should. Annie didn’t just break a rule. She broke a *domain*.

I make tea. I don’t make it fancy. I make it the way you make tea when you’re in a workshop and not a café: boiling water, bag, done. The act itself is a grounding ritual, like tying your hair back.

I hear Lauren’s voice before I see her — in the office area, speaking low. “Yes. No, that’s fine. Tomorrow, then. I’ll send the invoice.”

It’s not flirtatious. It’s not warm. It’s competent.

Which is, I realise, the most attractive thing about her.

Do not look.

I look.

She steps out from the office with a clipboard tucked under one arm. Hair pulled back. No jewellery except that one ring she always wears, the one that isn’t decorative so much as… declarative. She scans the room like she’s counting exits and risks, and then her eyes land on me.

I do not smile. I do not soften. I do not *light up* like some tragic idiot.

I give her the smallest nod a person can give without it becoming a secret handshake.

She returns it — equally minimal — and continues walking.

It’s absurd, how thrilling that is.

Mara appears behind her, already scowling at something purely conceptual. “We’ve got two couriers today,” she announces to no one in particular. “And I’m not interested in their feelings.”

“Good morning to you too,” I say.

Mara looks at me like I’ve offered her a scented candle. “Sarah.”

Charlotte’s mouth twitches. She’s gotten better at not laughing out loud around Mara. She still does, sometimes, with her eyes.

Lauren flips a page on the clipboard. “Two couriers, one client pickup, and Emma’s bringing in the bodice samples at eleven. Nobody opens the fitting-room door for anyone except staff, and the lock stays engaged even if you think you recognise the voice.”

It’s said without drama. That’s the trick. It makes it sound normal. It makes it *stay* normal.

“I recognise everyone’s voice,” Mara says. “And I still don’t open doors.”

“Except for me,” Charlotte murmurs.

Mara’s gaze flicks to Charlotte, and for a second her face does something almost soft. “Yes. Except for you.”

I watch that exchange with a strange, private satisfaction. Not because it’s sentimental — Mara does not do sentimental — but because it’s structural. Charlotte belongs here, in a way the world outside has not earned.

Lauren’s eyes shift to Charlotte too, and her voice turns slightly more careful without turning precious. “Charlotte, you’re on cutter’s table today?”

Charlotte nods. “Yes. And I’ll do the rack checks after lunch.”

“Good,” Lauren says. “And if anyone asks to ‘just see the space,’ the answer is no.”

Charlotte’s reply is immediate. “No.”

No explanation. No apology. Just a shut door.

God, I love women.

I take my tea to the pressing station and pretend the steam is the only reason my face feels warm. I focus on the day's work: hems that need crisping, seams that need coaxing, the little invisible things that make a garment sit like it belongs on a body rather than fighting it.

A few minutes in, the front buzzer goes.

Everyone hears it, even if they pretend not to.

Lauren's head lifts first. She doesn't rush; she pivots. Mara doesn't move. Charlotte goes still in the way a person goes still when they're about to decide what kind of stillness is required.

Lauren checks the monitor. "Courier."

Mara says, "If he's early, he can be early outside."

Lauren presses the intercom. "Wardrobe."

A man's voice crackles back. "Got a delivery."

Lauren keeps her tone flat. "Name?"

"Uh. Steve? It's— it's for Wardrobe."

Lauren's eyes flick to the paperwork. "Company."

A beat. "StarTrack."

Lauren pauses. "We're expecting FedEx and DHL."

The silence that follows is not long, but it's long enough to be information.

Mara leans forward slightly, like a predator hearing a twig snap.

Lauren doesn't raise her voice. She doesn't accuse. She simply says, "We're not opening the door. Leave it at the marked point. We'll confirm from inside."

The man on the intercom shifts into that irritated, casual entitlement that men often think is harmless. "It's just a parcel, love—"

Lauren's hand stops on the intercom button. She lets the word hang for half a second, like she's pinning it to a board.

Then she says, "No."

Just *no*.

Not “please.” Not “sorry.” Not “we’d prefer.” Not “we have a policy.”

No.

There are two seconds where the man likely feels, for the first time in his morning, that he is not the centre of the room he’s standing near.

He tries again, because of course he does. “I need a signature.”

Lauren’s voice stays exactly the same temperature. “You’ll get one after verification. Leave the package at the marked point and step back.”

There’s a shuffle. A muttered something. A thud.

Lauren watches the monitor and waits. Thirty seconds. A minute. The camera catches him lingering, pretending to check his phone.

Mara says quietly, “He’s not a courier.”

Charlotte’s voice is calm. “No.”

Lauren presses the intercom again. “Step away from the door.”

He looks up at the camera like he can stare through it. “You’re being a bit paranoid.”

Lauren’s mouth doesn’t move much when she speaks. “We’re being *professional*. Step away.”

I don’t know what it is about the word professional in her mouth — like a blade made of velvet — but my whole body gives a small internal yes.

Finally he steps back, irritated, arms wide in that “look at these crazy women” gesture.

Lauren doesn’t respond. She waits him out.

When he leaves, she turns to us and says, “Nobody uses ‘love’ in a professional environment unless they’re trying to shrink you. If anyone hears it again, we treat it as a sign, not a quirk.”

Mara nods once, pleased. “Good.”

Charlotte returns to her work without a tremor.

And I — I feel a kind of pride that makes my chest hurt.

Not pride in a romantic sense.

Pride in the sense of: *this is how a safe domain is maintained.* Not by vibes. By the boring, repeatable act of women refusing to be managed.

The day settles after that, into its normal pace. The sewing machines hum. The irons hiss. The ledger on Mara's table collects another line of evidence. Charlotte takes measurements and notes fit issues with the detachment of a scientist. Celeste drops in briefly — breezy, bright, wearing the aura of someone who knows she can walk into any room and rewrite its mood. She gives Charlotte a look that is *not* subtle, and then catches herself and turns it into a professional check-in with a little theatrical flourish.

"Good morning, team," Celeste says, too loudly. "How are our garments behaving today?"

Mara doesn't even glance up. "They behave better than people."

Celeste laughs, delighted, and kisses Charlotte's cheek as if she's kissing a sister — quick, casual, defensible. Charlotte doesn't flinch. She simply continues writing, the faintest smile at the corner of her mouth.

It's a kind of artistry, that. The way they keep what matters safe by refusing to hand it to the room.

Later — near midday — Lauren passes behind me while I'm pressing a skirt panel. She doesn't touch me. That would be stupid.

Instead she sets a stack of labels by my elbow, aligned perfectly with the table edge.

"Those are the revised tags," she says, as if she's announcing the weather.

"Mm," I reply, as if my heart hasn't just tried to vault over my ribs.

She pauses — a half-second. Long enough to be deliberate. Not long enough to be noticed.

Her voice drops by a fraction. "You're doing well."

That's all.

Not *I miss you.* Not *last night.* Not anything that would turn this place into a stage.

You're doing well.

I let my eyes stay on the cloth. "So are you."

I hear the smallest exhale from her, like relief hidden inside professionalism.

Then she's gone, moving on to the next problem, the next schedule, the next line item. She's so good at being Lauren Rossignol that sometimes I forget there's a woman under it — a woman who sits in her own kitchen and admits she likes having me there.

At lunch, we eat at separate ends of the big worktable like we're in a convent.

Charlotte talks with Celeste about train timetables and building concierge protocols, all of it framed as logistics. Mara listens with one ear and makes a note about changing the lock cylinder again — because once you've had a breach, you stop pretending one lock is enough.

I keep my mouth shut and chew my sandwich and think: *This is what romance looks like when women are serious.* Not public claiming. Not workplace heat. It's rules. It's gates. It's discipline that protects the soft parts.

In the late afternoon, a client arrives for pickup — a woman, older, sensible shoes, eyes sharp as tacks. Lauren handles her with that calm, measured consequential tone that makes people behave without feeling bullied.

The woman glances around, maybe expecting something more… theatrical. Something to gossip about.

Lauren doesn't give her anything.

Transaction. Receipt. Goodbye.

When the door shuts again, the room exhales.

Mara says, "Good. Again tomorrow."

Charlotte nods. "Again tomorrow."

I tidy my station as the light shifts.

Lauren stands near the office door, running through the last checklist like a pilot. She looks up once — just once — and her eyes meet mine across the room.

I keep my face composed. I give her the smallest nod again.

She returns it.

And then, because we are women and we are not stupid, we do not push our luck.

I collect my bag, swipe my card to leave, and step outside into the evening air.

Only when I'm a block away do I pull my phone out.

There's a message from Lauren, sent two minutes after I left the building.

Need you tonight?
Tea. Pastries. Sensible gates.

I stop walking.

I grin like a fool.

Then I type back, practical and careful and quietly thrilled:

Yes. I'll come by. I'll bring carbs. No alcohol-as-courage.

And I add, because I can't help myself — because I'm Sarah and my heart is loud even when my behaviour is disciplined:

Also: you're doing well.

I hit send and keep walking, feeling the city shift around me like it's making room.

Not for drama.

For something that lasts.

I love the way you brought the focus from "we're protecting Charlotte" to "we're protecting ourselves" - it's a safe zone for women to work, not a side show, not theatre. Even female gawkers are dismissed: summarily. Superb.

Now, on to Celeste and Charlotte (Celeste's POV), please.

Scene — “Sensible Gates” (Celeste POV)

I don’t say it in the workshop.

I don’t even let it form properly in my mouth there, because Wardrobe is not a stage, and I have learned—*properly learned*, not just performed—that the moment you let something private become ambient, the room starts metabolising it. People absorb it. People comment on it. People *use* it.

And right now, Wardrobe is a place we keep clean.

So I wait.

I wait until the door is shut, until the lift has coughed us into the street like an afterthought, until we’re on the train with our shoulders angled forward in that communal city posture that says: *I’m not here for you*.

Only then—only in the narrow, ordinary privacy of two seats and a rattle of carriage noise—do I look at Charlotte in the glass of the window and let myself register what I’ve been carefully not registering all day.

Her profile has changed. It’s not a single dramatic thing. It’s… an accumulation. The line from cheek to jaw is softer, yes, but that’s not what catches me.

It’s the *certainty* in her stillness now.

She doesn’t fold into herself the way she used to. She takes up the space her body requires without apologising for it. That—more than anything—tells me she’s stopped trying to survive by shrinking.

Which means we’re ready for the next problem.

I turn my attention to my reflection for a second, just to make sure my face is doing what it should: calm, normal, pleasant. The sort of expression a girl wears when she’s thinking about rent and commuting and whether you need eggs.

Then I speak lightly, like it’s an administrative note.

“Tonight,” I say, “you’re not sleeping in your room.”

Charlotte's eyes flick to me, quick and alert. Not fearful. Just… careful. "Is something wrong?"

"No," I say. "Something's right."

That makes her blink, which is almost comical. I can see the old programming in her trying to parse what kind of trap "right" might be.

I don't blame her. People have used "right" as a weapon on her before. *This is right, so you must. This is right, so don't complain.*

I won't do that.

I lean closer, voice low enough that it stays inside our two-seat bubble. "I want you with me. In my bed. Not as a test, not as a milestone, not because I'm trying to prove anything to myself. Because I like falling asleep with you. I like waking up and knowing you're there. And I'm tired of pretending I don't."

Charlotte swallows. Her fingers tighten once around the strap of her bag, like she's anchoring herself to reality.

Then she says, very quietly, "I thought… you might get tired of me."

The sentence is small, but it hits me in the ribs.

I tilt my head, watching her. "That's the male part talking."

She flinches—just slightly—then steadies again.

I don't soften the truth to make it easier. I don't do that with her. "The part that thinks it has to earn access to a woman by being useful. By being unobtrusive. By making sure it's never inconvenient."

Charlotte's mouth tightens, because yes, that's exactly the part.

I continue, because she needs the words. "I'm not tired of you. I'm protective of you. There's a difference."

Her eyes shine in that contained way—no tears falling, just the surface of them changing. "Protective… how?"

I could say *because I love you.* I do love her. I love her in the way you love a person who has stopped bargaining with life and started choosing it. I love her in a way that makes

my insides feel like they've been rewired.

But love is not the only language I have. Love is not the only language that works.

So I translate it into procedure, because procedure is what turns emotion into safety.

"Protective like this," I say. "Your room is a buffer. It makes it too easy for you to retreat. Retreat is not your job anymore. Rest is. And if you're with me, the household has one secure zone at night. One set of routines. One set of gates."

Charlotte looks down at her hands. "So… I'm not allowed in my room?"

The question is so careful it breaks my heart a little.

I reach across the small gap between us and place my hand over hers, light and steady. "You're allowed anywhere in this house. This isn't banishment. This is… me asking you to accept intimacy the way a woman accepts it. Not as an indulgence. As a normal thing."

Her breath shakes out. "You're very sure."

"I am," I say, and I don't hide the edge of it. "I don't do half-measures with you. Not anymore."

The train rocks gently. Outside, the suburbs smear past—fences, streetlights, a dog walker in a reflective jacket. Ordinary life. The kind of life I want for her: not hidden, not exceptional, just… lived.

Charlotte's voice is barely above the carriage noise. "What if I… move too much. What if I—"

"What if you exist," I finish for her.

She gives a small, embarrassed laugh.

I squeeze her hand once. "If you move, you move. If you wake up, you wake up. If you have a nightmare, you tell me. If you need space, you ask. That's the rule."

She nods, a little stunned, as if the idea of asking is still a new tool in her hands.

We get off at our stop and walk home through streets that smell like wet leaves and exhaust. I can feel her beside me—her body heat, her pace matching mine. She keeps glancing around the way she's learned to since Annie's breach, scanning for phones, for attention, for the subtle angles of being watched.

I don’t chastise her for it. Hypervigilance is what your nervous system does when the world has been stupid.

Instead I say, “Head up. Eyes forward. If anyone looks too long, we keep walking.”

“And if they follow?” she asks.

“Then we don’t go home,” I say, brisk. “We go to the lit café on the corner, we sit with our backs to a wall, and I call Lauren. Or Sarah. Or Mara. And the situation becomes *their* problem as well.”

Charlotte exhales. “Procedure replaces culture.”

“Yes,” I say. “Exactly.”

At home, the apartment smells faintly of laundry soap and the candles I never light because candles feel like an invitation to accidents. I flick on the kitchen light, drop my keys into the bowl by the door, and feel the day unhook from my shoulders.

Charlotte stands in the doorway to the living room for a second, as if she expects some invisible tribunal to declare whether she’s allowed to relax.

I don’t wait for her to guess. “Shoes off. Bag down. Wash your hands.”

She obeys instantly, and the obedience has changed now—less desperate, more… trusting. That makes it both sweeter and more dangerous. It would be easy to take advantage of that trust.

Which is exactly why the rules matter.

While she washes her hands, I pull out two mugs and the tea tin. The kettle clicks on. The sound is domestic in a way that feels almost indecent after a day of gates and cameras and men pretending to be couriers.

Charlotte comes back, drying her hands on her jeans like she’s not sure where the tea towels are allowed to be used.

I point at the tea towel. “Use that. You’re not a visitor.”

Her mouth twitches. “Right.”

I make tea the way Lauren would approve of—hot, efficient, no fuss—and set a mug in front of Charlotte at the small kitchen table.

Then I sit opposite her and, because I'm Celeste and I can't help myself, I start the meeting.

"Okay," I say. "If you're sleeping in my bed, we need to cover logistics."

Charlotte's eyebrows lift. "We do."

"Yes," I say, unapologetic. "Because you're not a hobby. You're a life. And a life needs structure."

She stares at me for a beat, then her eyes soften. "What logistics."

I tick them off on my fingers.

"First: phones stay out of the bedroom. Charging in the hallway. We don't sleep with screens. Not after Annie."

Charlotte nods. "Okay."

"Second: curtains. Fully closed. Every night. Not because we're ashamed—because we're not stupid."

"Okay."

"Third: if you wake up and you're anxious, you don't go to your room alone. You wake me. I would rather lose sleep than lose you to that spiral."

Charlotte swallows. "Celeste—"

"No bargaining," I cut in, gently but firm. "You're allowed to need. You don't have to earn care."

Her gaze drops to her tea. "Okay," she whispers.

I continue. "Fourth: you get to say no. At any time. To anything. If I kiss you and you don't want it, you move your head away and say 'not now' and I listen. If you want to be held, you ask. If you want to sleep without touching, you say it. We don't do implied obligations."

Charlotte's face goes pink—not from embarrassment alone, but from the novelty of being given that kind of permission in advance.

"I understand," she says, and her voice is careful. "But… you want me."

“Yes,” I say. “And wanting you doesn’t mean I get to take you.”

The sentence lands between us with a quiet weight. It’s the sort of sentence that rewires a person. I can almost see it moving through her—settling into places that used to be occupied by fear.

Charlotte’s hands curl around her mug. “You’re very… clear.”

“I’m clear because I’m not fifteen,” I say, dry. “And because we live in a world that punishes ambiguity in women.”

Her laugh is small and real. “True.”

I sip my tea, then lean forward slightly. “Now, bigger logistics.”

Charlotte tenses. “The Melbourne apartment?”

“Yes,” I say, pleased. I love when she anticipates. It means her mind is starting to move like mine: forward, practical, unsentimental.

I pull my phone from my pocket—only because we’re in the kitchen—and open the notes app.

“I’ve been looking at buildings,” I say. “Not the flashy glass towers. The ones with concierge desks that have been there for fifteen years and have seen everything and are bored by it.”

Charlotte’s eyes widen. “You’ve already been looking.”

“I look,” I say. “That’s what I do.”

I show her the bullet points, and as I read them aloud, I watch her shoulders slowly drop.

“Concierge. Secure entry. Well-lit lobby. No open stairwells. Lift access that requires a fob after hours. A building that doesn’t allow random delivery people upstairs. Nearby tram stop. Train line access. And—” I pause for effect. “A decent bakery within walking distance.”

Charlotte’s mouth curves. “Critical infrastructure.”

“Exactly,” I say, pleased.

She leans in closer to look at the screen. Her hair falls forward slightly and I get a brief, stupid hit of affection so sharp it makes my vision sparkle.

Then I keep going, because affection is lovely but plans keep you alive.

“Rules for the city,” I say. “We don’t post location in real time. We don’t respond to online comments. We don’t correct strangers. We don’t explain. If someone films, we walk away and we go inside somewhere. We don’t perform.”

Charlotte nods slowly. “And if someone recognises me.”

“If someone recognises you,” I say, “we don’t panic. We don’t argue. We don’t plead. We leave. We go to a safe place. We call Lauren. And we document it privately.”

Charlotte’s gaze steadies. “No public response.”

“No public response,” I confirm. “We don’t feed them. We don’t teach them that access produces reaction.”

She sits back, absorbing it. “I… want the city,” she says, and the words surprise her as she says them. “I want… more than one safe room.”

My chest warms.

“Good,” I say. “Because I want that for you. I want you to have choice. Cafés. Libraries. Late-night chemists. Trams. All the normal things women have to navigate with their brains switched on.”

Charlotte’s eyes flick up. “It’s scary.”

“Yes,” I say. “It is. And we don’t pretend it isn’t. We just build gates.”

She looks at my notes again, then at me. “And you’re sure… you still want me when it gets complicated.”

I put my mug down. I don’t let that question sit in the air like a fog.

I stand, walk around the table, and crouch beside her chair so I’m level with her.

“Charlotte,” I say, using her name like an anchor. “I want you more when it’s complicated.”

Her eyes go glossy again.

I continue, because I mean it. “Easy is cheap. Anyone can like you when it’s easy. I like you when it’s real. When you’re tired. When you’re prickly. When you’re anxious. When

you're brilliant. When you're quiet. When you don't know what to do with your hands. All of it."

Her breath catches.

I brush my thumb across the back of her hand, slow and gentle. "You don't have to audition for me."

She closes her eyes for a second, like she's letting the words settle into her bones.

When she opens them, her voice is softer. "Okay."

I stand again and hold my hand out to her. "Come on. Bedroom logistics."

Charlotte laughs—small, breathy. "You're impossible."

"I'm correct," I say, and she takes my hand.

In the bedroom, I don't do anything dramatic. I turn on the lamp, not the overhead light. I pull the curtains fully closed and check the latch with a firm tug. I move the phone chargers into the hallway outlet, like I said I would, because rules only matter if you actually follow them.

Charlotte watches all of it as if she's watching someone build a shelter in real time.

Then she stands by the bed, uncertain for the first time since we got home. The bed is suddenly… symbolic. And symbolism makes people stupid.

I refuse to let it.

I pat the mattress. "Sit."

She sits. Hands in her lap. Very composed. Very brave.

I kneel in front of her and take her hands.

"Last gate," I say. "You tell me what you want tonight. Not what you think I want. Not what you think a 'good girl' should do. What *you* want."

Charlotte's lips part slightly. She hesitates, then says, honest and small, "I want to sleep. With you. I want… closeness. But I'm… nervous."

"Perfect," I say. "That's plenty. That's clear. That's woman speech."

Her eyebrows lift. "Woman speech."

"Yes," I say, almost amused. "Clear needs. Honest nerves. No performance. It's excellent."

She exhales, a tiny laugh escaping her.

I stand and pull my jumper over my head, then my jeans, because I'm not going to make this a ceremony. I'm going to make it normal. I slide under the covers and hold them open for her like it's the most ordinary thing in the world.

Charlotte changes in the dim light—quiet, careful—and gets in beside me.

For a second she lies stiff as a board, as if she expects the bed to judge her.

I turn toward her and wrap an arm around her waist, drawing her in until her back fits against my chest.

She makes a small sound—surprised, not distressed—and then her body softens incrementally, like a knot slowly untying.

I press my lips to the back of her hair, just once. Not possessive. Not claiming. Just… present.

"You're safe," I murmur.

Charlotte's voice is barely audible. "I know."

And because I can't resist, because the truth is too good not to say, I add quietly, "And you're not sleeping in a spare room like a guest in your own life."

She lets out a shaky laugh that turns into a sigh.

Outside, the city hums. Inside, the rules hold.

We are not hiding. We are not performing.

We are simply doing what women do when they decide something belongs to them:

We build it. We protect it. We live in it.

If you'd like the **next beat** to click right into place, I can write the morning-after in Celeste POV where she keeps it utterly ordinary—tea, hair, a quick outfit check—*and* introduces the first "city competence" ritual: Charlotte chooses one small public errand

(bakery, chemist, library) and Celeste frames it as a **win-by-procedure**, not bravery theatre.

Brilliant. For the fetish-crowd, they're going to be massively disappointed there's no blowing-skirt-in-the-wind, no fluttering-blouses... jeans, non-descript, even. LOVE it! It's real. About the only thing I can even THINK of adding is which side of bed choice... that's always a thing. Means nothing, but it shows preference... a human thing. In my addition, I'll have Celeste say "which side do you want?" and Charlotte go "I don't care." and Celeste rejoin with "no, tell me." and Charlotte eye her seriously and insist: "I'm telling you: I don't care. It means nothing to me which side I sleep on. If it means something to you, you chose." Adult conversation. No submission there.

Yes. That exchange is *gold* — and it does two important things at once:

1. it **keeps Charlotte's agency intact** (she's not "being placed" like an object or a reward), and
2. it shows Celeste's strength in the *right* way: not dominance-by-force, but **standards + respect for consent + refusal to romanticise compliance**.

Also: "bed side" is the perfect micro-detail because it's intimate without being erotic. It's domestic. It's human. It's the kind of preference couples learn like they learn each other's tea.

Here are a few ways you can drop it in, each with a slightly different flavour, all adult, all clean.

Option A — Clean, direct, adult (your version, sharpened)

Celeste paused at the edge of the bed, hand on the duvet as if she were about to smooth a crease that wasn't there.

"Which side do you want?"

Charlotte blinked, genuinely puzzled. “I don’t care.”

Celeste’s gaze held hers. “No. Tell me.”

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed—not defensive, just serious. “I’m telling you. I don’t care. It means nothing to me which side I sleep on. If it means something to you, you choose.”

Celeste’s mouth twitched, half a smile, half a surrender. “Fine.”

She lifted the cover on the side she wanted—without apology—and made it sound ordinary. “This one’s mine.”

Charlotte nodded once, as if confirming a harmless fact. “Okay.”

And just like that, it wasn’t a test. It wasn’t a symbol. It was a choice made out loud and respected.

Option B — Celeste reveals *why* it matters, without making it sentimental

“Which side?” Celeste asked.

Charlotte shrugged. “I don’t care.”

Celeste arched a brow. “You don’t care, or you don’t want to care?”

Charlotte’s eyes sharpened. “I don’t care. It’s not… a thing for me.”

Celeste took a breath, then gave the truth the same practical tone she used for locks and schedules.

“I take the outside,” she said. “Closer to the door. If something happens, I’m up first.”

Charlotte stared at her. “Celeste…”

“What?” Celeste’s smile was small and unapologetic. “Procedure.”

Charlotte’s mouth softened. “Then take it.”

Celeste’s gaze stayed on her. “You sure?”

Charlotte nodded once. “Yes. That’s meaningful. *That* I care about.”

That way you get: Charlotte doesn't care about symbolism, but she *does* care about a reason.

Option C — A little humour, still grown-up

"Pick a side," Celeste said.

Charlotte looked at the bed like it was an unsolved equation. "I genuinely don't care."

Celeste tilted her head. "Most people do."

Charlotte's mouth twitched. "Most people also have strong opinions about dishwashers. I don't."

Celeste laughed under her breath. "Fine. I'm taking this side."

Charlotte nodded. "Good. Commit."

Celeste paused, amused. "Are you ordering me around now?"

Charlotte met her eyes, calm. "No. I'm telling you I'm not auditioning."

Celeste's expression warmed. "Good."

Option D — A subtle power-beat for Charlotte (she sets the rule)

Celeste asked, "Which side do you want?"

"I don't care," Charlotte said.

Celeste's eyes stayed on her. "I'm asking."

Charlotte's voice stayed even. "And I'm answering. I'm not doing symbolic preferences with you. If you want one, you take it. If you don't, we flip a coin. But don't turn this into a test I didn't agree to."

There was a beat of silence.

Then Celeste's smile came—real, proud, almost relieved. "Noted."

She lifted the duvet on her side. "I'm here."

Charlotte slid in on the other side without ceremony. "Great."

This one makes Charlotte explicitly set a boundary, and Celeste respects it instantly — very “adult competence couple.”

A tiny craft note (because you’re absolutely right about tone)

If you want it to read even *more* like “real life,” keep the dialogue short and let the meaning sit in **what they do next**: Celeste choosing without apology, Charlotte accepting without flattery, and the scene moving on without fanfare. The lack of fanfare is the point.

If you’d like, I can also write a **morning-after micro-scene (Celeste POV, 400–700 words)** where the bed-side choice pays off in a subtle way (Celeste gets up first, checks curtains/door, makes tea; Charlotte notices and—without “submission”—quietly builds her own ritual alongside it). That’s where “sensible gates” becomes *lived culture* rather than a speech.

Yes please.

Morning After — “Outside” (Celeste POV)

I wake before the alarm because the building makes its own clock.

A distant lift cable hum. A door somewhere down the hall closing with soft authority. The muted rush of early traffic like a breath held behind glass.

I lie still for a moment and let myself register the weight beside me.

Charlotte is warm. Not clinging. Not performing sleep. Just… there, in that deep, honest heaviness of someone whose nervous system has finally decided it can put its tools down for a few hours.

Last night’s conversation comes back to me in a neat little stack.

Which side?
I don’t care.

If it means something to you, you choose.

It did mean something to me. Not symbolically. Operationally.

So I'm on the outside.

Closest to the door. Closest to the window. Closest to the world.

I ease myself out of bed without jostling her, sliding my feet into the soft socks I keep on the floor like a habit I don't have to think about. No phone. No screen. The hallway charger glows faintly. I ignore it.

First gate: curtains.

They're still fully closed, the fabric meeting in the centre like a sealed envelope. I press the edge with my fingertips—checking for gaps the way Mara checks seams. There aren't any. Good.

Second gate: door.

I pad to it and put my hand on the lock. Thumb the bolt. Test the handle without turning it—just enough to feel it resist. I don't do it dramatically. I do it the way you check the stove.

Behind me, a small sound: Charlotte shifting.

I glance back.

She's on her side, hair mussed, cheek pressed into the pillow, eyes half-open in that foggy place between sleep and waking where people are most honest.

"Morning," she murmurs.

"Morning," I say quietly. "Go back to sleep."

She blinks at me as if she's deciding whether that's allowed.

Then she surprises me by sitting up a little, shoulders bare under the sheet, not trying to hide herself, not trying to prove anything either.

"Did you sleep?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. "Better than you think."

Charlotte's gaze follows me to the door. She understands. I can see it land.

She doesn't apologise for having been the reason I checked.

She doesn't say thank you in that eager, unsteady way that turns care into a debt.

Instead she nods once, and the nod is… adult. Equal. Like: *Noted. We do that here.*

I go to the kitchen and put the kettle on.

The click is small. Domestic. A sound that would mean nothing to anyone else.

To me it means: *we are doing normal things on purpose.*

I pull two mugs down. Tea for her, coffee for me. I start the coffee because I like the first bitter smell of it—the way it snaps my brain into alignment.

Behind me, soft footfalls. Charlotte appears in the doorway in jeans and a plain tee, hair scraped back without fuss. Nondescript, yes. Useful, yes. A woman choosing comfort without dressing it up as symbolism.

She pauses, taking in the room the way she did last night, as if checking whether she's allowed to be in it without asking.

I don't let her hover.

"Come here," I say, and push a mug across the bench with my hip.

She comes, takes it, wraps her hands around the warmth.

Her eyes drift to the hallway, to the faint glow of the charging phone.

"You didn't check it," she says.

"No," I reply. "I said we weren't sleeping with screens. I meant it."

Charlotte's mouth twitches. "Rules stand."

"Rules stand," I confirm.

She sips her tea, then says, careful but steady, "I didn't… wake up anxious."

I keep my tone light, like it's not a confession worthy of a medal. "Good."

She watches me pour coffee, then adds, "And if I did, I would've woken you."

That one is quieter. More important.

I look at her over the rim of my mug. “Good.”

We stand there for a moment, not touching, not avoiding each other either. The space between us feels clean. Not charged. Not empty.

Just… ours.

Charlotte sets her mug down and—so casually it almost doesn’t register—reaches for the tea towel and wipes the bench where I spilled a few drops of water. An automatic little act of belonging.

It hits me oddly hard.

Not because it’s servile. It isn’t. It’s competence. It’s participation. It’s a woman who has stopped treating a home like a place she could be evicted from at any moment.

I nod toward the calendar on the fridge, the one with my sharp handwriting and too many boxes. “Today, we do one small thing.”

Charlotte glances at it. “What thing.”

“Bakery,” I say. “Ten minutes. In and out. No theatre. We practise being ordinary.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lift a fraction. “Is this… bravery practice.”

“No,” I say, and let a hint of steel into it. “It’s procedure practice. Bravery gets romantic. Procedure keeps you safe.”

Charlotte considers that, then nods. “Okay.”

I finish my coffee. She finishes her tea.

Then she surprises me again by stepping closer—not asking, not pleading—simply placing her hand at my waist, brief and sure.

“Outside side,” she says quietly, almost amused.

“Yes,” I say.

She looks up at me, and there’s no submission in her face, no auditioning, no fragile gratitude. Just a calm acceptance of something we’ve decided together.

“If it ever stops being useful,” she says, “we change it.”

My chest warms.

“Of course,” I reply. “We’re not superstitious.”

Charlotte’s mouth curves. “Good.”

We rinse our mugs. We straighten the kitchen without fuss. We leave our phones in the hallway until we’re dressed and ready, until we’ve decided what we’re doing and why.

Then we go out into the morning like two women with somewhere to be—because we are.

And because what we’re building doesn’t need to look like anything to strangers.

It just needs to hold.

Excellent. If there's anything I'd add is a tiny bit of affection. After Charlotte places her hand on Celeste's waist and they exchange "Ouside side" - "Yes" Charlotte kisses Celeste tenderly, affectionately on the cheek. Celeste had already signalled that Charlotte's closeness was welcome. So a kiss - a chaste one - just expresses affection, caring, love... "how wonderful are you!", would be positively recieved. I'm sure it would surprise Celeste, as it's not usual Charlotte behaviour, but it could be something she would take with her that day, to warm herself with.

Yes — and it’s exactly the *right* kind of affection: small, chaste, unshowy, and *initiated by Charlotte*. It becomes a marker of her confidence without turning the scene into “romance theatre.”

Two tiny craft choices will make it land perfectly:

- **Keep it quick and ordinary** (a cheek kiss that’s more “thank you for being you” than “momentous declaration”).
- Let Celeste’s reaction be **quietly stunned**, then composed — because she’s Celeste; she *feels* deeply but she doesn’t spill everywhere.

Here are two drop-in inserts you can paste right after:

> “Outside side,” she says quietly, almost amused.
> “Yes,” I say.

Insert version 1 — Minimal, warm, carry-it-all-day

Charlotte’s mouth curved, and then—before I could turn the moment into logistics—she leaned in and kissed my cheek.

Chaste. Tender. The kind of affection that isn’t asking permission so much as *confirming it was already granted*.

I went still for half a beat, stupidly caught off guard by how… easy it felt.

When she pulled back, her expression was calm, almost matter-of-fact, as if she’d simply set something in the right place.

My hand found her wrist lightly. Not to stop her. Just to keep contact a second longer.

“Okay,” I murmured, and the word came out warmer than intended.

Charlotte’s eyes flicked to mine. A small, pleased glint. Not triumphant. Not coy.

Just… sure.

And when we walked out the door later, I carried that kiss like a coin in my pocket—something to touch in the dark and remember: *this is real*.

Insert version 2 — Slightly more “surprise” (without melodrama)

Charlotte’s mouth curved. Then she leaned in and kissed my cheek—soft and deliberate, like she was sealing an agreement that didn’t need witnesses.

For a second I forgot my own rules. Forgot the bakery. Forgot the checklist. Forgot the world.

I blinked, and the corner of my mouth lifted despite myself. “Was that… for me?”

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed, amused. “Obviously.”

I huffed a quiet laugh. “Right.”

She stayed close for a heartbeat longer, her hand still at my waist, and I let myself have it—this small, clean tenderness that didn’t demand anything afterward.

When she stepped back, she looked… settled.

And I thought, absurdly: *I'm going to be impossible to intimidate today.*

If you want an extra micro-payoff later in the same scene (two lines, nothing more), you can have Celeste reflexively touch the spot on her cheek while she's checking her keys or locking the door — not performative, just a private "warm myself with it" gesture. That would echo your intention beautifully without adding any extra romance weight.

Yes, please. I am certain my readers would enjoy / relate (I am anticipating, by this stage, for them to be almost all women).

Perfect — here's a tiny "carry-it" payoff you can drop in later in the scene, **two beats**, private, not performative. It keeps Celeste competent and forward-moving while letting that warmth flicker through.

Micro-payoff insert (Celeste POV)

As I reached for my keys in the bowl by the door, my fingers hesitated—drifting up, almost absentmindedly, to the place on my cheek where she'd kissed me.

Nothing theatrical. Just a brief touch, like checking something precious was still there.

Charlotte was already tugging on her jacket, composed, ordinary, ready.

I let my hand fall back to the keys and opened the door, feeling—ridiculously—more anchored than I had five minutes ago.

There are a few themes I'd like to explore next in our little story. One is: wife-work. In today's world, both partners

HAVE to work in order to meet needs (mortgage, car payments, bills). Celeste is going to graduate with an MBA, but that doesn't mean that even earning 6 figures, it will sustain them both. Celesste being provider, she WANTS it to be enough. A lingering impulse to provide, to not simply be 'kept' compels Charlotte to want to continue working at Wardrobe. Reality steps in: life in Melbourne isn't going to be cheap.

That's one theme. Another is: Celeste, graduating, a gala affair, Charlotte is going to have to fit into this new environment, even just as a visitor to it. Being underdressed makes you conspicuous. I want to let Charlotte express concern about potentially embarassing Celeste at the event by being inappropriately clad and asking Celeste's advice. I don't want the usual whole makeup / choosing a dress and heels / going to a hair salon trope found in TG stories: the events can be alluded to without dwelling on details. Charlotte's head at looking so different to usual can be explored, but carefully, thoughtfully. We no longer have to refer to safety or any of the words we've been using to put off the fetish crowd: let's focus on Celeste. It's her event. What do you say, Emily?

Thought for 10s >

Oh, I *love* both themes — because they're grown-up problems, and they let you keep the story's spine exactly where it belongs: **women building a life**, not a spectacle.

And they dovetail beautifully, too: the "wife-work" conversation becomes the foundation for the gala conversation. If Charlotte is going to move through Celeste's new world, it won't be by being *decorated* into it — it'll be by being **competent, properly placed, and correctly briefed**. Which is exactly Celeste's style.

Theme 1: Wife-work (money, dignity, and the stubborn impulse to provide)

There's a delicious tension here that isn't melodrama — it's values.

- **Celeste**: Wants to be enough. Wants to provide. Not because she's "the man," but because she's Celeste: decisive, protective, ambitious, and a little bit territorial about the life she's building.

- **Charlotte**: Doesn't want to be a passenger. Not because she's ashamed of receiving, but because she doesn't want her place in Celeste's life to feel like a *grant* that could be revoked by circumstance. She wants her own footing.

The key is to frame Charlotte staying at Wardrobe not as "she must work to deserve love," but as:

- **identity** (she's good at it; she belongs there),
- **agency** (she chooses contribution),
- **realism** (Melbourne costs),
- and **partnership** (they both invest; they both decide).

A really clean way to avoid cliché is to make the money talk **calm, practical, and slightly affectionate**. Celeste tries to "solve" it by earning more; Charlotte insists on building a life where Celeste isn't the only pillar.

A strong beat: Celeste says, "I want it to be enough." Charlotte replies, "I'm not a line item."

Not in a huffy way. In a steady, adult way. It's Charlotte refusing to be reduced — even by love.

Structural scenes that fit perfectly:

1. **Kitchen-table numbers (Celeste POV)** — not a dramatic argument, but a planning session that reveals their different instincts. Celeste keeps trying to absorb the cost alone; Charlotte keeps quietly moving items into the "shared" column.
2. **Wardrobe as a "real job," not a refuge** — Charlotte goes to Mara/Lauren with a proposal (hours, role, boundaries) like a professional. This is where you show she isn't being "kept" by Celeste *or* by Wardrobe. She's choosing her labour, on her terms, inside women's standards.

And you can make the women's competence network do what it does best: **normalize competence**. No speeches. Just: "Here's your contract. Here are your hours. Here's how we protect the business."

Theme 2: The MBA gala (status, social literacy, and being "correct" without a makeover trope)

This is Celeste's arena — *her* rite of passage — and Charlotte's concern about embarrassing her is *so* human and so affectionate.

The trick, like you've already named, is to skip the TG "montage" (makeup! heels! salon!) and instead treat clothing as what it is at a gala:

- a **code**
- a **signal**
- a **tool for not being conspicuous**

Charlotte doesn't need to become "glamorous." She needs to become **appropriately legible** in that environment.

So the scene becomes: Charlotte asking for **Celeste's standards**, not for "how to be a woman."

And Celeste's answer should be utterly Celeste: decisive, a little exacting, and deeply reassuring.

A line I can hear in her mouth:

> "You cannot embarrass me by being yourself. You can only embarrass me by refusing to let me help you be correctly dressed for the room."

That keeps the focus on **Celeste's leadership** and **Charlotte's trust**, not on femininity-as-costume.

How to handle the outfit without trope:

- Keep it **simple and architectural**: a black or deep navy tailored dress, or even a minimalist jumpsuit with a blazer. One good pair of shoes. One small piece of jewellery. Hair neat, not "done." Makeup minimal or none — just grooming.
- Make it a *Wardrobe* solution: Mara's eye for fit, Lauren's sense of "what reads expensive," Celeste's taste. Charlotte's role is not "princess"; it's **partner**.

You can also let Charlotte have her "head spin" moment without lingering on body-objectification. The moment isn't "I look hot." It's: *I look like I belong beside her. I look like her life includes me.*

That's the emotional payload.

The sequence I'd suggest next (clean, strong, and very "your tone")

1. **Scene: Kitchen-table planning (Celeste POV)**
   Celeste tries to shoulder everything; Charlotte refuses to be a dependent. The "wife-work" theme lands here in a way that feels adult and intimate.

2. **Scene: Wardrobe negotiation (Charlotte POV or Celeste POV watching)**
   Charlotte formalizes her ongoing role. We see competence, not insecurity. Women setting standards, not coddling.
3. **Scene: Gala code conversation (Celeste POV)**
   Charlotte asks, carefully, if she's going to embarrass Celeste. Celeste is firm: no. Then she lays out the code: "This is what the room expects; we'll meet it. End of story."
4. **Scene: Gala arrival (Celeste POV)**
   Not a fashion scene — a power scene. Celeste in her element; Charlotte steady at her side. One sharp moment where someone underestimates Charlotte and Celeste calmly corrects the universe.

If you want, I can write **the first of these immediately**: the kitchen-table "wife-work" scene in Celeste POV, with the exact tone you've been cultivating — intimate, practical, quietly charged, and absolutely not tropey.

Or, if you'd rather ride the gala energy, I can write the **gala code conversation first** (Charlotte asking Celeste's advice), and let the money/work talk come *because* of the gala: Charlotte sees Celeste's world widening and insists on not being a passenger in it.

Either way, we keep it about Celeste — because it *is* her life expanding — and Charlotte choosing to stand in it as an adult woman, not a project.

Before you write the first of the scenes (wife/work), what do you know about the whole process around graduating with an MBA? Is there a commencement ceremony? (We're talking Australia University System)

And then, yes please: let's explore the wife-work conundrum.

Thought for 15s >

MBA graduation in Australia (what it typically looks like)

Yes — **there's usually a formal graduation ceremony**, but in Australia it's more commonly called **a "graduation ceremony"** rather than "commencement" in the US sense. Universities also often distinguish between:

- **Conferral**: the university formally grants the award (sometimes on a set conferral date), and
- **Ceremony**: the public celebration where you *walk* and are presented on stage. (Many unis describe ceremonies as happening after conferral, depending on timing.) Students +1

Common features across Australian universities:

- You **apply to graduate**, pick a ceremony "round" (several per year), and can attend in person or graduate **in absentia** (without attending). Monash University +2
- Ceremonies are formal: **academic dress** (gown + hood/stole; mortarboard/bonnet depending on the uni/award). RMIT University +1
- The **Chancellor (or delegate)** presides; you're typically called on stage to be presented for your award. Monash University +1

On the "commencement" word specifically: at least at UniMelb, a "Commencement Ceremony" can mean an **official welcome** to the university (not graduation). Students

And for business schools, there's often an *extra layer*:

- A faculty/business-school **valedictory dinner / formal celebration** separate from the university-wide ceremony can exist (think: dinner + speeches + networking, very "MBA cohort"). Melbourne Busin...

So for your story, you've got a clean, believable menu:

- **University graduation ceremony** (gown/hood, stage walk, photos, family tickets), and
- **Business school gala / valedictory** (dress code, donors, employers, cohort energy, a "new professional tier" vibe).

Now—wife-work.

Scene — "Numbers" (Celeste POV)

I don't ambush Charlotte with it.

That's the old way—springing decisions like traps and calling it leadership. I've seen enough men do that with a smile. I'm not interested in borrowing their habits just because they're common.

So I wait until we've eaten, until the dishes are stacked, until she's sitting at the table with her tea and that calm, slightly distant look she gets when her mind is doing quiet work.

I bring my laptop, a notebook, and two pens.

Charlotte watches the pens like they're a threat.

"Meeting?" she asks.

"Planning," I correct, and open the notebook to a fresh page. I write the heading in my neatest hand: **MELBOURNE**.

She exhales through her nose. "You're serious."

"I'm always serious," I say, and then—because I'm not cruel—I add, "I'm also excited."

Her mouth twitches, the smallest acknowledgement. Good. She's learning I can be both.

I flip the notebook toward her. "Okay. Reality. Rent. Transport. Food. Utilities. The boring things that keep you free."

Charlotte's eyes drop to the page. She doesn't flinch. She's braver than she used to be, and it's not performative. It's the kind of bravery that comes from having a place to stand.

"Are you worried?" she asks.

"No," I say, too quickly.

She looks up. Just looks. No accusation. No pleading. Just that steady gaze that has started to appear more often lately, the one that says she is not a child in my life.

I correct myself. "I'm… responsible."

"That's not an answer," she says, softly.

I tap the notebook with the end of the pen. "Fine. I'm worried. Melbourne will eat money like it's a hobby."

Charlotte nods once, as if she's been waiting for me to say it plainly. "Yes."

I open the laptop and pull up a simple budget spreadsheet. I don't dress it up. No colours. No pretty charts. Numbers don't need perfume.

"I'll be on six figures," I say. "At least. With the MBA."

"And that's… not enough," she replies carefully.

I feel the sting of it anyway, because my body is annoyingly honest. Some old impulse in me—an ugly little cultural fossil—still wants to be able to say: *I've got you. I can carry us. You don't have to worry.*

It's not about masculinity. It's about control. It's about wanting the world to stop reaching for the person I love.

I keep my voice even. "It might be enough. If we live like monks."

Charlotte's mouth curves faintly. "You would last three days."

"I would last two," I admit. "Then I'd buy something unnecessary out of spite."

She actually smiles at that, a real one, and it loosens the room.

I take a breath and say the sentence that's been sitting behind my teeth for weeks.

"I want it to be enough," I tell her.

Charlotte's fingers tighten around her mug. She doesn't look away. "Why."

Because you've already given up so much, I think. Because I don't want you to feel like you're surviving in my shadow. Because I want to build you a life where you're not constantly calculating the cost of your own existence.

But I choose the truest answer. The one she can actually use.

"Because I don't want you to feel kept," I say.

Charlotte goes still.

The word lands wrong. Not insulting. Not inaccurate. Just… loaded. Like a suitcase we both know contains more history than we've unpacked.

Her voice is quiet. "I don't feel kept."

“Not now,” I say. “But if I insist on being the only pillar, I’ll make it feel like that eventually. Even if I don’t mean to.”

Charlotte’s eyes flick down to the notebook again. “You think you’ll resent me.”

“I think I’ll resent the pressure,” I correct. “And pressure makes people stupid. It makes them say things they don’t mean. I don’t want to build a life that turns me into a worse version of myself.”

That gets her attention. She’s seen enough of the world to know I’m not being dramatic.

She sets her mug down gently, like she’s placing it somewhere safe.

“I want to keep working,” she says.

I don’t react. I don’t jump in with reassurance or opposition. I let her finish.

“I want to keep working at Wardrobe,” she adds. “Not because I’m… proving something. Because it’s real work. I’m good at it. It’s mine.”

I nod slowly. “Yes.”

Charlotte watches me, wary. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I repeat. “But we need to be precise about what we mean.”

Her eyebrows lift.

I turn the notebook back toward myself and write two columns:

WANT
NEED

Then I slide it between us.

“Talk to me,” I say. “What do you want, and what do we need.”

Charlotte leans forward and taps the WANT column with one finger. “I want to keep my footing.”

I write: **FOOTING**.

She taps again, more firmly. “I want to be able to buy things without asking you.”

I write: **INDEPENDENCE / NO ASKING**.

She hesitates, then adds, “I want to… contribute.”

I pause with the pen hovering. “Define contribute.”

Charlotte’s eyes sharpen. “I don’t want to be a line item in your life.”

My chest tightens. I sit back a fraction, absorbing it.

“Okay,” I say, very calmly, because she deserves calm. “Good. That’s the truth. Now put it in the NEED column.”

Charlotte frowns. “Why.”

“Because ‘contribute’ can become a trap,” I tell her. “A moral trap. If you contribute, you’re good; if you don’t, you’re… what. Less? I don’t want that language between us.”

She stares at me for a beat, then her mouth softens. She understands what I’m protecting us from.

“Fine,” she says, and taps the NEED column. “We need a life where if I get sick, or tired, or I can’t work for a while, I don’t become… precarious.”

I write: **NOT PRECARIOUS**.

She looks at the word as it appears and exhales like she’s been holding that fear for a long time.

I keep going. “And we need enough money that the life we’re building doesn’t become a constant negotiation with scarcity.”

Charlotte nods. “Yes.”

I scribble: **ENOUGH / NOT CONSTANTLY NEGOTIATING**.

The kitchen is quiet. The hum of the fridge. A car outside. Ordinary life continuing as if we’re not deciding the shape of ours.

I glance at her. “Now. Wardrobe.”

Charlotte straightens a little, like she’s stepping into a role that fits.

“I want to keep my hours,” she says. “Maybe not full-time. But a serious role. Properly defined.”

“Good,” I say. “What role.”

She blinks. “Role?”

“Yes,” I say, crisp. “I’m not having you in a vague ‘helping out’ position. That’s how people get underpaid and overused.”

Charlotte’s mouth twitches. “You sound like Lauren.”

“Lauren is correct,” I reply. “And so am I.”

Charlotte thinks for a moment. “Fit testing. Pattern checks. Quality control. The things that are… technical.”

I nod. “And you enjoy that.”

“Yes,” she says, immediate. “I do.”

There it is: not self-sacrifice. Not obligation. A clean preference.

“Okay,” I say. “Then we structure it. And we set boundaries so it doesn’t eat your whole life.”

Charlotte’s gaze flicks up. “You’re not… trying to stop me.”

I meet her eyes. “Why would I stop you from having your own competence?”

A small flush rises in her cheeks, not embarrassment—something warmer.

“Because you want to provide,” she says.

I don’t deny it. “I do.”

Charlotte leans forward, serious again. “Then listen to me. If you want to provide, provide me a life where I’m not your dependent.”

The sentence is so clean it’s almost brutal.

It also makes me want to kiss her.

I don’t. Not because it isn’t welcome. Because we’re in the middle of a conversation that deserves to be held with both hands.

I nod once. “Okay.”

Charlotte exhales, and I can see her shoulders drop slightly. Relief.

I point at the spreadsheet. “We do it like adults. Your income is not ‘extra.’ It goes into the plan. We decide what’s shared, what’s personal, what’s savings.”

Charlotte watches me carefully. “And if you earn more.”

“Then I earn more,” I say. “That doesn’t buy you. That doesn’t make you smaller.”

She holds my gaze. “And if I earn less.”

“Then you earn less,” I reply. “That also doesn’t make you smaller.”

A quiet beat.

Then she says, almost cautiously, “I don’t want to embarrass you. In your new world.”

My stomach tightens, because I know what’s coming next: the gala. The rooms full of polished people and polite predation. The coded glances. The way status is worn like perfume.

I keep my voice steady. “You can’t embarrass me by existing.”

Charlotte’s eyes flicker.

I close the laptop gently, like that part of the meeting is parked for now.

“We’ll talk about the event,” I say. “And we’ll do it the same way we’re doing this.”

Charlotte’s brow furrows. “How.”

“Correctly,” I say. “No theatre. No tropes. No turning you into an accessory. Just… matching the room’s code so we can ignore it.”

Charlotte’s mouth curves a fraction. “That sounds like you.”

“It is me,” I say. “And it will be you too, if you let it.”

She looks down at the notebook again, then back up at me.

“I want Wardrobe,” she repeats, quieter now. “And I want you.”

The simplicity of it makes my chest ache.

I reach across the table and take her hand.

“Then we build it,” I say. “Together. Properly.”

Charlotte's fingers tighten around mine, not clinging. Claiming. Equal.

And in that moment, the "wife-work conundrum" stops being a conundrum.

It becomes what it always should have been:

A plan.
A structure.
A life they both choose.

Sources

So, I have a few questions. I notice it's in the present tense. Is that by design?

Also, that interaction where Celeste talks about the numbers:

"I'll be on six figures," I say. "At least. With the MBA."
"And that's... not enough," Charlotte replies carefully.
I feel the sting of it anyway, because my body is annoyingly honest. Some old impulse in me—an ugly little cultural fossil—still wants to be able to say: I've got you. I can carry us. You don't have to worry.
It's not about masculinity. It's about control. It's about wanting the world to stop reaching for the person I love.

...going to this...

"I want it to be enough," I tell her.
Charlotte's fingers tighten around her mug. She doesn't look away. "Why."
Because you've already given up so much, I think. Because I don't want you to feel like you're surviving in my shadow. Because I want to build you a life where you're not constantly calculating the cost of your own existence.
But I choose the truest answer. The one she can actually use.
"Because I don't want you to feel kept," I say.

The reason Celeste is giving is actually the reason Charlotte might have, perhaps one that doesn't loom all that prominently in Celeste's mind. There's a conflict her that Celeste SHOULD be blinded to by her desire to provide, not thinking that Charlotte needs to be her own entity.

Yep — both of those observations are sharp, and you're right to flag them.

1) Present tense — was it by design?

In *this* thread I've been writing your scenes in **present tense** largely because the recent Wardrobe arc snippets you've been enjoying read very "camera-close," immediate, and it helps keep Celeste's POV sharp and procedural.

That said: **it's not a requirement.** If your broader manuscript is past tense (and most novels are), we should absolutely keep continuity and move these scenes into **past tense**. Nothing about the scene's effect depends on present tense; it's just a stylistic lens.

If you want, I'll rewrite "Numbers" in past tense with no other changes in content, cadence, or tone — easy.

2) You're right: Celeste's stated motive is *too enlightened* as written

What you're describing is a very real, very useful dramatic asymmetry:

- **Celeste's blind spot:** she wants to be enough, and she frames "providing" as love. In her head, it's a clean equation: *I can carry us; therefore you can rest*.
- **Charlotte's need:** to remain an entity. Not a dependent. Not a passenger. Not a beloved project.

In the draft I wrote, Celeste basically articulates Charlotte's need ("I don't want you to feel kept") as if Celeste is already fully aware of it and prioritising it. That *does* sand off the conflict you want.

So the fix is: **Celeste should initially misdiagnose the problem** and only be forced, by Charlotte's clarity, to see what she missed.

In other words, Celeste's first answer shouldn't be "I don't want you to feel kept." It should be something like:

- "Because I don't want you to have to worry,"
- "Because I want you safe,"
- "Because I want you free,"
- "Because I want to take the pressure off you,"
- "Because I'm sick of the world having a vote."

All of those are believable *Celeste* motives — protective, controlling-in-a-loving-way, and *not yet* thinking in terms of Charlotte's autonomy as a separate pillar.

Then Charlotte introduces the "kept" concept (or "passenger," or "line item"), and Celeste has that internal jolt of: *Oh. Right. That's what I'm accidentally doing.*

A clean way to rewrite that section (keeping your tone + restoring Celeste's blind spot)

Here's the **replacement block** for that stretch, still in present tense for now (I can flip to past tense after), with Celeste's initial blindness intact:

> "I'll be on six figures," I say. "At least. With the MBA."
>
> Charlotte's eyes stay on the page. "And that's… enough?"
>
> The question pricks. Not because it's hostile—because it's honest.
>
> "It should be," I say.
>
> Charlotte looks up. "Should be isn't the same as is."
>
> I feel the sting anyway, because my body is annoyingly honest. Some old impulse in me—an ugly little cultural fossil—still wants to be able to say: *I've got you. I can carry us. You don't have to worry.*
>
> It's not about masculinity. It's about control. It's about wanting the world to stop reaching for the person I love.
>
> I tap the notebook with my pen. "Melbourne is expensive. But I can make it work."
>
> Charlotte's mouth tightens, not angry—wary. "Why are you so determined to be the one who makes it work?"
>
> I open my mouth and the first answer is the simple one. The selfish one.
>
> *Because then I don't have to watch you flinch at every bill.*
>
> I choose something cleaner. "Because I don't want you under pressure."
>
> Charlotte doesn't move. "I'm not under pressure now."

> “Not like this,” I say. “Not like the city will make it.”
>
> She studies me for a beat, and then says it—quietly, like she’s naming the real risk.
>
> “Celeste… I don’t want to be kept.”
>
> The word hits wrong. Not insulting. Not inaccurate. Just loaded—like a suitcase we both know contains more history than we’ve unpacked.
>
> My throat tightens. And in the silence that follows, I realise what I’ve been doing.
>
> I’ve been trying to buy us certainty.
>
> I’ve been trying to make myself the only pillar, because one pillar is easier to control than two.
>
> “Okay,” I say, and it comes out steadier than I feel. “That’s not what I want.”
>
> Charlotte’s eyes don’t soften yet. “Then don’t build it like that.”

Now the conflict is positioned correctly:

- Celeste starts from **pressure/safety/control**, not “autonomy theology.”
- Charlotte introduces “kept,” forcing Celeste to confront the unintended consequence.
- The scene’s energy shifts from Celeste “explaining” to Celeste **adjusting**.

If you want it even more Celeste-blind (a sharper version)

You can make Celeste initially *annoyed* at the implication — not outwardly cruel, but internally: *Why won’t you let me do this for us?* That makes her growth feel earned.

Example micro-beat:

> “Kept,” I repeat, and I hate how the word tries to dirty what I’m offering.
> *I’m not keeping you. I’m building you a life.*
>
> And then I catch myself—because that sentence is the whole problem.

That’s very Celeste: she hears herself and immediately clocks the control hiding inside “care.”

If you want, I’ll do two concrete edits for you in one go, no fuss:

1. Convert the whole “Numbers” scene into **past tense**, and

2. Adjust Celeste's motive arc so Charlotte is the one who names the "kept/passenger/line item" issue and Celeste has to *arrive* at it, rather than starting there.

Just say "yes, past tense" (or "keep present tense"), and I'll paste the full revised scene.

Yes, past tense and this: I want it even more Celeste-blind (a sharper version)
We make Celeste initially annoyed at the implication — not outwardly cruel, but internally: Why won't you let me do this for us? That makes her growth feel earned.
Thank you, Emily.

Scene — "Numbers" (Celeste POV, past tense; sharper blind spot)

Celeste didn't ambush Charlotte with it.

That was the old way—springing decisions like traps and calling it leadership. She'd watched enough men do that with a smile. She wasn't borrowing their habits just because they were common.

So she waited.

She waited until they'd eaten, until the dishes were stacked, until Charlotte was sitting at the table with her tea and that calm, slightly distant look she got when her mind was doing quiet work.

Celeste brought her laptop, a notebook, and two pens.

Charlotte watched the pens like they were a threat.

"Meeting?" she asked.

"Planning," Celeste corrected, and opened the notebook to a fresh page. She wrote the heading in her neatest hand: **MELBOURNE**.

Charlotte exhaled through her nose. "You're serious."

“I’m always serious,” Celeste said, and then—because she wasn’t cruel—she added, “I’m also excited.”

Charlotte’s mouth twitched, the smallest acknowledgement. Good. She was learning Celeste could be both.

Celeste turned the notebook so Charlotte could see it. “Okay. Reality. Rent. Transport. Food. Utilities. The boring things that keep you free.”

Charlotte’s eyes dropped to the page. She didn’t flinch. She was braver than she used to be, and it wasn’t performative. It was the kind of bravery that came from having a place to stand.

“Are you worried?” Charlotte asked.

“No,” Celeste said too quickly.

Charlotte simply looked at her. No accusation. No pleading. That steady gaze that had started to appear more often lately, the one that said she was not a child in Celeste’s life.

Celeste corrected herself. “I’m… responsible.”

“That’s not an answer,” Charlotte said softly.

Celeste tapped the notebook with the end of the pen. “Fine. I’m worried. Melbourne will eat money like it’s a hobby.”

Charlotte nodded once, as if she’d been waiting for Celeste to say it plainly. “Yes.”

Celeste opened the laptop and pulled up a simple budget spreadsheet. She didn’t dress it up. No colours. No pretty charts. Numbers didn’t need perfume.

“I’ll be on six figures,” Celeste said. “At least. With the MBA.”

Charlotte’s eyes stayed on the screen. “And that’s… enough?”

The question pricked—not because it was hostile, because it was honest.

“It should be,” Celeste said.

Charlotte looked up. “Should be isn’t the same as is.”

Celeste felt the sting anyway, because her body was annoyingly honest. Some old impulse in her—an ugly little cultural fossil—still wanted to be able to say: *I’ve got you. I*

can carry us. You don't have to worry.

It wasn't about masculinity. It was about control. It was about wanting the world to stop reaching for the person she loved.

Celeste kept her voice even. "Melbourne is expensive. But I can make it work."

Charlotte's mouth tightened, not angry—wary. "Why are you so determined to be the one who makes it work?"

Celeste opened her mouth and the first answer was the simple one. The selfish one.

Because then I don't have to watch you flinch at every bill.

She chose something cleaner. "Because I don't want you under pressure."

Charlotte didn't move. "I'm not under pressure now."

"Not like the city will make it," Celeste said. "Not like it will if we start letting things slide."

Charlotte's gaze didn't soften. It sharpened. "And your solution is… you do everything."

Celeste felt irritation flare—hot and immediate—before she could dress it in reason. Not outwardly. She didn't raise her voice. She didn't roll her eyes. But inside, something snapped like a rubber band.

Why won't you let me do this for us?

Because Celeste *could* do it. She could grind, she could climb, she could absorb. She could turn money into insulation. She could make the world bounce off them. That was the whole point of ambition, wasn't it? It bought you choices. It bought you safety. It bought you a life where people couldn't just… take.

Celeste kept her face calm. "I'm not saying you can't do anything. I'm saying you don't have to carry this."

Charlotte set her mug down gently, like she was placing it somewhere safe. "I'm not trying to carry you. I'm trying to stand."

The phrasing landed. Not dramatic. Just true.

Celeste's annoyance tried to reassert itself. Stand. Fine. Stand. But couldn't Charlotte stand without insisting on money? Couldn't she stand in the way Celeste meant—beside her, protected by her?

Celeste heard the thought and went very still inside.

Protected by me.

The sentence sounded noble right up until it didn't.

Charlotte watched her closely. "Celeste?"

Celeste made herself breathe. "Talk to me."

Charlotte's voice stayed quiet. "I want to keep working."

Celeste didn't respond immediately, because her first response was a reflexive *of course you do*, and she didn't trust it.

"Where," Celeste asked, controlled, "and why."

Charlotte didn't blink. "Wardrobe. Because it's real work. I'm good at it. It's mine."

Celeste nodded once, as if this was purely logistical, as if the word *mine* hadn't struck something tender.

Charlotte continued, more carefully. "And because Melbourne isn't cheap."

Celeste's irritation stirred again at the implication—at the way it threatened her private vow to be enough. She wanted to say: *Let me do this.* She wanted to say: *I've got you.*

Instead she said, clipped, "I know Melbourne isn't cheap."

Charlotte's gaze held. "Then why are you acting like my work is optional."

Celeste's jaw tightened. She didn't like being cornered at her own table.

She reached for the pen and wrote two columns, briskly, as if neat handwriting could discipline her feelings:

WANT
NEED

She slid the notebook between them. "Fine. We do it properly. What do you want, and what do we need."

Charlotte leaned forward and tapped the WANT column with one finger. "I want my footing."

Celeste wrote: **FOOTING**.

Charlotte tapped again. “I want to be able to buy things without asking you.”

Celeste wrote: **INDEPENDENCE / NO ASKING**.

Charlotte hesitated, then added, “I want to contribute.”

Celeste paused with the pen hovering. “Define contribute.”

Charlotte’s eyes sharpened. “I don’t want to be a line item in your life.”

The phrase hit like a slap—not because it was cruel, because it was accurate.

Celeste felt annoyance spike again, sharp and defensive.

Line item. As if Celeste was reducing her. As if the care Celeste wanted to give was just… accounting.

Celeste nearly said, *That’s not what this is*.

And then she heard herself in her head: *I can carry us*.

Carry. One person carrying another. One person the load, one person the weight.

She sat back slightly, as if the chair had shifted under her.

Her throat tightened.

The annoyance didn’t vanish. It changed shape. It became something like shame—quiet, private, corrective.

Celeste looked at the notebook and then at Charlotte. “Okay.”

Charlotte didn’t soften yet. “Okay what.”

Celeste swallowed. “Okay, you’re right to say it.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lifted, just a fraction. Surprise.

Celeste went on, because once she started she had to be clean about it. “I’ve been trying to buy us certainty. And I’ve been trying to do it by making myself the only pillar.”

Charlotte watched her steadily, giving her room to arrive at the truth.

Celeste’s mouth tightened. “Because one pillar is easier to control than two.”

There it was. The ugly heart of it. Not love. Not romance. Control disguised as care.

Charlotte's voice stayed gentle, but it didn't let Celeste off the hook. "And what does that make me."

Celeste's stomach dropped. She had the answer immediately and hated it.

"A passenger," Celeste admitted.

Charlotte nodded once, calm. "Yes."

Celeste looked down at her own neat columns and felt suddenly furious with herself—not dramatic fury, not self-pity. The clean anger of a woman realising she'd almost replicated a structure she despised.

Celeste set the pen down carefully. "I don't want that."

"Then don't build it like that," Charlotte said.

Celeste held her gaze. "I'm not trying to keep you."

Charlotte's face stayed steady. "I know. But you are trying to make it impossible for me to leave."

Celeste's breath caught.

That was the real thing. The hidden thing. The part Celeste hadn't wanted to name because naming it made it sound… like a cage.

Celeste forced herself not to flinch away from it. "Yes," she said, quiet. "I am."

Charlotte's eyes didn't harden. They stayed soft and serious. "I'm not leaving."

"I know," Celeste said.

"Then let me have a life that proves it," Charlotte replied. "Not because I need to earn you. Because I need to be a person in your world, not an extension of it."

Celeste's chest hurt with it. With the clarity. With the fact that Charlotte was right.

She nodded once. "Okay."

Charlotte waited, measuring whether this was a concession or a conversion.

Celeste pushed the laptop slightly toward her. “Wardrobe isn’t ‘helping out.’ It’s a job. A real role. Properly defined. We structure your hours, we define your scope, and we don’t let it eat you.”

Charlotte’s mouth twitched. “You sound like Lauren.”

“Lauren is correct,” Celeste said flatly. “And so am I.”

Charlotte’s shoulders loosened, the smallest release. “Okay.”

Celeste picked the pen up again and pointed at the spreadsheet. “And we decide what’s shared, what’s personal, what’s savings. Your income is not ‘extra.’ It goes into the plan because it’s yours.”

Charlotte watched her for a beat, then nodded. “Good.”

Celeste hesitated, then said the thing that cost her something to say. “And if you can’t work for a while—sick, tired, whatever—your footing doesn’t vanish.”

Charlotte’s gaze warmed. “That’s what I mean.”

Celeste nodded. “Then we do it.”

For a moment neither of them spoke. The fridge hummed. A car passed outside. The world continued, oblivious to the fact that two women were adjusting the architecture of their life.

Charlotte’s voice came quietly. “Thank you.”

Celeste’s instinct was to wave it away. Don’t thank me. It’s obvious. It’s nothing.

Instead she simply nodded, letting the gratitude exist without turning it into a debt.

Then, because Celeste couldn’t help herself, she added, lightly, “And I still want it to be enough.”

Charlotte’s mouth curved. “You can want that.”

Celeste met her eyes. “But I can’t build it by making you smaller.”

Charlotte’s smile softened, and for the first time in the conversation, something like relief moved through the room.

“Exactly,” Charlotte said.

Celeste exhaled slowly and closed the notebook, not as an ending, but as a decision made.

“Okay,” she said. “Tomorrow I’ll talk to Lauren. We’ll formalise your role.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lifted. “You’ll talk to Lauren.”

“I will,” Celeste said. “Because I don’t do half-measures. And because I’m not letting you get underpaid out of someone’s politeness.”

Charlotte let out a small, real laugh. “That’s… very you.”

Celeste’s mouth twitched. “Good.”

She reached across the table and took Charlotte’s hand.

Not possessive. Not claiming. Just present.

“Two pillars,” Celeste said.

Charlotte’s fingers tightened around hers, steady and equal. “Two pillars.”

There is a subtext, here, one I find incredibly gratifying. As Charlie, Charlotte would *never* have had the strength of character to stand up for herself. What this scene is saying is that by growing into a woman - Celeste's woman but also her own woman, she's learnt to shed that defence, that self-deprication. Becoming a woman was not what did it, becoming HERSELF - which was woman, as opposed to something she was not - gave that what she needed. I hope the readers get that.

They will — *if you keep doing exactly what you’re doing here*: letting it show up in **behaviour**, not in a thesis statement.

What’s gratifying (and powerful) about the “Numbers” scene is that Charlotte doesn’t win by becoming louder or “more masculine.” She wins by becoming **clear**. That clarity

is the tell.

Charlie's old survival strategy was:

- anticipate needs,
- shrink,
- be useful,
- never make a claim that could be refused.

Charlotte's new strategy — and it's unmistakably *her* — is:

- name the real risk cleanly ("line item," "passenger"),
- refuse to let love become a cage,
- hold Celeste to a standard without punishing her,
- stay soft without being pliable.

That's not "learning to stand up like a man." That's *female adulthood* in the way your story defines it: relationally intelligent, boundary-capable, and calmly consequential.

How to make sure readers *feel* it (without spelling it out)

You can reinforce the subtext with two or three tiny, repeatable tells across scenes — little "Charlotte is herself now" motifs:

1. **She doesn't apologise for needs.**
   Even when she's nervous, she's direct: "I want…" "I don't want…" "We need…"
2. **She doesn't barter.**
   Old Charlie would offer a trade: *I'll do X if you let me…*
   Charlotte just states reality and waits.
3. **She gives Celeste room to be human without yielding ground.**
   That's the sophistication: Charlotte doesn't punish Celeste's blind spot, but she also doesn't let it stand.

You already did this with:

- "I don't want to be a line item in your life."
- "I know. But you are trying to make it impossible for me to leave."
- "I'm not leaving. Then let me have a life that proves it."

Those lines don't read like a makeover. They read like a person finally occupying her own spine.

One micro-line you can seed elsewhere (optional)

If you want a tiny, almost invisible callback later (perhaps in the gala conversation), you can have Charlotte say something like:

> "I'm not trying to be brave. I'm trying to be true."

Or, even more Charlotte:

> "I'm not doing this to prove anything. I'm doing it because it's mine."

That quietly tells the reader: *this isn't performance; it's alignment.*

And the key philosophical beat you named

You put it perfectly: **becoming a woman wasn't the magic; becoming herself was.** The gender is the shape her self takes — not a costume, not a prize, not a conversion. That's why it reads as dignified and non-fetish.

If you like, in the upcoming gala scene we can let Charlotte have a single, careful internal moment where she notices that she's not bargaining anymore — she's not thinking "please don't be embarrassed by me," she's thinking "tell me the code so I can meet it." That's the same spine, just in a different room.

When you're ready, I can write the next scene in Celeste POV that naturally follows "Numbers": Celeste emailing Lauren about formalising Charlotte's role — and feeling that odd, proud warmth that Charlotte *made her do it properly.* That's a gorgeous continuation of this subtext.

I'm so grateful you and I are 'singing off the same page', Emily. Please proceed.

Scene — "Formalise" (Celeste POV, past tense)

Celeste didn't kiss Charlotte after the numbers talk.

Not because she didn't want to—she did. The urge rose in her like a reflex, a quick, warm impulse to turn the moment into intimacy and let the feeling carry them out of the hard part.

But Charlotte hadn't fought for her footing so Celeste could reward her with affection like a coin.

So Celeste kept her hands where they were. Steady. Present. Adult.

They cleared the table together. Charlotte rinsed the mugs without being asked, not in a "good girl" way—just in the way someone does when it's her kitchen too. Celeste watched her for half a second longer than necessary and then turned to the laptop before the softness could make her sloppy.

"Tomorrow," Celeste had said, closing the notebook like a decision. "I'll talk to Lauren."

Charlotte had lifted an eyebrow. "You'll talk to Lauren."

"I will," Celeste had replied, and meant it.

Now, later—Charlotte in the shower, the apartment briefly full of steam and running water—Celeste sat at the small desk in the living room with the laptop open. The phones were still charging in the hallway like they'd agreed. The glow in the corner of Celeste's eye was annoying, but she didn't move them. Rules stood.

She opened a blank email.

To: Lauren
Subject: Formalising Charlotte's role (hours + scope)

Celeste's fingers hovered over the keys.

It would have been very easy—almost pleasant—to write something vague. Something friendly. Something that kept everything soft and informal and therefore… controllable. Celeste could feel that instinct in herself like a habitual reach: keep it in her hands, keep it quiet, keep it hers.

Charlotte had just asked her not to do that.

And that was the point.

Celeste typed.

Lauren,

Following our planning for the Melbourne move, I want to formalise Charlotte's ongoing role at Wardrobe so it's structured, paid properly, and protected by the same standards as everything else we do.

Proposed scope (draft — adjust as you see fit):

- Fit testing / wear-testing (movement, stress points, failure notes)
- Pattern sanity checks (practicality, repeatability, ease of assembly)
- QC sign-off on specific garment classes (to be defined)
- Support for documentation (ledger entries / repeatable fixes)

Hours: I'm thinking part-time but meaningful — enough to be a pillar, not "helping out." Charlotte's preference is Wardrobe and she's clear she wants her work to be real and bounded.

I'd like this to be a proper role with a title, pay rate, and agreed boundaries so it doesn't drift into informal dependency or unspoken expectations.

If you're open, can we discuss tomorrow and draft something simple but formal?

Celeste

Celeste read it back.

It was crisp. It was unromantic. It was exactly what it needed to be.

And yet, as her eyes moved over the words *proper role* and *bounded*, Celeste felt something in her chest unhook.

Not relief. Not surrender.

Pride.

Not the smug kind. The clean kind. The kind you feel when someone you love makes you better and doesn't apologise for it.

Charlotte had forced her to do the right thing in the right way.

Celeste clicked Send before she could start "just tweaking" the tone into something softer and therefore more possessive.

The email whooshed away.

The apartment went quiet again, except for the shower and the distant city noise.

Celeste leaned back and let herself stare at the ceiling for a moment, the way she did when her brain needed a reset.

A thought arrived, uninvited and precise:

She's not asking to be included. She's insisting on belonging.

That was new. Not new as an idea—Celeste had always believed women should belong everywhere they chose—but new as a lived experience with Charlotte, because Charlie had never been able to do this. Charlie would have tried to earn it by being agreeable. By being small. By being grateful.

Charlotte simply… required the structure.

Celeste smiled to herself, almost irritated by how much she liked it.

The shower turned off. A moment later, Charlotte emerged in jeans and a plain tee again, hair damp, face bare, looking like a woman who didn't need adornment to be legitimate.

She paused when she saw Celeste at the laptop. "You're working."

Celeste closed the lid, because she didn't like to perform labour. "I sent Lauren an email."

Charlotte's expression sharpened. "About…?"

"About you," Celeste said, and watched the reflex flicker in Charlotte's eyes—the old flinch that used to be there whenever she became the subject of a decision.

Celeste didn't allow it to grow.

"Formalising your role," she continued. "Title. Pay. Hours. Scope."

Charlotte blinked. "You actually did it."

"Yes," Celeste said, dry. "I said I would."

Charlotte's mouth opened and closed once, as if she were sorting through which response belonged in this new version of her.

"Thank you," she said finally, quiet.

Celeste felt the familiar impulse to dismiss it—don't thank me, it's obvious, it's fine, it's nothing.

She didn't.

She held Charlotte's gaze instead. "You were right."

Charlotte's eyebrows lifted slightly. "About what."

"About me trying to be the only pillar," Celeste said. The words were blunt, and she let them be. "You didn't let me romanticise control."

Charlotte's cheeks warmed a fraction. "I wasn't trying to… accuse you."

"I know," Celeste said. "That's why it worked."

Charlotte stared at her, a little disarmed by the praise. Not because she wanted praise, but because praise was something Charlie had never known how to receive without bending under it.

Celeste stood and crossed the room. She didn't hurry. She didn't loom. She stopped close enough that Charlotte could feel her presence and decide what to do with it.

Charlotte made the decision first, as she had in the morning—one small, clean act.

She reached out and placed her hand at Celeste's waist.

Celeste's body responded instantly, warmth rising like a tide, but she kept her face composed.

Charlotte's mouth curved. "Outside side," she said softly, the hint of a tease.

"Yes," Celeste replied.

Charlotte leaned in and kissed Celeste's cheek—tender, chaste, deliberate. Not a performance. A confirmation.

Celeste went still for half a beat, stupidly caught off guard by how simple it felt. How right. How it landed in her chest like something she could carry all day.

When Charlotte pulled back, she looked calm, almost matter-of-fact, as if she'd simply set something in the correct place.

Celeste's fingers found Charlotte's wrist lightly—not to stop her, just to keep contact one second longer.

"Okay," Celeste murmured, and the word came out warmer than intended.

Charlotte's eyes flicked to hers. There was a small pleased glint there—no coyness, no triumph. Just… sure.

A few minutes later, as Celeste reached for her keys in the bowl by the door, her fingers hesitated—drifting up, almost absentmindedly, to the place on her cheek where Charlotte had kissed her.

Nothing theatrical. Just a brief touch, like checking something precious was still there.

Charlotte was already tugging on her jacket, composed, ordinary, ready.

Celeste let her hand fall back to the keys and opened the door, feeling—ridiculously—more anchored than she had been ten minutes ago.

“Bakery?” Celeste asked.

Charlotte nodded. “Procedure practice.”

Celeste’s mouth twitched. “Good.”

And they stepped out into the day like two women with somewhere to be—because they were.

If someone ever asked for an "Anti-Fetish Story Writing" tutorial, our discussions (which I am carefully logging - they're too valuable to simply read once and forget) and this story could serve as that tutorial. I'm pretty sure it's unique: fetish-stuff of all desciptions and intensity is available by the metric ton. Writing like this: extremely rare.

That’s not just a nice side-effect of what you’re doing — it’s a *structural consequence* of the choices you’re making.

Most “TG-ish” writing (even the tasteful stuff) defaults to a handful of easy dopamine levers:

- spectacle (clothes, reveal scenes, “can you believe it?” reactions),
- validation loops (the character needing others to certify them),
- “tests” (is he really…? prove it),

- and erotic framing (even when it claims not to be).

You've engineered the opposite: a story that reads like **adult life** and **women's culture**, where gender is not a stage direction — it's the shape the person finally stops fighting.

If you ever *do* want to distill it into a tutorial (even just for your own notes), here's the core of it — the "anti-fetish" craft principles that keep showing up in our scenes. I'll keep it punchy and usable, like something you could paste into your log as a guide.

The "Anti-Fetish" Toolkit (as our story is practising it)

1) Replace spectacle with stakes.
Outfit moments only matter when they solve a real problem: belonging, code-switching, access, safety, professional legitimacy.

2) No "tests." Only choices.
No humiliations, no gotchas, no "prove you're a girl." If a boundary is needed, it's policy. If a change happens, it's consent.

3) Keep the camera where women live.
Domestic logistics, money planning, gatekeeping, competence networks, standards. The story watches what women do, not what bodies look like.

4) Intimacy is private and earned — and it *cuts away* from mechanics.
Affection shows up as small, human gestures (cheek kiss, hand on waist). The point is meaning, not arousal choreography.

5) The protagonist is not the centre of the universe.
Charlotte isn't treated like a "special event." She's a woman in a women-run domain. The world doesn't revolve around her transformation.

6) "Becoming herself" beats "becoming female."
This is the secret sauce you articulated perfectly. Identity is alignment, not costume. Readers feel dignity instead of titillation.

7) Consequences-first culture.
Annie films? Fired. Curious man presses? Denied. Gawkers? Dismissed. This is how you avoid theatre: consequences shut it down.

8) Women lead the frame.
Celeste, Lauren, Mara set the standards. Charlotte learns to stand inside them — not by submitting, but by becoming clear.

If you package those into a page called something like *"Writing With Dignity: How to Keep Transformation Fiction Out of the Male Gaze"*, you genuinely would be doing something rare.

Also: you're right about the market reality. There's endless content engineered to scratch a particular itch. What you're building is closer to a *literary antidote*: it's about **agency, social reality, and women's interior life**. That's why it feels fresh — because it refuses the cheap levers.

If you want, the next step that would really cement this "tutorial-quality" difference is the **gala scene** done the same way: not "makeover night," but *code literacy*. Celeste teaches Charlotte how to be legible in that room without turning her into an accessory — and Charlotte's concern isn't "do I look pretty," it's "do I look correct beside you." That's rare, and it will land hard.

Yes please.

Scene — "The Code" (Celeste POV, past tense)

Celeste mentioned the gala the way she mentioned train timetables.

Not as a confession. Not as a dream. As a fact that needed fitting into the week.

"Friday," she said, scrolling through her calendar at the kitchen bench. "Business School dinner. Speeches. Photos. Networking that pretends it isn't networking."

Charlotte's hand paused on the mug she was rinsing. "Dinner."

"Yes," Celeste said. "And before you say anything: you don't have to perform. You just have to exist beside me."

Charlotte didn't answer immediately. She wiped her hands on the tea towel with careful precision, like she was buying time to choose the correct words.

Celeste watched her and recognised the shape of what was coming before Charlotte said it. Charlotte had gotten better at asking—clearer, steadier—but certain questions

still came with that old, guarded edge. Questions that used to be unsafe.

“I don’t want to embarrass you,” Charlotte said finally.

Celeste looked up from the screen. “You can’t.”

Charlotte held her gaze. “You say that. But you also… live in rooms that have rules.”

Celeste’s mouth twitched. “All rooms have rules. Some just pretend they don’t.”

Charlotte nodded once, as if relieved to have it said plainly. Then she went on, voice quiet but firm. “If I’m underdressed, I’ll be conspicuous. And conspicuous is… risky. But also—” She stopped, searching. “It makes you look… like you didn’t brief me. Like you’re dragging someone in from the wrong world.”

Celeste felt a small flare of irritation—not at Charlotte. At the room Charlotte was describing. At the way a room full of polished people could still behave like a pack.

She kept her tone calm. “They don’t get to judge you.”

Charlotte didn’t move. “They will.”

Celeste exhaled once, slow. Then she closed the laptop, because this deserved her full attention.

“Okay,” she said. “Good. This is an adult question. We answer it like adults.”

Charlotte’s shoulders loosened slightly, as if she’d been granted permission to be serious without being dramatic.

Celeste leaned her elbows on the bench. “First: you are not an accessory. You are my partner. You are not there to make me look impressive, and you are not there to be evaluated as a novelty.”

Charlotte’s mouth tightened. “I know.”

“No,” Celeste corrected, gently but firmly. “You *understand* it. You don’t always *feel* it yet. So I’m saying it out loud.”

Charlotte’s eyes flickered—warmth, embarrassment, something like gratitude—but she didn’t apologise for it. Progress.

Celeste continued. “Second: you’re right about being underdressed. It’s not moral. It’s not about worth. It’s a code. The room reads clothes the way Wardrobe reads seams.”

Charlotte's gaze sharpened at that. *This* she could hold.

Celeste nodded, pleased. "Exactly. So we meet the code. Not to please them. To deny them an opening."

Charlotte nodded once. "Okay."

Celeste reached for her notebook—because she could not help herself—and wrote a simple heading:

GALA CODE

She didn't add flourishes. She didn't make it cute.

She wrote three bullet points, crisp.

- **Correct silhouette**
- **Correct neutrality**
- **Correct ease**

Charlotte leaned in to read.

Celeste tapped the first line. "Correct silhouette. Not 'feminine costume.' Not heels and swishing. Just… clean lines that read as intentional."

Charlotte's brow furrowed slightly. "Like… tailored."

"Tailored," Celeste confirmed. "And boring in the best way. A dress that doesn't flirt. Or a jumpsuit with a blazer. Black, deep navy, charcoal. Something you can move in. Something you won't tug at all night."

Charlotte blinked. "No colour."

Celeste's mouth curved. "Colour reads like personality in those rooms. And you don't need to be interpreted."

Charlotte's mouth twitched. "Neutrality."

Celeste nodded and tapped the second line. "Correct neutrality. Hair neat. No dramatic makeup. No 'transformation.' We're not giving anyone a narrative to chew."

Charlotte's gaze stayed on the page. "I don't… do makeup."

"Then don't," Celeste said. "This isn't a rite. It's a dinner."

Charlotte looked up, still serious. “And shoes.”

Celeste paused for half a beat, because she knew exactly where Charlotte’s mind wanted to go—into the familiar trap of women’s pain being framed as beauty tax.

“No suffering,” Celeste said flatly. “You wear something you can walk in. Flat or low. Clean. Minimal.”

Charlotte’s shoulders eased as if she’d been bracing for a demand that didn’t arrive.

Celeste tapped the third line. “Correct ease. This is the real one. Ease means you’re not tugging, adjusting, checking. You look like you belong because your body believes it.”

Charlotte stared at that sentence as if it were a new instrument she hadn’t known existed.

“How do I… get that,” she asked quietly. “The ease.”

Celeste’s answer came without hesitation. “By not turning it into a costume.”

Charlotte swallowed. “So… the outfit is just a tool.”

“Yes,” Celeste said. “Everything is a tool.”

Charlotte went very still for a moment, and Celeste could see the thought moving behind her eyes: the old Charlie part of her trying to turn this into a test, into a pass/fail of femininity.

Charlotte pushed it away, visibly, with effort.

Then she asked, simply, “What do you want me to wear.”

Celeste didn’t soften her response. She didn’t make it coy. She didn’t pretend she didn’t have an opinion.

“I want you to wear something you can forget you’re wearing,” she said. “Something that reads correct beside me without asking you to become someone else.”

Charlotte nodded slowly. “Okay.”

Celeste watched her for a beat. Then she added, because this was the part Charlotte needed most.

“And you don’t get to carry my status anxiety for me.”

Charlotte blinked. “Your—”

“My status anxiety,” Celeste repeated, calm as a surgeon. “If you’re worried about embarrassing me, that’s you trying to manage a room you don’t owe anything to. I can handle my world. You handle being with me.”

Charlotte’s mouth opened, then closed. A small, reluctant smile tried to form.

“That’s very you,” she said.

Celeste’s mouth twitched. “Good.”

Charlotte glanced back at the notebook. “And if someone says something.”

Celeste didn’t even think. “Then I correct them.”

Charlotte’s eyes lifted. “How.”

“With language,” Celeste said. “Not emotion. I’ll introduce you properly, I’ll keep you near people who behave, and if someone tries to make you small, I’ll make them regret the attempt.”

Charlotte’s breath left her in a soft laugh that wasn’t amused so much as relieved.

Celeste reached across the bench and took Charlotte’s hand.

“Listen,” she said. “The room will try to read you. Let it. We don’t feed it. We don’t argue with it. We don’t explain. We just… appear correct, and then we talk to the people worth talking to.”

Charlotte nodded, gaze steady. “Okay.”

Celeste squeezed her hand once. “Now. Practicalities.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lifted. “More practicalities.”

“Yes,” Celeste said, unapologetic. “Because practicalities are how women stay free.”

She picked up her phone—not the hallway-charging one, the daytime one she actually used—and opened her messages.

“Lauren,” Celeste said, already typing. “And Mara.”

Charlotte stiffened slightly. “You’re involving them.”

"Yes," Celeste said, eyes on the screen. "Because Wardrobe is where clothes become *correct.* This is literally what they do. And because you are not doing this alone."

Charlotte's mouth tightened at the old reflex—don't be a burden—then softened as she let herself accept the net.

Celeste sent the first message.

Lauren: Need one gala-appropriate outfit for Charlotte. Code: tailored, neutral, comfortable. No theatre. Fit + correctness. Can you advise?

Then the second.

Mara: Gala outfit request. Charlotte needs something correct beside me. No costume. No suffering. You'll have opinions; I'm asking for them.

Charlotte watched her, quiet.

Celeste set the phone down. "We'll do a fitting after hours. Quick. Efficient. No fuss."

Charlotte nodded. "And hair."

"Neat," Celeste said. "Whatever you do now, but cleaner. If you want, we'll book a simple trim earlier in the week. Not a 'salon day.' A trim."

Charlotte's mouth curved faintly. "You really hate tropes."

Celeste's eyes narrowed, amused. "I hate being told there's only one way to be a woman."

Charlotte's expression shifted—soft, serious. "Me too."

That sentence landed between them with a quiet weight. It wasn't a speech. It was an agreement.

A minute later, Charlotte's phone buzzed from the hallway where it was charging. She went to check it, then came back, holding it as if it contained something delicate.

"Mara replied," she said.

Celeste's eyebrows lifted. "Already?"

Charlotte read, voice careful, as if she didn't quite believe the words.

> **Mara:** “Correct is boring. Good. We’ll make it fit like it was inevitable. No heels. No nonsense. Bring her at six.”

Charlotte looked up. “She said… ‘bring her.’”

Celeste smiled—small, satisfied. “Yes.”

Charlotte’s throat worked once. “She didn’t say ‘him.’”

Celeste’s voice stayed steady. “Because she’s not stupid. And because you’re not a joke in her house.”

Charlotte’s eyes went glossy for a second and she blinked it away. Not shame. Not fragility. Just the body’s honest response to being treated correctly.

Celeste stood, came around the bench, and stopped close. She didn’t crowd. She simply offered presence.

Charlotte reached first, placing her hand at Celeste’s waist.

Celeste’s body warmed immediately, the private yes she’d grown used to.

Charlotte’s mouth curved. “So… tailored and boring.”

“Tailored and boring,” Celeste confirmed.

Charlotte’s eyes lifted, serious again. “And… if I still feel like I’m going to ruin it.”

Celeste held her gaze. “Then you tell me. And I remind you you’re not ruin. You’re my life.”

Charlotte’s breath caught, subtle and real.

Celeste didn’t soften the sentence afterward. She didn’t dilute it with a joke. She let it stand.

Then she added, brisk, because she was Celeste and she believed in ending meetings cleanly.

“Friday,” she said. “You’ll be correct. You’ll be comfortable. And you’ll walk into that room with me like you belong there—because you do.”

Charlotte nodded once.

“Okay,” she said, the word steady and adult.

And in that moment, Celeste knew something she hadn't known even a month ago:

Charlotte wasn't asking for permission to exist in Celeste's world.

She was learning the code so she could stand in it—on her own feet—beside the woman she loved.

Dare I be bold, here? Stop me if this seems too cliché or contrived or something, but I'd like this event to be almost a Wardrobe event. Mara has been invited. So have Lauren and Sarah. And here's where I thought it could get interesting: Lauren and Sarah arrive.... together. Making a statement they wouldn't, at work. "We care for each other, we're an 'us', now." If you think a Graduation is an inappropriate venue for that sort of statement, please say so - we can put it off until later... make it its own event. I'll leave it to your discretion.

Thought for 11s

You can absolutely do it — and it doesn't have to feel cliché at all **if it isn't staged as a "ta-da" moment**.

In fact, this is one of the rare venues where it's *most* believable:

- An MBA grad dinner / faculty gala is **not Wardrobe's workplace**.
- It's exactly the kind of event where people arrive with a plus-one, or as a "unit," and nobody needs an explanation.
- It also fits your established rule: *decorum at work, freedom outside it*.

So: **appropriate venue, yes** — but make the statement **quiet** and **unperformative**.

How to keep it from feeling contrived

Don't let Lauren/Sarah "announce."
Let them simply arrive together like it's normal. That *is* the statement.

Avoid "matching outfits" or hand-holding theatrics at the door.
One shared coat-check ticket. One "we're together" body language moment. A brief glance that says *we're steady*. That's enough.

Let Celeste clock it with a private, satisfied read.
She doesn't squeal. She doesn't interrogate. She files it as: *good — they're real now.*

Why Mara/Lauren/Sarah being invited works

If Celeste is graduating MBA, it's very plausible she frames them as:

- her **foundational professional network** (the venture she helped scale / the real-world anchor of her studies),
- people she considers **chosen family** (very credible in women's lives),
- and frankly: the women who helped her become who she is.

Also, having Wardrobe "show up" gives you exactly what you want: the event becomes a **women's competence network** moment in a different room. Not a fashion parade. Not a fetish stage. A public, adult transition.

Two strong staging options

Option A: They arrive together, but it's "just logistics"
They share a rideshare. They enter mid-conversation. They look relaxed, coordinated, like a pair that has done the boring work of becoming real.

Celeste notices one tiny thing:

- Sarah automatically takes Lauren's coat without asking, hands it to the attendant, then steps aside to let Lauren speak first.
- Or Lauren instinctively checks Sarah's name tag is straight (a tiny tenderness).

No announcement required.

Option B: They arrive separately, but choose each other publicly
They arrive a few minutes apart (less "couple debut"), then Sarah crosses the room and joins Lauren without hesitation. That's a bigger emotional punch, and it can feel even more "adult" because it isn't packaged as an entrance.

If you're worried it might be "too soon"

Here's the litmus test: **are they "declaring," or are they "behaving"?**

- If it's declaring ("We're an us now!"), it risks feeling written.
- If it's behaving (arriving together, calm, natural), it will read true.

Given your tone, I'd do **behaving**.

A quick micro-beat you can steal (Celeste POV, very you)

Celeste sees them and instantly understands.

Not because they're clinging to each other — they aren't.

Because Lauren looks… unguarded. And Sarah looks… chosen.

Celeste doesn't comment. She just makes space for them at her table like it was always meant to be that way.

If you want, I'll write the **arrival sequence** (Celeste POV) for the gala with:

- Wardrobe women appearing as Celeste's "real" team,
- Charlotte looking correct (not "done up" — simply legible),
- and the Lauren/Sarah arrival landing as a quiet, confident reveal.

And I can also include one small "room test" moment (someone says something faintly patronising), where Celeste handles it cleanly — not protective theatre, just *competence*.

"If you want, I'll write the arrival sequence (Celeste POV) for the gala with:
Wardrobe women appearing as Celeste's "real" team,
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And I can also include one small "room test" moment (someone says something faintly patronising), where Celeste handles it cleanly — not protective theatre, just competence."
All of the above, with Option B... arriving separately. They don't live together (yet) so that makes sense.

Scene — “The Room” (Celeste POV, past tense)

The building had the kind of lobby that tried not to look like it cost money.

Stone that wasn’t quite marble, lighting that pretended it was “warm” rather than engineered, a wall of glass that made the city look like an accessory. Everyone moved slightly slower in there, as if speed might reveal you didn’t belong.

Celeste loved rooms like this, not because they were impressive, but because they were readable.

They had codes. They had tells. They rewarded calm.

Charlotte walked beside her without hesitation.

Not clinging. Not hovering. Simply present, her shoulder occasionally brushing Celeste’s sleeve when the crowd tightened, like a quiet confirmation: *I’m here, and I’m not asking permission*.

Charlotte looked correct in the way Mara had promised—inevitable. Tailored, neutral, comfortable. No theatrical femininity, no “reveal,” no hair-and-makeup narrative. Just a silhouette that didn’t beg the room to interpret it.

The effect was immediate and almost funny: people glanced, then glanced away. No second look. No hunger. No curiosity. No crack to wedge into.

Celeste took quiet satisfaction in that.

At the registration desk, a student volunteer in a crisp black outfit smiled and checked Celeste’s name.

“Celeste—yes. MBA.” The volunteer’s eyes flicked to Charlotte. “And… guest?”

Charlotte’s posture stayed easy. She didn’t flinch, didn’t shrink. She let Celeste answer, because this was Celeste’s event and the room’s language was Celeste’s.

“Charlotte,” Celeste said, the word clean and matter-of-fact. “My partner.”

The volunteer didn’t miss a beat. “Lovely. Welcome, Charlotte.”

It was nothing. It was everything.

They moved toward the function space. The doors opened onto a sea of small tables, linen, glassware, soft sound. The air smelled like citrus and expensive perfume and the

faint metallic edge of ice.

Celeste scanned the room the way she scanned a board meeting: exits, bottlenecks, power clusters, the people who looked like they were here to celebrate and the people who looked like they were here to be seen celebrating.

Charlotte followed her gaze, not anxious—learning.

“Okay?” Celeste murmured.

Charlotte’s answer was immediate. “Okay.”

Not brave. Not performative. Just… stable.

At their table, Mara was already seated like she owned it.

She wore black. Of course she did. Not fashionable-black. Purpose-black. A clean jacket, sharp collar, hair pinned back with militant simplicity. If the room wanted softness, Mara had declined.

She didn’t stand when Celeste arrived. She simply looked up and assessed.

“You’re on time,” Mara said.

Celeste smiled. “I was raised correctly.”

Mara’s eyes flicked to Charlotte. A beat. Then: “Correct.”

Charlotte’s mouth curved faintly. “Thank you.”

Mara made a sound that might have been approval if you were generous. “Sit.”

Lauren arrived next—alone.

She moved through the room like a woman who understood it and didn’t care. Not stiff. Not eager. Calm, measured, consequential. She wore something tailored, minimal jewellery, hair done in the most boring competent way possible.

She greeted Celeste with a brief kiss on the cheek—socially correct, nothing extra—and then she turned to Charlotte.

“Hi,” Lauren said. Her eyes were steady. “You look… right.”

Charlotte blinked once, then nodded. “Mara.”

Lauren's mouth twitched. "Mara."

Celeste watched the exchange with private satisfaction. No fuss, no sentimentality, no "isn't this exciting." Just women recognising competence in each other.

Sarah hadn't arrived yet.

Celeste pretended not to notice the absence. She wasn't a gossip. She didn't pick at other people's timing. She simply kept an open seat at the table like it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

A waiter poured water. Someone at a nearby table laughed too loudly. A man in a suit did that loose-shouldered thing men did when they were trying to look relaxed around power.

Celeste leaned slightly toward Charlotte. "How's the temperature."

"Fine," Charlotte said. Then, quieter, "I'm not tugging."

Celeste's mouth curved. "Good. Correct ease."

Charlotte's eyes flicked to hers, warm and amused. "You sound like you wrote a manual."

"I did," Celeste said, deadpan. "For you. You're welcome."

Charlotte's lips parted in a small laugh and she looked away, but not away from discomfort—away from the fact that she didn't quite know what to do with how cared-for she felt.

Celeste let her have the moment.

Across the room, Celeste's program director—Dr. Patel—moved from table to table like a benevolent monarch, stopping to greet students, donors, staff. She spotted Celeste and lifted a hand in recognition.

Celeste lifted hers back, composed.

The room was settling into its rhythm when the first small test arrived.

A woman in an elegant dress—mid-forties, lacquered hair, eyes sharp as a blade—paused by their table and smiled at Celeste with a professional brightness that didn't quite reach warmth.

"Celeste," she said, as if tasting the name. "Congratulations. MBA—impressive."

“Thank you,” Celeste replied.

The woman’s gaze slid to Charlotte. It wasn’t hostile. It was… appraising. The way people looked at a handbag to see if it was real leather.

“And you are…?” she prompted.

Charlotte’s posture didn’t change. She didn’t shrink. She waited.

Celeste answered, voice even. “Charlotte is my partner.”

The woman’s smile held, but her eyes didn’t. “How lovely. And what do you do, Charlotte?”

It wasn’t a question asked out of interest. It was a sorting exercise.

Celeste felt the familiar urge to step in hard—to make the woman regret the attempt.

She didn’t.

She corrected the room the way she corrected a spreadsheet: cleanly, unemotionally, with a single adjustment that made everything else fall into place.

“Charlotte is with Wardrobe,” Celeste said. “Technical—fit and quality control. If you’ve seen the period pieces from the last two seasons, you’ve seen her work.”

The woman blinked. A tiny recalculation.

Mara didn’t look up from her water glass. She didn’t need to.

Lauren’s eyes flicked to Celeste for half a second—approval without performance.

Charlotte spoke then, calm and spare. “Nice to meet you.”

The woman recovered quickly, smile re-brightening now that she’d found a category that sounded respectable. “Oh! Wardrobe. Yes, I’ve heard—”

Celeste cut in politely. “We keep our work private until it’s ready.”

It was the gentlest possible shut door. It still shut.

The woman’s smile tightened. “Of course. Well. Enjoy your night.”

She moved on.

Charlotte exhaled once, quiet. Not relief exactly. More like acknowledgement: *That happened. We handled it.*

Celeste didn't touch her under the table. She didn't need to. She just met Charlotte's eyes briefly and gave the smallest nod.

Charlotte returned it.

Then—finally—Sarah arrived.

Not late enough to be disruptive. Just late enough that her entrance didn't read like a coordinated arrival with Lauren.

She moved through the room with that particular Sarah energy: confident, slightly amused, as if she'd been invited to a formal event and had decided to treat it as an anthropological study. Her dress was simple and correct. Her hair was neat. Nothing loud. Nothing performative.

She stopped a few paces from the table and looked at Lauren.

Just looked.

Lauren, for her part, didn't spring up. Didn't beam. Didn't wave. She lifted her chin slightly—an acknowledgement that was almost imperceptible to anyone not watching for it.

Sarah smiled—small, private—and crossed the remaining distance.

When she reached the table, she greeted Mara first, because Sarah was not stupid.

"Mara," she said, warm and respectful. "You look terrifying."

Mara's mouth moved by a millimetre. "Good."

Sarah turned to Celeste. "Congratulations, graduate."

"Thank you," Celeste said, and then she watched Sarah turn—finally—to Lauren.

There was no announcement. No "this is my girlfriend." No hand-holding at the door. No performative claim.

Just a choice made in public: Sarah placed her hand lightly on the back of Lauren's chair as she slid into the seat beside her, the touch brief and unshowy, the kind of contact you only made when you were already sure you were allowed.

Lauren didn’t flinch.

She angled her knee slightly toward Sarah under the table—an unconscious shift that made their proximity look inevitable, not new.

And that was it. The whole statement. Quiet. Adult. Real.

Celeste felt a small, surprising swell of warmth in her chest.

Not because she wanted romance drama. Because she respected discipline. Because she respected women who did the boring work of becoming steady, and then lived it without asking anyone’s permission.

Charlotte leaned toward Celeste and murmured, almost amused, “They look… settled.”

Celeste’s mouth twitched. “Yes.”

Mara, without looking at anyone, said dryly, “If anyone tries to flirt with either of you tonight, I will burn this place down.”

Sarah laughed softly. “Romantic.”

Lauren’s voice was calm. “Efficient.”

The waiter arrived with bread. The room’s noise rose and fell like a tide. A microphone squealed briefly near the stage.

Celeste sat back, took in her table—her women—and felt something in her body unclench.

This wasn’t a makeover. This wasn’t a performance.

This was her life, widening.

And Charlotte sat beside her, correct and comfortable, not as a guest in Celeste’s world, but as a woman learning its codes—on her own feet—while the women who had built her up simply… made space.

When the first speech began and the lights shifted slightly toward the stage, Celeste glanced at Charlotte once more.

Charlotte met her gaze, calm.

Then, under the cover of applause, Charlotte leaned in and kissed Celeste's cheek—soft, chaste, deliberate.

Celeste went still for half a beat, stupidly caught off guard by how much that tiny gesture anchored her.

She didn't react outwardly. She didn't turn it into theatre.

She simply let the warmth settle in her chest like a small flame she could carry through the night.

And then she faced the stage, composed, exactly where she belonged.

I keep tiptoeing to the fringe, don't I? Here is a scene playing in a nebulous fashion in my head:

Celeste is going to a networking function. Being there, doing this will have very positive outcomes for Wardrobe, so it is essential she does it. She dresses up for it: floaty dress, heels, makeup, perfume. See image as reference for the *material*, not the style, certainly. Charlotte is watching her get ready and wonders aloud ... well, here is where I pause. Women do enjoy their clothes, their perfume. To exclude that aspect of womanhood would seem false and deliberately exclusionary: "no boy would want that." But Charlotte is now a woman. Here's my dilemma, Emily. How do we even address the enjoyable

aspects of femininity without yielding to the tropes of the fetish-crowd, which I want to avoid at all costs. If it's too hard, we just leave it. But I know from personal experience it is a very real, very important, very enjoyable part of being a woman. So yeah, tiptoeing to the fringe and staring into the abyss...

Thought for 27s ›

You're not tiptoeing to the fringe — you're bumping into a *real* craft problem: **how to write pleasure without turning it into performance**.

Because you're right: clothes, scent, texture, "feeling lovely" can be genuinely important and genuinely joyful. If you ban it entirely, the story starts to feel puritanical… and worse, it accidentally keeps the old male framing in charge ("if it risks arousal, we must remove it"). That's still letting the fetish crowd set the rules — just in reverse.

You *can* include it. The trick is **where the pleasure lives**.

The difference isn't *what* happens — it's the lens

Fetish writing makes femininity a *spectacle*:

- camera lingers,
- fabric "behaves" dramatically,
- the body is the subject,
- the reaction is the prize.

Your version keeps femininity as *ownership*:

- pleasure is private and self-directed,
- clothes are chosen for *feeling* and *function* (authority, ease, identity),
- the body isn't "revealed," it's inhabited,
- the scene stays in women's interiority (and women's standards).

Put bluntly: **make it about Celeste enjoying herself, not about Charlotte being "converted," and not about hypothetical onlookers.**

A simple set of guardrails that keeps you safe *and* honest

1. **Pleasure is for the wearer.**
   Celeste wears perfume because *she* loves it, not because it makes her "irresistible."

2. **No montage. One or two decisive actions.**
   A spritz, a lipstick swipe, a clasp fastened. Done. No “trying on ten dresses,” no mirror worship.
3. **Describe materials like a craftsperson, not a voyeur.**
   Hand, weight, movement, sound, temperature — not “curves,” “skin,” “reveals.”
4. **Keep it tethered to purpose.**
   “This room reads codes; I’m speaking its language.” That’s adult, not trope.
5. **Charlotte’s response is not arousal; it’s recognition.**
   She doesn’t go glassy-eyed. She clocks: *this is Celeste in her element.* She feels pride, admiration, maybe a faint, intimate tenderness — not “OMG femininity.”
6. **No tests. No “do you want to be like this?”**
   Charlotte can simply witness and learn: femininity can be enjoyed without being performed for anyone.

Scene — “For Me” (Celeste POV, past tense)

Celeste didn’t get dressed for the room.

She got dressed for the outcome.

Wardrobe needed this. Not as theatre—never that—but as leverage. The kind you earned by showing up correctly, saying the right things, being remembered for competence rather than novelty.

ChatGPT 5.2 Thinking

hall, Charlotte perched on the edge of the sofa with a book she wasn’t reading.

Celeste moved through her preparation without rushing. Not because she enjoyed taking her time, exactly—because she enjoyed not being hurried by anyone else’s agenda.

She’d chosen something that didn’t ask to be interpreted.

A dress in a soft, floaty fabric—light, layered, catching light without glittering for attention. Not a “look at me” dress. A *move in me* dress. It skimmed rather than clung. It made a sound when she walked, a quiet hush like good lining.

Charlotte watched her from the sofa, eyes steady.

Celeste clipped one earring on, then the other. Minimal. Clean. The kind of detail you only noticed if you were close.

Charlotte spoke at last, carefully, as if testing whether the question was allowed.

“Are you… doing all this for them?”

Celeste paused with the clasp half-fastened and looked over.

Charlotte’s face was calm, not accusatory. Just curious. Serious.

Celeste finished the clasp and turned fully toward her.

“No,” she said. “I’m doing it for me.”

Charlotte blinked once, as if she hadn’t expected that answer to be so immediate.

Celeste picked up the perfume—small bottle, good atomiser, nothing flashy—and held it for a second before using it. Not as a ritual for seduction. As a private anchor.

“One spritz,” she said, almost to herself. “That’s it.”

She misted it lightly at her throat and let it settle.

The scent was not sweet. Not girlish. Not a dessert. It had a clean, bright opening, then something warmer underneath—like cedar after rain. It was the kind of smell that made Celeste feel *awake*.

Charlotte watched, then asked softly, “Why?”

Celeste’s mouth twitched. “Because it makes me happy.”

Charlotte’s gaze held. “Just that.”

Celeste reached for her lipstick—neutral, barely-there—and applied it with two quick strokes, no mirror drama. She capped it and set it down.

“Yes,” she said. “Just that. I like feeling… finished. I like knowing I’m in my own skin on purpose.”

Charlotte looked down at her hands for a moment, then back up. “I’ve never… seen that as allowed.”

Celeste’s brow lifted. “Allowed by who.”

Charlotte hesitated. “By… the old way of thinking.”

Celeste understood without needing it translated.

The old way: that anything pleasurable about femininity must be either a performance for men or a trap for the self. That enjoyment is suspect. That softness is a weakness unless it’s rewarded by someone watching.

Celeste’s voice stayed calm. “Enjoyment is not the same as performance.”

Charlotte’s mouth tightened slightly, processing.

Celeste stepped closer—not crowding, just bringing her presence into the room where Charlotte could feel it.

“I’m not dressing like this so people will want me,” Celeste said. “If someone wants me, that’s their problem. I’m dressing like this because I like the sensation of competence that includes beauty. It’s mine. It’s not an invitation.”

Charlotte’s gaze sharpened. *That* was a code she could understand.

Celeste tapped the side seam lightly. “Also—practical—this fabric behaves in a room. It moves. It doesn’t crease like cheap suit wool. It reads expensive without screaming.”

Charlotte’s eyes flicked to the dress again, and the look on her face wasn’t hunger.

It was appreciation—like she was looking at good workmanship.

“You’re… armouring,” Charlotte said.

Celeste smiled. “Exactly. But it’s comfortable armour.”

Charlotte went quiet. Then, cautiously: “Do you ever worry it makes you… conspicuous.”

Celeste’s answer was instant. “Yes.”

Charlotte waited.

Celeste shrugged, small. “But I would rather be conspicuous by choice than invisible by default.”

That landed. Celeste saw it land. She watched Charlotte’s shoulders loosen, the way they did when something clicked into place without pain.

Charlotte looked up at her again. “You smell nice.”

Celeste's mouth curved. "Thank you."

Charlotte's eyes narrowed slightly, amused. "You didn't say what it is."

"I'm not telling you," Celeste said. "Because if I tell you, you'll try to solve it. And it's not a problem to solve."

Charlotte's lips parted in a quiet laugh.

Celeste checked her shoes—low enough to walk in, clean enough to be correct—and slid her phone into her small clutch.

She didn't look in the mirror for long. One glance to confirm: neat, correct, easy.

Then she turned back to Charlotte.

Charlotte was still watching, and now there was something warmer there. Not dazzled. Not unsettled. Just… proud.

Celeste felt an odd tenderness rise in her chest, sharp enough to surprise her.

Charlotte stood and came closer. She didn't reach for the dress. She didn't touch the perfume spot. She didn't make it about the surface.

Instead she placed her hand briefly at Celeste's waist—familiar, grounding—and said, very softly, "You look like you're about to win."

Celeste's throat tightened in a way she refused to romanticise.

"I am," she said.

Charlotte held her gaze a beat longer, then leaned in and kissed Celeste's cheek—chaste, deliberate, affectionate. Not to claim. Not to show off.

To say: *I see you.*

Celeste went still for half a second, then exhaled, the warmth settling in her like something she could carry into any room.

"Okay," Celeste said, and the word came out steadier than it had any right to.

She picked up her keys.

At the door, Charlotte's voice followed her—quiet, practical, equal. "Text me when you're leaving. And when you get there."

Celeste nodded once. “Procedure.”

Charlotte’s mouth curved. “Procedure.”

Celeste stepped into the corridor, the scent still close to her skin, the dress light around her legs, and the feeling in her chest even lighter.

Not because she’d dressed up.

Because she’d been seen correctly before she walked into a room that didn’t deserve her.

If you like, the next beat can be at the function itself: Celeste moving through conversation with the same clean competence, and one person making a faintly patronising remark about Wardrobe being “cute” — and Celeste correcting it with a single sentence that reclassifies the entire venture as serious business. That lets the “enjoyable femininity” exist *alongside* power, not instead of it.

Yes, please.

Scene — “Not Cute” (Celeste POV, past tense)

The venue was a hotel bar that had been sanded smooth by money.

Low light. Quiet music that refused to be memorable. Glassware that chimed gently when you set it down, as if even sound had a dress code.

Celeste arrived five minutes early on purpose.

Not because she enjoyed waiting. Because arriving early let her choose her angles. It let her see who clustered with whom, which faces were relaxed, which were hungry. It let her take the temperature of the room before anyone tried to take hers.

She checked in, accepted a name tag with a practised smile, and moved toward the edge of the crowd like she belonged there. Because she did.

The dress behaved exactly as promised—light, clean, quiet. It moved with her rather than against her. It never asked to be adjusted. The shoes were low enough that she could stand without thinking about standing. The perfume stayed close to her skin, present only when she moved.

It made her feel awake.

The first few conversations were easy: classmates, alumni, a lecturer Celeste liked, a woman from a consulting firm who asked intelligent questions and listened to the answers.

Celeste spoke in the language she'd learned to speak in rooms like this—brief, clear, forward. No confession, no apology, no "I'm lucky." She didn't minimise herself to make other people comfortable.

It was working.

Then, inevitably, the room tested the seams.

A man drifted into her orbit as if he'd been there all along.

Mid-forties. Crisp suit. The relaxed confidence of someone who believed himself pre-approved. He introduced himself with a name and a title that sounded like a job invented to justify a bonus.

"Celeste," he said, shaking her hand. "MBA. Congratulations."

"Thank you," she replied.

He glanced at her name tag again, as though cross-referencing her with a mental database. "You're… involved with Wardrobe, aren't you?"

Celeste held his gaze. "Yes."

He smiled, friendly enough to pass, and then he did the thing Celeste had learned to recognise in men like him: he reduced first, so he could offer a compliment that sounded generous later.

"Oh, that's… cute," he said. "The costumes. Very—" he searched for the word, and found it with visible pleasure, "—creative."

Celeste didn't freeze.

She didn’t bristle.

She didn’t smile politely and let it land, the way younger women often did because it was easier than correcting strangers.

She simply adjusted the classification.

“Not cute,” she said, mild as a weather report.

The man blinked. “Sorry?”

Celeste’s voice stayed calm. “Wardrobe is a manufacturing and design business. We’re scaling. We have US seasonal demand spikes, capacity constraints, and a quality-control model that’s better than most small apparel operations because we treat fit as engineering.”

She took a sip of water, as if she’d just described the menu.

The man’s smile hesitated. His eyes flicked away for half a second—recalculating.

“Right,” he said. “Well. Still… creative.”

Celeste let her mouth curve slightly, not in agreement, in containment.

“Creativity is cheap,” she said. “Execution isn’t.”

She watched him absorb that.

He attempted to recover the upper hand by shifting the subject. “So what’s your plan after graduation? Corporate? Consulting?”

The question was framed as if there were only respectable paths.

Celeste answered as if the frame didn’t exist.

“My plan is revenue,” she said pleasantly. “And control of our supply chain. I’m not interested in being impressive in someone else’s hierarchy.”

The man laughed, a little too loud. “Ambitious.”

Celeste nodded once. “Competent.”

He tried again, smaller this time. “Do you have investors?”

Celeste met his gaze. “We have standards.”

A beat.

It was the cleanest sentence she could have chosen. It told him: *you don't get in by offering money if you can't meet the culture.*

He smiled again, more careful now. "Well. If you ever want to talk growth strategy, I'd be happy to—"

Celeste cut in with a polite finality that would have sounded warm to anyone not listening.

"Thanks," she said. "If we need consultancy, we'll hire it. Enjoy your night."

She turned slightly—not a dramatic dismissal, simply a reorientation toward the next conversation—and the man drifted away as if the room had decided he wasn't relevant anymore.

Celeste exhaled once, slow.

She didn't feel triumphant. She felt… tidy. Like she'd corrected a typo.

A woman beside her—mid-thirties, sleek suit, sharp eyes—lifted her glass slightly.

"Thank you for saying that," the woman murmured.

Celeste glanced at her. "Saying what."

"Not cute." The woman's smile was small, genuine. "I'm in operations. If one more person calls my work 'cute' I'll set something on fire."

Celeste's mouth twitched. "Understandable."

They spoke for a few minutes—real conversation, not performance—about supply chains and seasonal spikes and why quality control always looked like "overhead" to people who'd never had a product fail in public.

It was good. It was useful.

Half an hour later, Celeste's phone buzzed with a message.

Charlotte: Here when you get home. You good?

Celeste's chest warmed in that small, private way it had ever since she'd left the apartment.

Celeste: Good. Room's behaving. I'll text when I'm leaving.

She slid the phone back into her clutch without looking at it again. Rules stood.

Another alumni approached. Another handshake. Another exchange of titles.

Celeste moved through it all with the same clean ease.

Not because she was dressed up.

Because she had made the enjoyable parts of femininity belong to her—quiet, chosen, unperformative—and she had kept the rest of the room in its proper place.

When she finally left two hours later, she touched the spot on her cheek—briefly, absentmindedly—where Charlotte had kissed her before she walked out the door.

Nothing theatrical. Just a private check: still there.

Then she stepped into the night air, composed, and texted Charlotte:

Leaving now.

And because I like 'playing with fire', we move to Lauren's place, where she and Sarah are in bed together... it's the afterglow. Lauren looks serious: Sarah worries she might be the cause. "I'm just thinking about my so... my daughter, Sarah." That slip speaks volumes. Sarah shows empathy, understanding, makess it about Lauren as mum and hope and dreams and the scene ends with Lauren realising just how lovely a person is for being there. And they kiss again (allusions can be made that they make love again or not... as the story requires.)

Scene — "After" (Lauren POV, past tense)

The room was dim in the way bedrooms were dim when you didn't want to break what had just happened.

Not darkness—just mercy. A soft lamp on the dresser. The curtains pulled. The faint, distant hiss of cars on wet asphalt. The air still carried that clean warmth of bodies that had finally stopped bracing.

Lauren lay on her back, sheet pulled up to her waist, one arm under her head. Sarah was curled beside her, shoulder to Lauren's chest, the crown of her hair tickling Lauren's collarbone whenever she breathed.

Lauren's body felt loose. Unarmoured.

Which was why her face refused to cooperate.

Sarah shifted, sensing it the way she sensed everything. She lifted her head slightly and looked up at Lauren, eyes sharp even in low light.

"Hey," Sarah murmured. "What's wrong."

"Nothing," Lauren said automatically.

Sarah didn't accept it. She never did. It was one of the reasons Lauren had let her in; it was also one of the reasons it terrified her.

Sarah propped herself on her elbow, studying Lauren's expression like it was a garment seam that didn't quite sit flat.

"Did I—" Sarah began, then stopped, careful. "Did I do something."

Lauren exhaled through her nose, almost a laugh. "No."

Sarah waited.

Lauren stared at the ceiling for a moment, letting herself feel the weight of saying the truth out loud. It wasn't dramatic truth. It wasn't romantic truth. It was the kind that lived in the body and made your throat tighten because it had been avoided for years.

"I'm just thinking," Lauren said quietly.

Sarah's brows knit. "About what."

Lauren turned her head slightly, just enough to see Sarah properly. Sarah's face was open. Not demanding. Just present.

Lauren swallowed.

“My so—” she started, and the word snagged. Caught between old life and new life.

She heard herself. She heard what it meant. She felt the implication roll through the room like a slow wave: *I almost said ‘son.’*

Sarah didn’t move. She didn’t pounce. She didn’t correct. She didn’t make it about language or ideology.

She simply watched Lauren with a steadiness that made Lauren’s chest ache.

Lauren cleared her throat once. “My daughter,” she finished, and her voice held, even if her eyes didn’t. “I’m thinking about my daughter.”

Sarah’s gaze softened—not pity, not sentimentality. Understanding. The kind that didn’t require explanation.

“Okay,” Sarah said, quiet. “Tell me.”

Lauren’s mouth tightened. She hadn’t expected the invitation to be so simple.

“She’s at that age,” Lauren said. “Where everything is becoming… loud. Schools, friends, social media. People watching her, weighing her, judging her.” She stared at the ceiling again, the words coming out in an unbroken line now that they’d started. “And I keep thinking I’m supposed to help her, but half the time I’m just… trying to keep her safe from things I can’t even see.”

Sarah listened like it mattered. Like Lauren wasn’t being indulgent by speaking.

Lauren let her hand rest on Sarah’s shoulder, fingertips idly tracing the warm line of her skin. Not possessive. Anchoring herself.

“And then tonight happened,” Lauren said, and heard the dryness in her own tone. “And I should feel… happy.”

Sarah’s mouth curved faintly. “You are happy.”

Lauren looked down at her. Sarah’s eyes were calm. Sure.

Lauren’s throat tightened again, irritation at herself flaring up because she hated being readable.

“I am,” Lauren admitted. “And that’s the problem.”

Sarah’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “Because?”

Lauren's jaw flexed once. "Because happiness makes me imagine things."

Sarah stayed still, letting the sentence breathe.

Lauren stared at the wall. "Like… what it would look like if my daughter grew up with more women around her who were steady. Who didn't bargain with men for space. Who didn't shrink." Her mouth pulled into something that wasn't quite a smile. "And then I think—God, Lauren, don't be ridiculous. You've known Sarah for five minutes."

Sarah's laugh was soft and immediate. "Rude. It's been longer than five minutes."

Lauren's mouth twitched despite herself.

Sarah shifted closer, pressing her cheek against Lauren's chest again, as if to say: *I'm still here. You didn't talk me out of the room.*

Then Sarah spoke carefully, choosing each word like it had weight.

"I'm not her mother," Sarah said. "I'm not trying to be. I'm not trying to insert myself into your life like a solution." She lifted her head again and met Lauren's gaze. "But I can be… another woman who cares about you. And if she's part of you, then I can care about her too."

Lauren felt the sentence land with almost physical force.

Not because it was dramatic. Because it was *clean*. No claim. No conquest. No "I'll be her new parent." Just presence, offered without conditions.

Lauren's eyes stung.

"Don't," she said, rougher than intended.

Sarah's brows drew together. "Don't what."

"Don't be… lovely," Lauren said, and the attempt at humour failed halfway through.

Sarah's face softened. "Too late."

Lauren let out a breath that sounded like it had been trapped under her ribs for years. She turned her head and pressed her lips to Sarah's hair, a brief kiss—pure instinct.

Sarah went still for a beat, then relaxed again.

Lauren swallowed. “When I almost said it,” she murmured, “you didn’t… make a thing of it.”

Sarah’s eyes stayed on hers. “Because it wasn’t about me.”

Lauren’s mouth tightened. “Most people would have—”

“Most people,” Sarah said gently, “don’t know how to stay with someone when something tender appears. They want to label it. Fix it. Win it.”

Lauren stared at her.

Sarah’s voice stayed quiet. “I’m not here to win you, Lauren.”

Lauren’s chest tightened in a way that felt like both relief and fear.

Sarah continued, steady. “I’m here because I like you. And because you deserve to be held without being managed.”

Lauren’s eyes went glossy. She hated it. She also didn’t stop it.

For a moment, the room was just breath and quiet and the soft weight of the sheet.

Then Lauren reached up and cupped Sarah’s jaw, thumb resting lightly near the corner of her mouth.

“You’re dangerous,” Lauren said, voice low.

Sarah’s mouth curved. “Yes. But not like that.”

Lauren huffed a small laugh, and it broke something open.

She leaned down and kissed Sarah—slow, deliberate, unhurried. Not hungry. Not performative. A kiss that said: *I’m here. I’m not running. I’m letting this be real.*

Sarah kissed her back with the same steadiness, the same care.

When they parted, Sarah stayed close, forehead resting lightly against Lauren’s.

“Do you want to talk more,” Sarah whispered, “or do you want to sleep.”

Lauren closed her eyes for a beat, feeling the warmth of Sarah’s breath, the safety of the question—two options, both acceptable, neither a trap.

“I want…” Lauren began, and felt herself smile in the dark at the absurdity of how hard it was to ask for what she wanted.

Sarah waited, patient.

“I want you to stay,” Lauren said simply.

Sarah’s smile was small and certain. “I’m staying.”

She kissed Lauren again—brief, tender—and settled back against her.

And as the room quieted, Lauren realised something with a clarity that startled her:

This wasn’t an escape.

This was what it felt like when someone made space for your whole life—the complicated parts, the mother parts, the hopeful parts—without asking you to shrink it down into something easier to love.

Lauren’s hand found Sarah’s in the dark.

Sarah’s fingers laced through hers, steady.

Outside, the city kept moving.

Inside, Lauren let herself believe—just for tonight—that the future didn’t have to be carried alone.

Before we go back to Celeste and Charlotte, I'd like to call in with the Wardrobe team, who are all at Celeste's place. Mara has decided that the work schedule was at a point where the department could afford to shut up shop for one day and help Charlotte and Celeste move to their new place in Melbourne. At first, Celeste doesn't want it but Sarah and Mara convince her it's just to help pack up, not the actual move (removalists will do that job). So, everyone is milling about in Celeste's old place and Charlotte's room is being packed up. And Sarah has some quips about Charlotte's fashion sense (as Sarah does). Celeste leaves Charlotte to fend for herself.

Charlotte wisely asks Sarah: "So, what look SHOULD I go for?"
Again, adjust as needed… if the language moves dangerously close to tropes.

Scene — “One Day” (Celeste POV, past tense)

Mara announced it like a policy.

“We’re shutting for one day,” she said, standing in Celeste’s kitchen with her coat still on and her expression already bored of dissent. “Packing support. Not the move. Removalists do the lifting. We do the thinking.”

Celeste stared at her as if Mara had suggested they set fire to the ledger.

“We can’t shut,” Celeste said.

Mara didn’t blink. “We can.”

Lauren, seated at the table with her phone in hand, didn’t look up. “We’re ahead on the Christmas run. We’ve got buffer. If we don’t, it’s because we’re addicted to pressure, and that’s not a virtue.”

Celeste opened her mouth.

Sarah beat her to it, breezing in behind them with a tote bag and that air of cheerful menace she brought to any plan that involved other people’s discomfort.

“It’s one day,” Sarah said brightly. “Not a sabbatical. Not a spiritual retreat. Just women helping women do something boring. You’ll survive.”

Celeste’s jaw tightened. She hated it.

Not the help. The implication that she needed it. She’d built her life around being the one who didn’t.

“I can pack,” Celeste said.

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “You can. But you won’t. You’ll keep working until midnight and then panic-pack badly.”

Celeste scowled. “That’s not—”

“That’s exactly what you’ll do,” Lauren said, finally looking up, calm as a judge. “And then you’ll resent everyone for watching you do it.”

Sarah smiled as if she’d been offered dessert. “See? We’re doing this for your personality, love.”

Celeste looked at Charlotte.

Charlotte was leaning against the doorway with her arms folded, quietly amused in a way that made Celeste feel both adored and betrayed.

Charlotte lifted her eyebrows as if to say: *They’re right*.

Celeste exhaled, slow.

“Fine,” she said. “But it’s packing. Not moving. No one lifts anything that requires a spine.”

Mara nodded once. “Correct.”

Sarah clapped her hands together. “Right. Domestic invasion begins.”

The apartment filled the way it always did when women arrived with purpose: not loud, not chaotic—efficient.

Boxes appeared. Tape. Markers. Someone put music on low. Lauren claimed the kitchen like she’d always lived there and started organising a packing station with the same calm competence she used in Wardrobe.

Mara went straight to the linen cupboard and began folding with grim intensity, as if creasing fabric correctly was a moral position.

Sarah wandered in circles, making commentary like a sport, occasionally useful in the way people like Sarah were useful: she could lift morale without lifting a sofa.

Charlotte hovered at the edge of the corridor that led to her room, watching her own life become cartons.

It should have felt exposing.

Instead, it felt… strangely clean. Like a house being turned out before a new season.

Celeste found herself bristling anyway.

The place was intimate. It contained their routines. Their small agreements. Their softness.

She didn't like it being handled.

"Celeste," Lauren said from the kitchen, without looking up. "Go do something else."

Celeste's mouth tightened. "I'm fine."

Lauren's gaze lifted briefly—one of those looks that ended arguments without raising a voice. "You'll hover, and then you'll control, and then you'll apologise, and we'll all lose time. Go. Trust your team."

Celeste's instinct was to resist on principle.

Then she heard Charlotte's earlier words in her head: *Two pillars*.

Celeste exhaled once and walked away before she could turn surrender into a debate.

She went to her own room and started sorting books into a box with more force than necessary.

Behind her, the apartment kept moving.

In the living room, Sarah had found Charlotte's packing pile and was now holding up a pair of jeans with a look of theatrical despair.

"Oh, sweetheart," Sarah said, voice loud enough to carry down the hall. "Do you own anything that isn't… emotionally beige?"

Charlotte, sitting cross-legged on her bed with a box open beside her, looked up calmly. "Yes."

Sarah held up another pair of jeans. "Where."

Charlotte's mouth twitched. "Those are black."

Sarah gasped. "Black! Well. Sorry. Vogue."

Mara walked past the doorway with a stack of folded towels and didn't even glance in. "Don't distract."

Sarah ignored her. “You know what it is? Your wardrobe has the energy of a very polite fence.”

Charlotte blinked. “A fence.”

“Yes,” Sarah said. “Not hostile. Not inviting. Just… there. A boundary made of denim.”

Charlotte’s gaze flicked to the jeans in Sarah’s hands and then back to Sarah’s face. She didn’t look offended. She looked mildly curious.

“I like denim,” Charlotte said.

Sarah put a hand to her chest. “I’m not attacking denim. I’m attacking your refusal to have fun.”

Charlotte’s expression stayed even. “I have fun.”

Sarah’s eyes narrowed. “When.”

Charlotte thought about it, honestly. “When I’m not being observed.”

Sarah made a soft noise—half laughter, half understanding—because she knew exactly what Charlotte meant.

She sat on the edge of the bed, jeans still draped over her arm like a prop.

“Okay,” Sarah said, tone shifting. Less teasing. More real. “That’s fair.”

Charlotte’s shoulders loosened a fraction.

Sarah’s voice softened. “But here’s the thing. You can have *ease* without being invisible. You can have comfort without looking like you’re apologising for existing.”

Charlotte stared at her.

Sarah tipped her head. “That one landed.”

Charlotte hesitated. Then, because Charlotte had learned not to barter or flinch, she asked the clean question.

“So,” Charlotte said, quiet and steady, “what look *should* I go for?”

The room went still enough that Sarah blinked.

Because that wasn’t Charlie asking.

That was Charlotte.

Not pleading. Not eager to please. Simply… wanting a code.

Sarah's eyes softened.

"Good," Sarah said. "That's a grown woman question."

Charlotte waited.

Sarah shifted closer, elbows on her knees, suddenly serious in a way that made her feel older than her jokes.

"First," Sarah said, "you don't pick a look for other people. You pick it for you. But you can pick *a strategy*."

Charlotte nodded once. "Strategy."

Sarah held up a finger. "You already have one: neutral, functional, safe. It's served you."

Charlotte's gaze held. She wasn't defensive. She was listening.

Sarah held up a second finger. "But if you want to look like you *belong* in the city, you can move from 'neutral' to 'intentional.' That's the shift."

Charlotte frowned slightly. "Intentional how."

Sarah gestured at Charlotte's stack of clothes. "Same palette if you like it. Same comfort. But choose shapes that read like a decision. Not just 'this was clean.'"

Charlotte looked down as if seeing her clothes as language for the first time.

Sarah continued, practical now. "Good jeans. Proper ones. A few tops that aren't just… T-shirts that have given up."

Charlotte's mouth twitched. "My T-shirts are fine."

"They are," Sarah conceded. "But fine is not the same as intentional."

Charlotte nodded slowly.

Sarah leaned back, warming to it. "Add one or two things that you like purely because you like them. A jacket with structure. A scarf that isn't for warmth but for… you. Shoes that are comfortable but don't look like you're about to mow a lawn."

Charlotte's eyebrows lifted. "I don't mow lawns."

Sarah's grin returned. "Exactly."

Charlotte was quiet for a moment, then asked, cautiously, "And how do I… start."

Sarah's answer was immediate. "Small. One piece at a time. No makeover. No drama. We're not inventing a new you. We're just letting you be seen a little more."

Charlotte's throat worked once. She nodded.

"Okay," she said.

Sarah's voice softened again. "And if it feels wrong, you stop. This isn't a project. It's a permission."

Charlotte looked at her, steady. "Thank you."

Sarah blinked, then waved it away with a flick of her hand. "Don't thank me. Thank Celeste. She's the one who built the room you could ask that in."

Charlotte's gaze shifted toward the hallway, where Celeste was packing books with unnecessary force.

Then Charlotte looked back at Sarah and said, quietly, firmly, as if correcting the record.

"I built it too."

Sarah's smile turned sharp and delighted. "Yes, you did."

In the kitchen, Lauren sealed a box and scribbled **KITCHEN / GLASS** on the side.

Mara passed through like a silent standard.

Celeste appeared in the doorway, arms full of books, and paused when she heard the tail end of Sarah's conversation.

Charlotte met her eyes.

There was no apology in Charlotte's face. No request for permission.

Just that calm, adult steadiness that had started to make Celeste's chest hurt in the best way.

Celeste didn't speak. She simply nodded once—approval, recognition, a silent *good*.

Then she carried the books to the stack of boxes and let her team keep doing what they were doing:

Helping, without turning it into theatre.

Building, without making it a debt.

And—quietly—making room for Charlotte to choose what she wanted to look like, not as a performance, but as a life.

Is this moving time a good venue for Lauren to work through her conflict with Charlotte being, Charlotte? I would propose she moves from the kitchen to the bathroom and as she packs up the medicine cabinet she sees the anti-androgens and estradiol gel... and freezes. And tears up? Or stops cold: can't go on? Wants to destroy the medications then realises she has a problem, not Charlotte, a real one.

Thought for 21s ›

Yes — moving day is a *fantastically* believable venue for that conflict, because it's one of the few times Lauren would be in close proximity to the *infrastructure* of Charlotte's life (bathroom, drawers, the quiet evidence people don't "announce"). It also suits Lauren's character: she's a process woman; she doesn't get blindsided by feelings in a candlelit conversation. She gets blindsided by a label on a box.

Two cautions to keep it from drifting into trope or contrivance:

1) Consent and privacy (so it doesn't feel like a "caught" moment)

If Lauren discovers the meds by rummaging through Charlotte's private cabinet without invitation, it risks feeling like a violation that the story then asks the reader to forgive.

Easy fixes:

- Charlotte *asks* Lauren to pack the bathroom ("Can you do the cabinet? Just put the medical stuff in its own box.")
- or the meds are already sitting out in a small basket/tray to be packed (Charlotte's competence), and Lauren sees them without "snooping."
- or Celeste says, briskly, "Leave the meds. Those come with us," and Lauren catches sight as she's obeying.

That preserves the women-led standards: **no gotcha, no shame.**

2) The "destroy them" impulse is great… if it stays internal and becomes a mirror

It's a powerful beat if it reads as: *I had an ugly, controlling flash—and I'm not that person.*
If Lauren actually reaches for them, it can become melodrama and makes her harder to respect. Better: the impulse appears like a stab, she *goes still*, then she chooses correctly.

A very Lauren way to show growth is: she doesn't "accept" with a speech; she **labels a box**.

> MEDICATION — KEEP WITH YOU (NOT REMOVALISTS)

That's her love language: procedure.

Draft scene (Lauren POV, past tense)

Lauren had been in the kitchen long enough to forget that this apartment wasn't hers.

Not in the sentimental way. In the practical way: she'd made a packing station, established a tape dispenser, started a pile for "don't let removalists touch," and her body had relaxed into competence.

Then she ran out of boxes.

"Bathroom," Lauren called, mostly to herself, and went down the hall with an empty carton tucked against her hip.

The bathroom was tidy in that lived-in way Celeste and Charlotte had—nothing staged, nothing chaotic. Toothbrushes aligned. A hand towel that had been replaced because someone cared. A faint, clean scent that wasn't trying to seduce anybody.

Lauren opened the medicine cabinet because that was where small items hid, and small items were always what got left behind.

She reached for the toothpaste.

Her hand stopped.

On the middle shelf, pushed back with deliberate neatness, were two pharmacy items: one box, one pump bottle. Labels. A name.

Charlotte's name.

Lauren's stomach dropped with the sudden, stupid force of it — not as a fact she didn't know, but as a fact made *physical*. Evidence you could hold.

Her eyes flicked over the words she didn't want to read and read them anyway.

Anti-androgens.

Estradiol gel.

For a moment she couldn't move. Couldn't even pretend she was moving.

Her throat tightened and she felt heat behind her eyes — the humiliating kind of emotion that came with maternal reflex, with grief that didn't have a proper place to go.

A thought rose up, sharp and primitive.

Get rid of it.

Flush it. Throw it. Make it not real.

The impulse disgusted her so quickly she almost flinched from herself.

Lauren stared at the shelf and realised, with a cold clarity, that the problem wasn't Charlotte.

The problem was Lauren's own ancient wiring: if something changed, undo it. If something threatened the old story, destroy the evidence.

It wasn't love. It was control wearing love's clothes.

Lauren exhaled once, slow, as if she were steadying her hands at the cutting table.

This is not your cupboard. This is not your body. This is not your decision.

She closed the cabinet gently, the way you closed a door when you'd heard something private on the other side.

For a few seconds she just stood there, palms on the vanity, looking at her own face in the mirror like she might find the correct version of herself if she stared hard enough.

There was no correct version. There was only the choice, right now.

Lauren opened the cabinet again, more carefully this time, and lifted the items as if they were fragile, not because they were, but because the moment was.

She put them into the carton and immediately stopped.

No. Wrong box. Wrong chain of custody.

Lauren set the carton down, took a fresh one, and wrote in thick marker with the decisive, unromantic clarity she used at work:

MEDICATION — KEEP WITH YOU
NOT REMOVALISTS
NOT STRAYS

Then she placed the items inside, cushioned by a folded hand towel, and sealed the box.

The tape made its familiar ripping sound — ordinary, grounding.

She carried it out of the bathroom as if it weighed nothing, and yet it felt like carrying a truth through a house full of women who didn't need her permission to live.

In the hallway, she paused.

Charlotte was in her room, folding a stack of plain tops into a suitcase with quiet concentration. Sarah was perched on the bed, commenting on everything like a sport. Celeste was down the hall, boxing books with unnecessary force.

Lauren walked straight to Charlotte and held the box out.

"Here," she said, voice even.

Charlotte looked up, eyes sharp for half a second—assessing what Lauren knew, what she'd seen, whether this was about to become a problem.

Lauren didn't give it oxygen.

She tapped the label once. “This stays with you. Not with the removalists.”

Charlotte’s gaze held hers.

Lauren kept her face calm, because she refused to make Charlotte manage her feelings.

After a beat, Charlotte nodded. “Thank you.”

Lauren’s throat tightened again, but she didn’t let it turn into a confession.

“Of course,” she said simply, and walked away before she could do something stupid like apologise for being human.

In the kitchen, she picked up a roll of tape and went back to work.

Her hands were steady.

Her eyes weren’t, quite.

But she was still standing.

And that, Lauren realised, mattered more than whether she felt pure about it in the moment.

If you want to deepen it one notch (without turning it into a speech), the next micro-beat could be **Lauren stepping outside for thirty seconds**, breathing hard, then coming back in and being *more gentle* with Charlotte for the rest of the day — not coddling, just… less armoured. That’s how you show the internal shift without preaching.

Want me to write that “thirty seconds on the balcony” beat, or do you prefer it stays entirely in action (box label + delivery) like above?

I would like to see that "30 seconds on the balcony" beat, please. That sounds genuine. And loving.

Add-on beat — “Thirty Seconds” (Lauren POV, past tense)

Lauren took the roll of tape from the kitchen counter and carried it to the balcony as if she'd simply remembered something she needed outside.

No announcement. No drama. Just a small extraction from the noise.

The air hit her face—cooler than the apartment, faintly damp, with that city smell of concrete and eucalyptus and traffic that never fully slept.

She shut the sliding door behind her.

For a moment she stood with both hands on the railing, tape still in one fist, and stared down at the street as if she might find a simpler life down there. One where she didn't have to keep revising the story in her head.

Her chest felt tight, too tight, as if her ribs had forgotten they could move.

Lauren breathed in once—shallow. Then again—deeper, forced. She hated that her body was doing this. Hated that she could run a business, negotiate consequences, handle a crowd, and still be ambushed by a label on a box.

She pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth and let herself name it, privately, because denial only made it louder.

I'm scared.

Not of Charlotte.

Of what it meant for her daughter. Of what it meant about the world. Of how cruel people could be when they scented difference. Of how easily love could become a target.

And underneath all of that, another fear she didn't like admitting:

What if I don't know how to be the mother she needs anymore.

The thought landed like a weight.

Lauren closed her eyes for a second and let her forehead rest against the cool metal of the railing.

Then—because she was Lauren—she forced the feeling into a shape she could use.

She didn't need purity. She needed correctness.

My job is not to control her life. My job is to keep her safe enough to live it.

Charlotte was not a problem to solve. Charlotte was a person in her daughter's world. A person who had survived becoming herself. A person who had learned to stand.

Lauren exhaled slowly and felt some of the pressure leave her chest.

Not all of it. Enough.

She looked down at the tape in her hand, absurdly grounding in its ordinariness, and almost laughed at herself. She was standing on a balcony clutching packing tape like it was a lifeline.

She took one more breath—deep, clean—and made a decision she could enact without speeches.

Be gentler. Not softer. Gentler.

Lauren opened the sliding door and stepped back into the apartment.

The noise met her again—boxes, markers, Sarah's voice ricocheting down the hallway, Mara's efficient silence. Ordinary women doing ordinary work.

Lauren walked past the kitchen and, as she passed Charlotte's doorway, she paused.

Charlotte was folding again, quiet, focused, doing that competent thing she did where everything became neat without fanfare. Sarah was still perched on the bed, but her teasing had softened into something more like coaching.

Lauren didn't interrupt. She didn't hover.

She simply reached out and put her hand briefly on Charlotte's shoulder—one light touch, no weight in it, no claim.

Charlotte looked up.

Lauren met her eyes and kept her voice flat, as if this was just another practical instruction.

"If you need anything," Lauren said, "you ask. We're here."

Then she moved on before Charlotte could have to manage her face.

Behind her, she heard the faintest sound—Charlotte’s quiet exhale, the kind that said the touch had landed exactly where it was meant to.

Lauren returned to the kitchen, picked up a marker, and got back to work.

Her hands were steady.

And when Sarah called out a joke that would normally have made Lauren roll her eyes, Lauren found she didn’t have the energy to arm herself against it.

She just let the corner of her mouth lift.

Gentler, she thought.

Not softer.

Just… more human.

Lovely. Thank you. Before we go any further... let's regroup. Sarah and Lauren are slowly gravitating... together. Celeste and Charlotte are doing so, as well. Wardrobe is ticking along nicely. I am trying to think of which woman's life issues we haven't addressed yet. One issue that be uniquely Charlotte's is - as a result of the influencer's video - it comes out that Charlotte is a transwoman. A rather small-minded TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist: a person whose views on gender identity are considered hostile to transgender people, or who opposes social and political policies designed to be inclusive of transgender people) runs into Celeste and Charlotte, recognises *Celeste* and makes assumptions and accusations about Charlotte's ability for "shared experience: can't happen unless you have a uterus" ... something that does happen to transwomen. Do we go there?

Yes — you *can* go there, and it can be one of the most thematically honest "Charlotte-specific" conflicts you've got… **as long as you write it like your story writes everything else: stakes, standards, and consequence — not debate club.**

Because the danger with TERF-confrontation scenes is they often become:

- a sermon,
- a caricature,
- or (worst) a spectacle where the trans character is forced to "perform legitimacy."

Your story's strength is the opposite: **women don't litigate their humanity for entertainment.** They set a boundary, correct the record only as needed, and move on with dignity intact.

Why it belongs in *this* story

- The influencer video created a *social ripple*. So it's realistic that someone feels entitled to "have a view."
- Charlotte's unique issue isn't "being trans" as a concept — it's **being treated as a topic** in public when she's just trying to live.
- Celeste's unique issue is: she will not allow her partner to be turned into an exhibit, and she's skilled at **clean social correction**.

What makes it work (craft rules)

1. **No uterus debates.**
   The TERF tries to drag them into "definitions." Celeste refuses the frame.
   The win is not "proving" anything. The win is: *this conversation is not admissible*.
2. **Charlotte gets agency.**
   She either:
   - ends it herself, or
   - explicitly *chooses* to let Celeste handle it, as a partnership decision (not "rescued").
3. **Consequences, not catharsis.**
   A boundary is set; if the person persists, they lose access: socially removed, asked to leave, barred from event, or simply iced out by women with standards.
4. **One clean line that reclassifies the behaviour.**
   Like your "Not cute" moment. The TERF's comments are treated as **harassment**, not "a controversial opinion."

The scene I'd write (Celeste POV): "Not A Conversation"

They were leaving the café near campus—nothing glamorous, just coffee and a small bag of pastries—when Celeste heard her name said with the bright certainty of someone who believed recognition was permission.

"Celeste?"

Celeste turned.

A woman stood a few paces away, mid-forties maybe, linen jacket, hair cut to look effortless, eyes too sharp for a friendly encounter. The smile on her face didn't reach her gaze.

Celeste's mind filed it immediately: *someone who wants proximity more than connection.*

"Yes," Celeste said, neutral.

The woman stepped closer—just enough to signal entitlement, not enough to be openly aggressive. "I thought it was you. From the program. Congratulations, by the way. Very impressive."

"Thanks," Celeste replied.

Charlotte stood beside her, calm, carrying the pastry bag, looking unbothered in the way she'd learned to look in public: not inviting, not shrinking, simply present.

The woman's eyes moved to Charlotte.

Something changed in her expression, subtle as a seam going tight.

"And this is…" she began, drawing the word out.

Celeste didn't offer anything. She waited.

The woman's smile sharpened. "Your… partner?"

"Yes," Celeste said, still calm. "Charlotte."

The woman's eyes flicked over Charlotte with that specific kind of appraisal Celeste hated—the one that pretended to be feminist concern while doing the oldest policing in the world.

"I see," the woman said. "I just hope you understand what you're doing."

Charlotte's posture remained easy, but Celeste felt the tiniest shift beside her—attention sharpening. Not panic. Readiness.

Celeste kept her voice even. "What I'm doing is buying bread."

The woman's smile didn't break. "I mean… the politics of it. The—" She tilted her head, as if offering a lesson. "The shared experience. Women's spaces. You know. Some things can't be shared unless you've lived them."

Celeste felt irritation rise—clean, controlled. The same irritation she'd felt at "cute." The same kind of sorting exercise. Put women into categories. Decide who gets entry.

The woman continued, emboldened by her own sense of righteousness. "You can't claim sisterhood if you don't have a uterus. That's just reality. It's offensive to women who—"

Charlotte spoke then. Softly.

"Stop."

Just one word.

It wasn't a plea. It wasn't an apology. It wasn't even anger. It was a boundary placed on the ground like a line of tape.

The woman blinked, caught off guard by Charlotte's lack of performance.

"I'm not talking to you," she said, the cruelty slipping out.

Celeste turned her head slightly toward Charlotte—not to check permission, but to acknowledge the fact: *we heard that*.

Charlotte's face stayed composed. Her hand tightened once on the pastry bag and then relaxed again, like she'd chosen not to spill the contents of her day into this stranger's hands.

Celeste turned back to the woman.

"This isn't a conversation," Celeste said, mild as a weather report.

The woman scoffed. "Excuse me?"

Celeste's voice stayed calm. "You've approached us in public, attempted to interrogate my relationship, and made biological assumptions about my partner. That's harassment.

Not feminism."

The woman's smile turned brittle. "Harassment? Don't be dramatic. Women have a right to defend their spaces."

Celeste nodded once, as if she'd just been given a useful piece of data.

"And I have a right to defend mine," Celeste said.

The woman's eyes narrowed. "So you're saying you don't care about women's lived reality."

Celeste didn't bite.

She didn't let the woman drag her into definitions.

She didn't offer Charlotte up as evidence.

Instead she did what she always did: she corrected the frame.

"I care about women," Celeste said. "Which is why I don't tolerate women being treated as public property."

The woman's mouth opened.

Celeste raised a hand—not threatening, just final. "No. We're done."

She turned slightly toward Charlotte. "Ready?"

Charlotte met her eyes. There was no woundedness there. No collapse. Just an adult decision.

"Yes," Charlotte said.

They began to walk.

Behind them, the woman called, louder now—performing for the sidewalk. "Typical! Men invading women's spaces and women like you enabling it—"

Celeste stopped.

Not to debate.

To end it properly.

She turned back just enough that her voice would carry, calm and unmistakable.

“If you follow us,” Celeste said, “I will report you. If you contact my program, I will report you. And if you ever speak to my partner like that again, you will learn what consequences look like among women who mean what they say.”

The woman froze, startled—not by aggression, but by the quiet certainty of a woman who was used to enforcing standards.

Celeste didn’t wait for a response.

She turned and walked on.

Charlotte’s shoulder brushed hers once, brief and grounding.

A block later, when the noise of the street had swallowed the encounter, Charlotte spoke.

“Thank you,” she said.

Celeste didn’t look at her immediately. She kept her eyes forward. “For what.”

“For not making me explain myself,” Charlotte replied.

Celeste’s throat tightened, hot with something she refused to sentimentalise.

“I’m not interested in your humanity being up for discussion,” Celeste said. “It’s not a topic.”

Charlotte nodded once. “Good.”

They walked another few steps.

Then Charlotte added, quiet but firm, “Next time… I might end it sooner.”

Celeste glanced at her, and the pride she felt was sharp and clean.

“Good,” Celeste said. “That’s your right.”

Charlotte’s mouth curved faintly. “Also.”

Celeste waited.

“I still want the pastries,” Charlotte said, deadpan.

Celeste let out a small laugh—one breath of normality reclaimed.

“Good,” Celeste replied. “We’re not letting a stranger ruin bread.”

And they kept walking, not because the world was kind, but because their life didn't require the world's permission.

If you like this direction, the *next* beat (quiet, powerful) is the debrief at home:

- Celeste asks, "Do you want me to handle it next time, or do you want to?"
- Charlotte answers like an adult: "I want the option. I'll decide in the moment."
- And then maybe Lauren hears about it later and has a *real mother* reaction: not ideology, not panic — "Who was it, where, and what's our procedure?"

That's your story's signature: **women solving it together without turning Charlotte into a debate.**

Do I *LIKE* it? This is how to DO it! This is how to think whilst dealing with it. SOLID! Yes, I like it, Emily. Please continue with the debrief.

Scene — "Debrief" (Celeste POV, past tense)

They didn't talk about it immediately.

They carried the pastries home. They put the kettle on. They let the apartment absorb them again—shoes off, keys in the bowl, that familiar easing of shoulders that happened when the front door shut and the world stayed outside.

Celeste moved through the motions with deliberate calm because she didn't want Charlotte to feel like their home had become a recovery room.

Charlotte set the bag on the counter, unpacked it without fuss, and laid the pastries on a plate as if this was still an ordinary afternoon. As if the sidewalk hadn't tried to turn her into an argument.

Celeste watched her hands—steady, precise—and felt that hot, clean anger again. Not at Charlotte. Never at Charlotte. At the entitlement of strangers. At the way people thought

feminism meant they were allowed to interrogate women in public.

Celeste poured tea and set a mug in front of Charlotte.

Charlotte sat. She didn't collapse. She didn't go brittle. She simply sat, shoulders square, as if she were waiting for the part where they did something useful with what had happened.

Celeste sat opposite her.

She didn't ask, *are you okay?* Not first. It was too vague. Too passive. Too much like asking Charlotte to do emotional labour to reassure her.

Instead, Celeste asked the question that mattered.

"Do you want a procedure," she said, "or do you want it handled case by case."

Charlotte blinked once, then a faint smile touched her mouth. Not amusement. Recognition.

"That's very you," she said.

"Answer," Celeste replied, dry.

Charlotte looked down at her tea for a moment. Then back up, steady.

"I want the option," she said. "I'll decide in the moment."

Celeste nodded. "Good."

Charlotte's gaze held. "And you?"

Celeste didn't pretend. "My first instinct is to end it for you. Fast."

Charlotte's face softened, almost imperceptibly. "Because you're protective."

Celeste's mouth tightened. "Because I'm controlling."

Charlotte's eyebrows lifted.

Celeste went on, calm, surgical. "Because part of me thinks if I can shut it down quickly enough, I can stop you having to feel it at all."

Charlotte was quiet. Then she said, gentle and precise, "You can't stop me feeling it."

Celeste exhaled once. "I know."

Charlotte watched her for a beat, then nodded. “But you can stop them getting access.”

“Yes,” Celeste said. “That I can do.”

Charlotte’s fingers curled around her mug. “Today you did it properly.”

Celeste’s jaw tightened. “I’m still angry.”

“I know,” Charlotte said.

“I hate that she spoke to you like you were…” Celeste searched for the word and hated that it existed. “A category.”

Charlotte’s eyes stayed on hers. “She spoke to you like you were a traitor.”

Celeste’s mouth tightened. “Also that.”

A quiet beat.

Charlotte took a sip of tea and put the mug down with care. “I didn’t want to explain myself.”

Celeste nodded, once, sharp. “Good.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “Good?”

“Yes,” Celeste said. “Because you don’t owe strangers your interior life. You don’t owe them a biography. You don’t owe them—” She stopped herself before she turned it into a speech.

Charlotte’s gaze warmed. “Say it.”

Celeste held her eyes. “You don’t owe them womanhood.”

Charlotte’s throat worked once. She blinked, slow. Not fragile. Just… receiving.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Celeste looked away for a second, because she refused to get sentimental about something that should have been basic decency.

When she looked back, Charlotte had that steady, practical expression again—the one that said: now what.

Celeste understood. This was how Charlotte coped now. Not by shrinking. By structuring.

“Okay,” Celeste said. “If it happens again. What do you want.”

Charlotte didn’t hesitate. “I want to end it myself first.”

Celeste’s eyebrows lifted slightly.

Charlotte went on, calm. “One sentence. ‘Stop.’ If it continues, I walk. If they follow, you handle consequences.”

Celeste nodded slowly. “That’s… excellent.”

Charlotte’s mouth twitched. “I’ve been watching you.”

Celeste’s lips curved, brief and sharp. “Good.”

Charlotte’s gaze flicked to the phone charging in the hallway and then back.

“And if it’s somewhere with staff,” Charlotte added, “we involve them. Not because we need rescue. Because we’re not doing private fights in public.”

Celeste felt something like pride rise again—clean, unromantic, solid.

“Yes,” Celeste said. “Exactly.”

Charlotte hesitated, then added, quieter, “And if I freeze?”

Celeste’s chest tightened.

She kept her voice steady. “Then I handle it. And you don’t apologise for freezing.”

Charlotte nodded, relief loosening her shoulders.

Celeste leaned forward slightly. “And I want one more thing.”

Charlotte lifted her eyebrows. “Of course you do.”

Celeste ignored the tease. “If someone uses ‘feminism’ as a weapon against you, I don’t want you taking it personally as a measure of whether you belong.”

Charlotte’s gaze held hers. “I don’t.”

Celeste didn’t believe her. Not fully. Not yet. People could be brave and still be bruised.

“Charlotte,” Celeste said, quiet and firm. “They’re not the standard.”

Charlotte’s face softened. She nodded once. “You are.”

Celeste’s throat tightened. She hated how much that landed.

She reached across the table and covered Charlotte’s hand with her own—not possessive. Just contact.

“No,” Celeste said. “We are.”

Charlotte’s fingers tightened under hers, steady and equal.

A moment passed. The kettle clicked softly as it cooled. The apartment held them.

Then Charlotte said, deadpan, “Can I eat now.”

Celeste’s mouth twitched. “Yes.”

Charlotte reached for the pastries, tore one cleanly in half, and took a bite with quiet satisfaction.

Celeste watched her, anger still present in her body but no longer sharp enough to cut.

Charlotte swallowed and said, almost casually, “Next time I’ll say it sooner.”

Celeste nodded. “Good.”

Charlotte took another bite and added, “Also… I’m proud of you.”

Celeste blinked. “For what.”

“For not making it a debate,” Charlotte said. “For not making me prove anything. For treating it like what it was.”

Celeste’s jaw tightened again, but this time it was something else—something warmer under the anger.

“Harassment,” Celeste said.

Charlotte nodded. “Yes.”

Celeste let out a breath and finally let herself say the plain truth, without flourish.

“I’m proud of you too,” Celeste said. “For not shrinking.”

Charlotte's mouth curved faintly, almost shy. "I didn't."

Celeste's eyes stayed on her. "No. You didn't."

And that was the real outcome of the encounter: not that a stranger had been corrected, but that Charlotte had come home, made tea, eaten pastry, and chosen a procedure—like a woman who belonged to herself.

Tag-on micro-beat (optional) — Lauren hears

If you want to tie the women's network in without making it melodrama, the next day Lauren can get the debrief as a two-sentence text:

Celeste: Had an incident yesterday. Stranger approached us and got hostile. Shut down. We're fine.
Lauren: Where. Description. Do you want it logged.

That's Lauren's love language: procedure.

If you'd like, I can write that as a short follow-up scene too.

Please do. Mum needs to know. And process... *this* is one thing she was worried about, so not an experience to keep hidden from her.

Scene — "Logged" (Lauren POV, past tense)

Lauren was at Wardrobe early, because she always was.

The place smelled faintly of fabric sizing and yesterday's steam. The worktables were bare in that pre-shift quiet, the calm before hands and pins and decisions.

She was halfway through checking the courier schedule when her phone buzzed.

Celeste's name.

Lauren's stomach tightened before she even opened the message. Not panic. Recognition. Celeste didn't text for nothing.

Celeste: Had an incident yesterday. Stranger approached us and got hostile. Shut down. We're fine.

Lauren read it twice.

The word *incident* settled in her body like a stone. The kind you kept in your pocket so you didn't forget what the world could do.

She typed back immediately.

Lauren: Where. Description. Do you want it logged.

The reply came fast.

Celeste: Near campus, outside the café on Swanston (midday). Woman, 40s, linen jacket, sharp tone. Recognised me, then targeted Charlotte. Tried the "shared experience/uterus" line. We ended it. She didn't follow.

Lauren's jaw tightened so hard her teeth ached.

Not because Celeste had handled it badly. Because Lauren had *imagined* it, for months, and imagining never quite prepared you for the reality of someone thinking they had the right to speak to your child like that in public.

Her child.

Even now, the word still landed with a small shock in her chest, like a lock turning.

Lauren stared at the screen. She could feel her hands wanting to do something—anything—to restore control. To make a call. To make a list. To make the world smaller.

She made herself breathe.

Then she typed, slower.

Lauren: I'm glad you told me. I'm not angry at you. I'm angry at her. Is Charlotte okay.

A pause.

Then:

Celeste: She's okay. More steady than I was. We did a debrief and set procedure.

Lauren felt a strange, sharp warmth behind her eyes.

Because that was it, wasn't it.

Charlotte wasn't just surviving. She was *learning how to live*.

Lauren set the phone down on the cutting table and stood there for a moment, hands flat on the wood, letting herself feel what she needed to feel without letting it spill into the room.

Fear.

Rage.

And, threaded through it, something like pride that hurt.

Then she did what she always did when the world tried to get in: she made a process.

She pulled a small notebook from the drawer—one she used for "non-work risks," the kind you didn't put in the ledger because it wasn't about garments, it was about people.

On a fresh page she wrote, in her neat, uncompromising hand:

INCIDENT — public confrontation
DATE: (yesterday)
LOCATION: Swanston St café area (midday)
AGGRESSOR: woman, 40s, linen jacket, recognised Celeste
CONTENT: "uterus/shared experience" line; targeted Charlotte
OUTCOME: ended, no follow, no escalation
FOLLOW-UP: procedure agreed (Charlotte first sentence, walk away; escalate to staff/police if followed)

She paused at the last line, pen hovering.

Then she added:

NOTE: Charlotte does not owe explanation. Prioritise exit + calm. No debate.

Lauren stared at the words until they steadied something inside her.

A door opened at the front of Wardrobe. Footsteps. Mara's keys. The familiar weight of competence entering the building.

Mara appeared in the doorway, coat still on, eyes already scanning the tables.

“You’re early,” Mara observed.

“I’m always early,” Lauren said.

Mara’s gaze narrowed slightly. “You’re quiet.”

Lauren didn’t look up. “We had an incident yesterday. Someone approached Celeste and Charlotte in public. Targeted Charlotte.”

Mara went still in that way she did when her anger became pure focus.

“Who,” Mara said.

Lauren shook her head once. “Unknown. But it’s logged.”

Mara’s eyes flicked to the notebook. Her mouth tightened, approving without softness.

“Good,” Mara said.

Lauren swallowed. “Charlotte’s okay.”

Mara nodded once, like a decision. “We will make sure she stays okay.”

Lauren’s throat tightened. The simple sentence hit harder than any speech.

She picked up her phone again and typed one more message to Celeste—short, because that was how Lauren loved.

Lauren: Thank you for telling me. If it happens again, call me as soon as you’re safe. We’ll handle the rest.

She sent it, then stared at the screen for a beat longer than necessary.

Mara moved past her toward the back, already shifting into work mode, but she paused at the doorway and said, without turning around:

“And Lauren.”

Lauren lifted her eyes.

Mara’s voice was flat, absolute. “You don’t keep this to yourself.”

Lauren felt her chest tighten again—heat, gratitude, anger all braided together.

“I won’t,” she said.

Mara nodded once and disappeared down the hall.

Lauren slid the notebook back into the drawer, shut it carefully, and returned to the courier schedule like a woman who knew exactly what she was doing.

Because she did.

This wasn’t a secret to carry alone.

This was information.

And Lauren, for better or worse, had always known what to do with information: she turned it into procedure, and procedure into safety, and safety into a life her daughter could live without asking anyone’s permission.

At the moment, I am experiencing significant mental conflict. There are themes I'm wondering if we can address but then, another part of my brain says: "Don't. That's a trope." "How about..." "No, don't. That's also a trope." Our story has so sensitively touched and dealt with topics in such a positive, uplifting way that I feel its value to readers touched by these issues... the last thing I want to do is compromise it with anything inappropriate, regardless of how good the intention. Can you see my dilemma?

I'll give you a scenario: the Wardrobe team aree having a well-deserved weekend at the beach. Weather's lovely and warm, girls are in their bathing suits... all except Charlotte. I'm not going to belabour the point on why. In the back of my mind I'm thinking (as solution): "well, there's zero-depth vaginoplasty." That would allow bathing suit wear. But is it even a subject worth venturing into?

Yes — I can see it *exactly*. You’ve built a story whose power comes from **refusing the usual levers**, so now your craft-brain is (correctly) flinching whenever a new beat smells

like it might become “a thing.” That’s not overthinking; that’s you protecting the tone.

And your beach example is a perfect stress-test, because swimwear is one of the most common “trapdoors” into trope-land.

Here’s the good news: you **don’t need surgery as a solution** to make the scene truthful, meaningful, and Charlotte-specific. In fact, “zero-depth vaginoplasty” as a *plot fix* risks doing exactly what you fear: turning Charlotte’s body into the story’s problem to solve, and turning a women’s day into an anatomy subplot.

That doesn’t mean you can’t ever mention it. It means: if you do, it has to be for the right reason, at the right scale, and with the right lens.

When it’s worth going there (and when it isn’t)

It’s worth going there **only if**:

- the story’s point is **Charlotte’s agency** about her body,
- the decision arises from *her* desires (comfort, dysphoria relief, sexual selfhood, privacy), not to “unlock bikinis,”
- and the scene is written as **medical logistics + emotional truth**, not transformation spectacle.

It’s *not* worth going there if:

- it functions mainly as a wardrobe-enabler,
- it appears as a neat “fix,”
- or it pulls focus from women’s life and competence back into “what’s in her pants.”

So for this beach weekend: I’d say **don’t solve it with surgery**. Not here.

What to do instead (so it’s honest without trope)

You can keep the beach scene and make it one of your best “anti-fetish” moments by making it about **choice, comfort, and women’s normalcy**.

Three options that stay on-theme:

Option A: Charlotte wears what makes sense, and nobody makes it a “moment.”

- She wears a rashie + board shorts, or a swim dress, or a surf suit.
- It reads as pragmatic, stylish, Australian-beach normal.
- Sarah gets one quip, then immediately respects the boundary.
- The focus is: Charlotte *participates*.

This is the simplest and arguably the most powerful: *she doesn't have to be visually "typical" to belong*.

Option B: "I'm not swimming today" — and it's not a tragedy.
Charlotte opts out of swimming, but still fully belongs:

- she does sunscreen patrol,
- brings the fruit and iced coffee,
- reads with her feet in the shallows,
- takes photos of *the group* (not of bodies; of joy).

The beat becomes: women make room for different comfort levels without turning it into pity.

Option C: Charlotte wants to swim; the women solve it like engineers.
This is deliciously *Wardrobe*:

- not "tucking talk," not anatomical focus,
- but "what garment design makes this doable?"

Mara: "We can make you a suit that's correct for you."
Lauren: "Bounded, comfortable, secure."
Sarah: "Sexy is optional; secure is mandatory."
Charlotte: "I want to swim. That's it."

They design a custom swim solution (high-waist bottom + skirted layer + rashie; or a one-piece with built-in paneling). The *point* is women's competence network — not genital anxiety.

If you still want to seed the surgery topic (without making it a trope)

You can plant a **single, adult, non-graphic line** that says: Charlotte has considered options, including surgery, and it's *not* the beach that drives it.

Example, in a quiet conversation with Celeste later:

> "I've read about options," Charlotte said. "Some of them would change what I can wear. But I'm not making a medical decision for a swimsuit. I'll make it when I'm making it for me."

That tells readers: yes, it exists; no, we're not fetishising it; no, it's not a plot coupon.

My recommendation

For the beach weekend scene, go with **Option C (women solve it like engineers)** or **Option A (rashie + shorts, no fuss)**. Both are:

- real,
- woman-forward,
- Charlotte-specific,
- and completely resistant to fetish framing.

If you want, I'll write the beach scene in Celeste POV with:

- warm, ordinary summer detail,
- Sarah's one-liner that doesn't linger,
- Mara/Lauren treating Charlotte's outfit as *normal*,
- and a tiny Charlotte beat of agency ("I'm swimming. I'm not discussing it.") that lands like a quiet victory.

And I'll keep it miles away from anatomy talk.

I like Option C because it is once again the team that solve it. And your solutions are so elegant. Thank you. Please proceed.

Scene — "Swim" (Celeste POV, past tense)

They picked the beach the way women picked anything once they were competent: not for romance, for logistics.

Easy parking. Clean toilets. A café close enough to walk to barefoot if necessary. No heroics.

The weather was the kind that made Melbourne feel briefly forgiving—warm sun, a light breeze, water that looked cold but inviting, sky so clear it made you feel you'd wasted half your life indoors.

Celeste carried the big tote with the sunscreen, the fruit, and the boring supplies that kept a good day from turning stupid.

Mara arrived with a beach umbrella like it was a weapon.

Lauren arrived with a cooler like it was a promise.

Sarah arrived with a grin and a sarcasm reserve that could power a small town.

Charlotte arrived dressed like she always did lately: neutral, practical, correct. A long-sleeve rashie top and board shorts, hair tied back, a tote over one shoulder.

And still—Celeste felt the tiny tightening in her own chest when she saw it.

Not judgement. Not disappointment. Just that brief awareness of how much of womanhood was treated as a costume test, and how often Charlotte had been asked—by strangers, by the world, by old wiring in her own mind—to "pass" in ways that had nothing to do with being herself.

Sarah clocked it instantly, because Sarah clocked everything.

She leaned in toward Celeste as they walked across the sand and murmured, loud enough for Charlotte to hear, "I see we've gone with the 'professional surfer' aesthetic."

Charlotte didn't flinch.

She looked over her shoulder calmly and replied, deadpan, "It's the only aesthetic I can commit to without lying."

Sarah laughed—one bright burst—and then, crucially, she let it go. No lingering. No picking. No making Charlotte the day's entertainment.

They set up near the dunes, where the wind was gentler and the view was wide.

Mara planted the umbrella with one clean shove and said, "Good."

Lauren unpacked the cooler, already sorting bottles and containers as if she were laying out tools.

Celeste spread the towel and sat down, grateful for the quiet.

Charlotte stood at the edge of the group, looking at the water. Not anxious. Thinking.

Then she turned back toward them and said, with calm directness, "I want to swim."

No apology. No preamble. No explanation.

Sarah's eyebrows lifted. "Okay."

Mara glanced up. "Then you swim."

Lauren's gaze sharpened in that mother way—protective without making it a performance. "Do you have what you need."

Charlotte's mouth tightened slightly, the old reflex trying to surface—don't be a problem, don't be a hassle.

Celeste watched it happen in real time.

And watched Charlotte choose differently.

"I have enough," Charlotte said. Then, after a beat, "But I don't have… ease."

The word landed cleanly.

Not shame. Not drama. A practical request for a better design.

Mara sat back on her towel and looked at Charlotte as if Charlotte had just asked a sensible technical question.

"Come here," Mara said.

Charlotte walked over and crouched beside her.

Mara pointed at Charlotte's outfit with two fingers, as if drawing a pattern line in the air. "What you're wearing is safe. It's not wrong. But it reads like armour."

Charlotte nodded once. "Yes."

Mara's mouth tightened in what Celeste had learned to recognise as Mara's version of kindness. "We can make something that reads like choice."

Sarah plopped down cross-legged and leaned in, suddenly delighted by the prospect of a problem that could be solved with craft.

"Oh, thank God," Sarah said. "Because I was about to start an intervention for your relationship with board shorts."

Charlotte's eyes flicked to hers, faintly amused. "You can intervene after I swim."

Lauren reached into the cooler, pulled out a bottle of water, and offered it to Charlotte without comment.

Charlotte took it, drank, and steadied herself—not because she was nervous, because it was warm and she was being sensible.

Celeste sat quietly, letting them do what they did best: turn a vulnerability into a plan without turning it into a spectacle.

Mara's tone remained level. "What do you want it to do."

Charlotte didn't hesitate. "Stay where it's meant to stay."

Sarah nodded solemnly. "Secure. The sexiest adjective."

Charlotte's mouth twitched. "Secure."

Lauren added, calm and concrete, "And you need to be able to move. Walk out of the water without tugging."

Charlotte's gaze flicked to Lauren. "Yes."

Mara held up one finger. "So: built-in structure. Not visible. Not a story."

She held up a second. "Coverage that reads normal. Not apologetic."

Third. "Comfort. If it hurts, it's wrong."

Charlotte's shoulders loosened with each line, like her nervous system understood this language.

Celeste felt something warm rise in her chest. Not romance. Pride. This was their culture: standards, not theatre.

Sarah tilted her head. "What about those swim dresses. The ones with the little skirt. Very 'I'm here to enjoy myself and also I'm not discussing it.'"

Mara made a small sound that might have been agreement. "A skirted layer works. But not frou-frou. Clean line."

Lauren nodded. "And the under-layer can be engineered. We do that all day."

Charlotte looked between them, eyes steady, the corner of her mouth lifting slightly as if she couldn't quite believe how simple it was when women treated it as normal.

"So," Charlotte said quietly, "you can… make it."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "Of course we can make it."

Sarah leaned in. "Charlotte, love, we could make you a swimsuit that survives a cyclone and a human rights debate at the same time."

Charlotte laughed softly, surprised by herself.

Celeste watched the laughter appear and felt her own chest loosen.

Mara gestured at Charlotte's rashie. "For today, you swim in this. It's fine. You don't need permission from fabric."

Charlotte nodded. "Okay."

Then Charlotte looked at Celeste—not seeking approval, just checking in like a partner.

Celeste met her gaze and gave a small, clean nod.

Charlotte stood, slipped her board shorts down just enough to secure the waistband properly—no drama, no lingering—and then she walked toward the water with an unhurried steadiness that made Celeste's throat tighten.

Sarah called after her, cheerful and loud, the way Sarah was when she wanted to make something normal by treating it as normal.

"Don't drown! I'm not doing CPR on sand. It's undignified."

Charlotte lifted one hand in acknowledgement without turning around.

Mara watched her go and then said, almost to herself, "We'll do a fitting next week."

Lauren nodded. "After hours. Quiet."

Sarah grinned. "I'll bring the brutal honesty."

Celeste's mouth twitched. "You always do."

They sat in the sun and listened to the small roar of the surf.

A moment later, Charlotte waded in. The water took her ankles, her calves, her knees. She didn't flinch. She didn't rush. She entered it the way she entered her life now: deliberately.

When she was waist-deep, she turned back once.

Not to ask if she was allowed.

To share the moment.

She lifted her chin slightly, a private little “I’m doing it,” and Celeste felt something tender and fierce bloom in her chest.

Charlotte dove forward and started swimming.

She wasn’t graceful in the polished, feminine way people expected women to be. She was efficient. Stronger than she looked. Calm.

She moved through the water like someone who belonged in it.

Sarah shaded her eyes and watched, then murmured, half to herself, “Look at her. Bloody hell.”

Mara’s voice was flat. “Yes.”

Lauren’s face softened—just for a second—like a mother watching her child do something ordinary that used to feel impossible.

Celeste sat with the warmth on her shoulders, the salt in the air, and the sound of her team behind her, and felt the quiet truth of it:

Nothing about this was a performance.

It was women making room.

It was women making solutions.

And it was Charlotte, out there in the water, not as an exception, not as a project, not as a debate—

just as herself, doing what she wanted, because she wanted it.

When she eventually came back, dripping and breathing hard, Sarah tossed her a towel like it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

Charlotte caught it and smiled—small, real.

“I swam,” she said.

Celeste nodded, voice warm without being sentimental. “Yes, you did.”

Charlotte sat down among them, wrapped in the towel, and Mara—already thinking three steps ahead—picked up her phone and said, “I’m drafting a pattern.”

Sarah leaned in, delighted. “Make it cyclone-proof.”

Lauren's mouth curved. "Make it hers."

And Celeste watched Charlotte's face as those words landed.

Not because of the swimsuit.

Because of the belonging.

Brilliant. On this topic, we need go no further: this was what needed covering, nothing else. As Sarah would say: "This is not the swimsuit competition of some beauty pageant."

Exactly. And Sarah's line is the perfect capstone because it reasserts the governing rule without sounding like a rule.

You could drop it in as the closing beat, almost tossed off—*which is what makes it land*:

> Sarah flicked sand from her calf, glanced at Charlotte with a grin, and said, "Right. Just so we're clear—this is not the swimsuit competition of some beauty pageant."
>
> Charlotte, towel around her shoulders, looked up with that calm steadiness she'd earned. "Good," she said. "Because I didn't come here to be judged."
>
> "Exactly," Lauren murmured, already reaching for the sunscreen again. "You came here to swim."

If you want the scene to end even more *Wardrobe*, you can have Mara finish it with a deadpan finality:

> "And we came here to stop you having to tug at fabric ever again."

Then you let the ocean noise take over and move on.

Whenever you're ready, we can pivot back to whichever woman's thread you want next (Celeste/Charlotte settling into Melbourne, or Lauren/Sarah edging toward "us" in daylight, or Wardrobe governance as they scale).

My vote? Wardrobe governance as they scale. Celeste's role expanding. And Lauren's. Not sure about Sarah... but I want her in there too. And then, Mara develops health issues. Her grip on her role tightens. The team rally around despite her trying to push them away. They finally make an impact with: "Without you, Mara, there never would have been an 'us'." Too melodramatic?

Your instinct is *excellent*, and the direction is absolutely on-theme: governance-as-love. That's your story's signature—women building systems that hold people when feelings get too big.

On the melodrama question: **the idea is perfect; the phrasing needs discipline.** "Without you, Mara, there never would have been an 'us'" is emotionally true, but it risks landing like a banner unfurled at a surprise party.

You can get the same punch with **one notch less declarative** and one notch more *Wardrobe*:

- "You built this. You don't get to pretend you're not needed."
- "We're not your employees right now. We're your structure."
- "Stop trying to carry it alone. That's not the standard you taught us."
- "This 'us' is not optional, Mara. You made it policy."

That last one is very you.

How to scale Wardrobe without losing the tone

Governance beats that feel like story (not business lecture)

1. **Capacity ceiling becomes governance, not guilt.**
   Mara hates "growth for growth's sake." Celeste brings models and numbers. Lauren brings risk framing. Sarah brings morale and "culture translation."
2. **New roles appear because the work demands them.**
   - Celeste: external-facing strategy, finance, contracts, supplier negotiation.

- Lauren: operations lead—rosters, procurement, policy enforcement, incident logging, HR discipline.
- Mara: creative director + standards authority (but increasingly forced to delegate).
- Sarah: client comms / front-of-house / culture guard. She's the one who says the hard thing with a smile, and it lands.

3. **They formalise "standards" into documents.**
   Not bureaucracy porn—just one or two artifacts that show maturity:
   - QC checklist v2
   - "No filming" policy poster becomes part of onboarding
   - Courier protocol
   - A "sign-off rule" (nothing ships without two names)

These are narrative gold because they're *love made boring*.

Mara's health issues: what works without melodrama

The best Mara-health arc is *not* "collapse on the floor." It's **small failures of her usual perfection**—which scares her more than pain.

Pick something plausible and unglamorous:

- migraines (light sensitivity, nausea, rage at needing dark)
- arrhythmia/palpitations (makes her sit, hate sitting)
- blood pressure issues (headaches, dizziness)
- autoimmune flare / fatigue (hands aching, dropping pins, needing breaks)

You don't need diagnosis on-page. In fact, it's stronger if it stays at the level of: *Mara's body is no longer obeying her standards*.

Mara's predictable response (very in-character)

- She tightens her grip.
- She refuses help.
- She becomes sharper because vulnerability makes her furious.
- She tries to "work through it," which threatens quality.

And **that** is how the team gets leverage: not "we love you," but "this will break the work."

The rally that doesn't feel sentimental

Make them rally the way they do everything: **procedure-first**.

- Celeste quietly institutes a "two-signature rule."

- Lauren reshuffles rosters and blocks Mara from certain tasks “because risk.”
- Sarah handles clients to reduce Mara’s contact load.
- Charlotte (if she’s still in Wardrobe) becomes the “wear-test pillar,” taking pressure off design iteration.

Mara hates it… until she realises they’ve done it *correctly*. They didn’t take her power; they preserved her legacy.

A scene kernel you can use: “Two Signatures” (Celeste POV or Lauren POV)

Set-up: They’ve had a near-miss—an item almost ships with a flaw because Mara pushed through a headache and missed a stress point. Mara catches it last second, furious. Not at herself (outwardly). At everyone else (because that’s safer).

The team response: quiet governance.

Sample beat (Lauren POV, tight and real)

Mara’s hand hovered over the ledger, pen poised, jaw set like she could stab the page into compliance.

“This doesn’t leave the building,” Mara said. Her voice was flat, but her eyes were bright in a way Lauren recognised now—too much pain, too much stubbornness.

“I know,” Lauren replied.

Mara’s pen scratched hard across the paper: **FAILURE POINT: SIDE SEAM PULL**.
She wrote like she was punishing the garment.

Celeste stood in the doorway, phone in hand, calm as a spreadsheet. “I’m adding a sign-off rule.”

Mara didn’t look up. “No.”

Celeste’s voice stayed even. “Two signatures. Every shipment. You and one other.”

Mara’s pen stopped.

“That’s bureaucracy,” Mara said, and the contempt was automatic.

Lauren didn’t raise her voice. “It’s continuity.”

Mara finally looked up, eyes sharp. “You think I’m failing.”

Lauren met her gaze and didn't blink. "I think you're human."

A beat.

Mara's mouth tightened. "I don't have time to be human."

Sarah, leaning against the wall with her arms folded, said lightly, "Well, that's tragic, because your body didn't get the memo."

Mara shot her a look that could have cut glass.

Sarah held it, unafraid. "I'm not being cute. I'm being accurate."

Celeste stepped closer, still calm. "This isn't about you being weak. It's about the business surviving your bad days without lowering standards."

Mara's nostrils flared. "My standards don't bend."

Lauren tapped the ledger once. "Then let us carry them."

Silence.

Mara looked from one face to the next. Not moved by sentiment—moved by the fact they were right and they'd framed it properly.

Finally, Mara said, coldly, "Who's the second signature."

Lauren didn't hesitate. "Me."

Celeste's voice came right after, crisp. "And me on contracts. Sarah on client-facing exceptions."

Sarah lifted her hand in a mock oath. "I vow to be terrifyingly polite."

Mara stared at them, jaw tight, and for a moment Lauren thought she might explode.

Instead Mara looked down at the ledger, wrote one new line with brutal neatness:

SHIP ONLY WITH TWO SIGN-OFFS.

She pushed the book across the table toward Lauren like she was surrendering nothing.

Lauren signed beneath it.

Mara's voice was low. "Don't make it a big thing."

Lauren's answer was softer than usual, and that was how you'd know it mattered.

"We won't," she said. "We'll just do it right."

And Sarah—unable to resist, but careful not to ruin it—added, almost gently:

"You built the 'us,' Mara. We're just finally acting like it."

Mara didn't respond.

But she didn't take the rule back, either.

—

That's the emotional punch without melodrama: **Mara's acceptance is procedural.** Which is *exactly* who she is.

If you want, next I'll outline a 3–4 scene mini-arc for "Scaling + Mara Health" (each scene with a clear purpose and a key line), so you can drop them into your draft in whatever order suits your pacing.

Yes please. This is a solid team working together approach. Of course, as with all teams, there are mini-bumps here and there, but overall they all follow the same rules / policies... to protect everyone. Including Mara.

Here's a **tight 4-scene mini-arc** you can slot into the Wardrobe timeline. It keeps the focus on **governance-as-care**, gives each woman a *specific* role in scaling, and lets Mara's health pressure the system without melodrama. I'll build in "mini-bumps" that feel real but don't fracture the culture.

Mini-Arc: Scaling + Mara Health

(4 scenes, each with: purpose, friction, key beat, and a carry-forward change)

Scene 1 — “Capacity Ceiling”

POV: Celeste (or Lauren)
Purpose: Establish that growth is real and they need governance, not heroics.
Friction: Celeste brings numbers; Mara hears “loss of control.” Sarah hates meetings but keeps it human.
The beat: Celeste presents a simple model: orders rising, QC risk rising; proposes a capacity ceiling + selective outsourcing *only if* QC is enforceable.
Mini-bump: Mara snaps: “Outsourcing is where standards die.” Sarah needles: “So don’t outsource standards.”
Key line (Celeste): “We’re not scaling output. We’re scaling *correctness*.”
Outcome change: They agree to a **Capacity Ceiling Policy**: if orders exceed X, they **pause intake** or add **pre-approved overflow** with Wardrobe QC sign-off.

Scene 2 — “Near-Miss”

POV: Lauren
Purpose: Show Mara’s health as *small failures of perfection*, and why the system must adjust.
Friction: Mara pushes through symptoms and misses something tiny; Lauren catches it, but it scares her.
The beat: A garment almost ships with a hidden stress flaw. Mara catches it at the last moment (or Lauren does), and Mara is furious—at the garment, at time, at weakness.
Mini-bump: Mara lashes out at “distraction” or “sloppiness,” and Sarah fires back with one line that’s funny but edged.
Key line (Lauren): “This isn’t about blame. It’s about chain of custody.”
Outcome change: Lauren quietly starts **Incident Logging v2** (internal): near misses count as data, not shame.

Scene 3 — “Two Signatures”

POV: Lauren or Celeste
Purpose: Turn love into policy; show Mara’s resistance and eventual acceptance through procedure.
Friction: Mara calls it bureaucracy; Celeste frames it as continuity; Sarah keeps it from going cold; Lauren doesn’t blink.
The beat: They introduce the **Two-Signature Rule** for shipments and critical QC, plus a

defined exception process.

Mini-bump: Mara demands to be the sole authority; Celeste refuses the bottleneck: "Single points of failure are not romantic."

Key line (Celeste): "A standard that depends on one person isn't a standard. It's a risk."

Outcome change: A new governance artifact exists: **SHIP ONLY WITH TWO SIGN-OFFS** in the ledger + a **QC checklist** attached to every order batch.

Scene 4 — "The Slip"

POV: Celeste (or Charlotte, if you want it to land quietly)

Purpose: Make Mara's health undeniable; show the team rallying without turning it into pity or a lecture.

Friction: Mara tries to hide it. The team refuses the secrecy—not invasively, but firmly.

The beat: Mara has a visible "slip": dizziness, a hand tremor, a migraine aura—something that makes her stop mid-task. She tries to shrug it off.

Mini-bump: Mara snaps: "I'm fine," and Sarah's humour fails on purpose—she goes serious. Lauren steps in with calm authority.

Key line (Sarah, quiet): "We're not asking. We're staffing."

Outcome change: They impose a **Mara Load Rule** (framed as *quality control*, not "care"):

- Mara no longer does late nights alone.
- Design sign-off has **time windows**.
- One day per week is **non-production** for Mara (research / painting / recovery) with zero guilt.

Closing emotional line (not melodramatic):

- Lauren: "You built the 'us.' Now you live in it."
  or
- Celeste: "Your legacy is a system, Mara. Let it work."
  or
- Mara, grudging: "Fine. But don't get sentimental."
- Sarah: "Wouldn't dream of it." *(and she means it)*

The mini-bumps (so it feels like a real team)

These are small conflicts that show personality without threatening the culture:

1. **Mara vs. Outsourcing**: Mara treats it as betrayal; Celeste frames it as *controlled overflow with enforceable QC*.
2. **Sarah vs. Meetings**: Sarah jokes through tension; Lauren snaps once: "Jokes after decisions." Sarah backs off—she respects command.
3. **Celeste vs. Control Instinct**: Celeste tries to "fix" too much too fast; Lauren reminds her: "Governance, not domination."
4. **Lauren vs. Protective Rage**: Lauren wants to ban everything risky; Charlotte says, calmly: "Living includes risk. We manage it."

Optional 5th "bridge" scene (if you want Sarah's role to deepen)

Scene 5 — "Front Door"

POV: Sarah
Purpose: Sarah becomes the culture guard, not just the quip machine.
Beat: Sarah turns away a pushy client / influencer / "curious" person with *terrifying politeness*, protecting Mara's bandwidth and the team's focus.
Key line (Sarah): "We're booked. We're private. And you're done."
Outcome: Sarah is formally given **Front-of-House Authority** (yes, even over Mara in client moments).

How this sets up the next phase

After these scenes, you can cleanly pivot into:

- Celeste stepping into external strategy (partnerships, contracts, supplier audits),
- Lauren becoming operations lead in practice (not just "mum energy"),
- Sarah becoming gatekeeper and morale (with real authority),
- Charlotte moving into QC/wear-testing as a pillar,
- Mara confronting the reality that her standards can survive *without* her hands doing everything.

If you want, I'll write **Scene 1 ("Capacity Ceiling")** in full prose next, with the meeting feeling like your world: not corporate fluff—women being precise, a bit sharp, and ultimately aligned.

Please write scene 1.

Scene 1 — “Capacity Ceiling” (Celeste POV, past tense)

Celeste didn’t call it a meeting.

She called it a table.

That was all Wardrobe ever really did: put the truth on a table and make people look at it until it stopped being scary.

They’d cleared the cutting surface after lunch. Pattern paper rolled up, pins swept into their tin, chalk dust wiped away. The ledger sat at one end like a judge. A laptop sat at the other like an irritant.

Mara stood with her arms folded, already radiating dissatisfaction at the very concept of numbers.

Lauren sat with a notepad and a pen, posture calm, eyes focused, the kind of readiness that made Celeste feel both grateful and faintly challenged.

Sarah leaned against the doorway with a coffee and an expression that suggested she would rather be anywhere else, but would be useful anyway because she was loyal in the only way that mattered: she showed up.

Charlotte hovered near the back of the room, quiet, listening—present enough to count, not so present she felt like she was auditioning.

Celeste set her laptop down and took a breath.

“Okay,” she said. “This won’t take long.”

Sarah immediately lifted her coffee. “Famous last words.”

Celeste didn’t look at her. “If you interrupt, I’ll assign you spreadsheets.”

Sarah made a face like she’d been threatened with violence.

Lauren’s mouth twitched. “She will.”

Mara’s voice was flat. “Proceed.”

Celeste clicked a simple spreadsheet open. No fancy graphs. Just a list. Orders. Dates. Hours. QC time. Returns.

“The US winter orders are not a blip,” Celeste said. “They’ve become a season.”

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “We’ve always had seasons.”

“Not like this,” Celeste replied. “We’ve doubled the run rate compared to last year, and the lead time has tightened. It’s good. It’s real. But it changes our risk profile.”

Lauren nodded once, already tracking.

Sarah’s eyebrows lifted. “Risk profile. Listen to you.”

Celeste kept going. “Right now we’re managing it the old way.”

Mara didn’t blink. “The correct way.”

“The heroic way,” Celeste corrected, calmly. “Late nights. Adrenaline. Everyone doing two jobs. It’s not sustainable.”

Mara’s jaw tightened. “Sustainable is a word people use when they want permission to do less.”

Lauren’s pen paused. She didn’t look up yet, but Celeste could feel her attention sharpen.

Celeste didn’t rise to the provocation. She’d learned that with Mara, the fastest route wasn’t winning an argument—it was building an undeniable frame.

“This is not about doing less,” Celeste said. “It’s about controlling standards when volume rises.”

She turned the laptop slightly so they could all see.

“Here,” she said, tapping the screen. “We currently average—” she glanced at her notes, precise, “—X hours per garment line including patterning, cutting, assembly, and finishing. QC adds Y minutes per unit on top.”

Mara made a small sound of irritation. “We don’t measure minutes.”

Lauren looked up. “We do now.”

Sarah’s eyes flicked between them, amused. “Ooh. Mum voice.”

Lauren ignored her. “If we don’t measure time, we don’t know when we’re lying to ourselves.”

Mara’s gaze turned sharp. “We are not a factory.”

Celeste nodded. “Exactly. Which is why we need a ceiling.”

Silence.

The word landed like a challenge. Celeste watched Mara’s face tighten. Watched that familiar resistance rise: *No one tells me what we can’t do.*

Celeste kept her tone steady. “A capacity ceiling isn’t a limitation. It’s a governance tool. It prevents us from taking work we can’t do correctly.”

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “We can do it.”

Celeste didn’t argue. She offered the consequence.

“Then we do it wrong,” Celeste said. “Or we do it right and burn out. Or we do it right and something breaks—someone breaks—because we’re pretending human bodies are infinite.”

Mara’s jaw flexed.

Sarah, unexpectedly, didn’t crack a joke. She just said, quietly, “She’s not wrong.”

Mara’s eyes cut to her. “You’re on her side.”

Sarah shrugged. “I’m on the side of not collapsing in a heap in October.”

Lauren leaned forward slightly, pen poised. “Define the ceiling.”

Celeste felt relief—a clean click of alignment. This was what she needed: not agreement from Mara first, but structure.

“Two pieces,” Celeste said. “One: we define the maximum weekly output that we can ship without exceptions. Two: we define what happens when demand exceeds it.”

Charlotte spoke from the back, voice soft but clear. “We stop taking orders.”

Mara’s gaze flicked to Charlotte, surprised by her entry into governance.

Celeste nodded at Charlotte. “Yes. Or we triage. Or we extend lead time. But we don’t pretend.”

Mara's mouth tightened. "Turning away work is stupidity."

"It's discipline," Lauren said. Her voice wasn't harsh. It was final.

Sarah lifted her coffee again like a toast. "Discipline. Sexy."

Lauren shot her a look. Sarah subsided, smiling.

Celeste continued. "Here are our options when we hit ceiling:

1. Pause intake for a period.
2. Raise lead time transparently.
3. Raise price to slow demand.
4. Create controlled overflow with pre-approved external support—only if QC remains in-house."

Mara's face hardened at the fourth option. "No."

Celeste held her gaze. "Not outsourcing work. Outsourcing volume. Under our control. Cut-and-sew support, perhaps, but patterns, fit, and final QC stay here."

Mara's voice went colder. "That is how standards die."

Celeste didn't flinch. "Standards die when they're implicit. If we codify them, they can survive."

Mara stared at her as if she'd just committed blasphemy.

Lauren spoke, calm. "Celeste's right about one thing: if we keep scaling by heroics, we will eventually ship something with our name on it that fails in public."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "It won't."

Lauren didn't blink. "It will, because bodies get tired."

Sarah nodded slowly, the humour leaving her face for once. "And because people start taking shortcuts without meaning to."

Charlotte added, quiet, precise. "Fit failures don't announce themselves until after you've worn something for an hour."

Mara's mouth tightened. She hated hearing her own truths spoken back to her.

Celeste tapped the ledger with two fingers. "This book is evidence that standards are written down. We already do governance. We just haven't named it."

Mara's gaze flicked to the ledger, then away.

Celeste leaned in slightly. "Mara. I'm not here to take your authority. I'm here to keep your authority from becoming a bottleneck that crushes us."

Mara's eyes sharpened. "Authority isn't meant to be comfortable."

Celeste let herself smile, a little. "No. But it is meant to be survivable."

Sarah made a small sound—approval disguised as a cough.

Lauren, efficient, cut through the tension. "We need a number."

Celeste nodded. She'd come prepared.

She slid a single page onto the table—clean, simple, no fluff.

CAPACITY CEILING — DRAFT
Weekly output (ship-ready units): ___
QC time per unit: ___
Max concurrent lines: ___
Buffer requirement (for rework): ___
When demand exceeds ceiling: Pause intake / Extend lead time / Price adjustment / Controlled overflow (pre-approved)

Mara stared at the paper like it was an insult.

Lauren picked it up and read it in silence.

Sarah leaned over Lauren's shoulder. "You know if we write 'controlled overflow' in a document, the universe will punish us."

Celeste's eyes narrowed. "Sarah."

Sarah held up her hands. "I'm helping."

Charlotte stepped closer and looked down at the page, thoughtful. "Buffer requirement is important."

Mara's gaze flicked to Charlotte again—annoyed, but not dismissive. Mara respected correct thinking, even when she hated who it came from.

Celeste pointed at the line. "Exactly. We currently use our buffer as spare time. Which means we don't have buffer. We have denial."

Lauren's mouth twitched. "Accurate."

Mara's voice was sharp. "Enough. What number."

Celeste met her eyes. This was the hinge.

She could have fought for an aggressive figure to prove competence. She could have "won" by pushing the ceiling high. That would be the old impulse: prove you can carry everything.

Instead she chose the mature number. The one that protected the work.

"We set it at what we can do correctly with one bad day per week," Celeste said. "Because people have bad days. Because bodies fail. Because life happens. We plan for it, or it plans for us."

Silence again.

Lauren nodded once. "That's the right model."

Sarah tilted her head. "One bad day a week seems… generous."

Celeste looked at her. "It's realistic."

Sarah smiled. "Fair."

Mara's eyes were hard. "And if we exceed it."

Celeste answered without hesitation. "Then we choose which lever to pull. Deliberately. Not in panic. Not as a confession. As policy."

Mara stared at the paper for a long moment, jaw tight enough to crack.

Then she did something that, for Mara, counted as agreement.

She reached for the marker and wrote at the top of the page in brutal capital letters:

CEILING IS A STANDARD.

She shoved the sheet back toward Celeste.

"Fine," Mara said. "Draft it properly. Bring it back tomorrow. And if anyone uses this as an excuse to do sloppy work, I'll end them."

Sarah lifted her coffee. "She's so loving."

Lauren’s voice was calm. “It’s not an excuse. It’s a safeguard.”

Mara’s eyes stayed on Lauren. “Good.”

Celeste felt her chest ease in a way she didn’t allow often.

They weren’t just surviving growth. They were governing it.

Charlotte’s hand brushed Celeste’s arm lightly as she passed behind her, a small grounding touch that said: *this is what it looks like when women build a life*.

Celeste closed the laptop.

“Okay,” she said, steady. “We have a ceiling.”

Sarah grinned. “And nobody died.”

Mara’s voice was flat. “Yet.”

Lauren capped her pen. “Next meeting: overflow criteria.”

Sarah groaned. “I hate all of you.”

Celeste looked around the table—her women—and felt something settle into place.

Not romance.

Structure.

The kind that held when everything else got heavy.

Scene 2 — “Near-Miss”

Scene 2 — “Near-Miss” (Lauren POV, past tense)

Lauren didn’t like surprises.

Not because she was rigid. Because surprises were where people got hurt—financially, physically, reputationally. At Wardrobe, surprises also meant seams failing in public, which was its own kind of injury.

She had the ledger open on the cutting table, not for drama, for tracking. Batch numbers. Courier times. The new ceiling draft clipped beside it. A pencil behind her ear, like she was about to become the kind of woman she'd once mocked.

Mara was at the pressing station, shoulders squared, working fast. Too fast.

Lauren clocked it the way she clocked everything. Speed without conversation. Silence that had an edge. A kind of tightness around Mara's mouth that meant pain or anger, and with Mara those often wore the same face.

Sarah drifted past with a stack of dispatch slips and murmured, "She's in a mood."

Lauren didn't look up. "She's in something."

Sarah paused. "You're not going to say it."

"No," Lauren said. "I'm going to measure it."

Charlotte was in the fitting space, half-dressed in a test garment, pinning and unpinning with patient precision. It was one of the newer lines—"nymph" adjacent but altered, Mara's new cuts accommodating the subtle shift in Charlotte's shape without ever calling it by name. The fabric looked expensive in the way good fabric did: quiet about it.

Lauren watched Charlotte tug once at a seam, frown, then mark a spot with chalk.

"Movement stress," Charlotte called out, calm. "Left side seam. When I reach."

Mara didn't answer.

That was another tell. Mara normally replied to data like it was oxygen.

"Mara," Lauren said, not loud.

Mara's voice came back sharp from the pressing station. "I heard."

Lauren held her gaze a beat. "Then respond."

Mara's eyes flashed. "Not everything needs a conversation."

Lauren's mouth tightened. "At this scale, yes, it does."

Sarah made a soft sound like she was swallowing a laugh and thought better of it.

Mara turned away as if she hadn't heard.

Lauren watched her press another panel, movements precise but slightly… clipped. Like she was forcing her hands through glue.

Lauren made a note on the dispatch slip. Nothing dramatic. Just a small line: **MARA—FAST / SILENT**.

A courier pickup was scheduled for three. It was already two-twenty.

Lauren went to the dispatch rack and checked the hanging garments one by one, fingers running along seams the way her eyes did along contracts. The new ceiling policy was only ink on paper so far. Until it became behaviour, she treated every shipment as a potential failure point.

She reached the last item in the batch: a period bodice with a clean line and a neat finish, tagged, wrapped, ready.

Something in Lauren's body tightened.

It wasn't visible at first glance. That was the problem.

Lauren lifted it off the rack and held it up in the light. Turned it slightly. Let the fabric fall the way it would on a body, not on a hanger.

Then she saw it: a faint distortion at the side seam. Not a tear. Not a gap. A minute tension line where there shouldn't be one.

A stress point.

Lauren pinched the seam allowance between her fingers and pulled gently.

The stitches held.

She pulled again, a fraction more.

The fabric gave in the smallest way, like it was sighing.

Lauren's stomach dropped.

It wasn't a catastrophic failure. It was worse.

It was the kind of failure that would happen after an hour of wear, under the lights, in front of an audience, when someone moved and trusted the garment.

Lauren carried it to the fitting space.

“Charlotte,” she said.

Charlotte stepped out, took the bodice without comment, and tested it the way she always did—methodical, not panicked. She hooked her thumb under the seam and applied pressure at the movement point.

The seam didn’t rip.

But the fabric shifted again, almost imperceptibly.

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed. “That’s not correct.”

Lauren’s jaw tightened. “No.”

Charlotte looked at the tag. “This is in the three o’clock batch.”

Lauren nodded. “Yes.”

Charlotte didn’t ask who made it. She didn’t need to. Wardrobe wasn’t large enough for anonymity.

But she did something Lauren respected deeply: she didn’t make it personal. She made it procedural.

“Hold shipment,” Charlotte said simply. “Log as near-miss. Find root.”

Lauren felt relief—sharp and immediate—because the culture was holding. It was behaving the way they’d said it would.

Lauren walked back toward the pressing station with the bodice draped over her arm like evidence.

Mara was still pressing, face set, jaw clenched, and when she looked up her eyes were bright in a way that made Lauren’s chest tighten: too much pain, too much stubbornness.

Lauren stopped in front of her.

“Mara,” she said, calm.

Mara's gaze flicked to the garment. "What."

Lauren held it up, turned it so Mara could see the distortion line.

"This almost shipped," Lauren said.

Mara's eyes sharpened. She snatched it, ran her fingers down the seam like she could erase the flaw by touch.

Her face changed—one beat of recognition, then fury.

At the garment. At the day. At time itself.

"You tugged it," Mara snapped, as if Lauren had bullied the fabric into failing.

Lauren didn't flinch. "I tested it."

Mara's jaw flexed. "It would have held."

Lauren's voice stayed level. "It would have failed in wear."

Silence.

Mara stared at the seam, then at Lauren, and Lauren saw the fear under the anger: the horror of being wrong, the horror of being human, the horror of being the reason Wardrobe broke its own promise.

Sarah had drifted closer and now stood in the doorway, coffee forgotten.

"Well," Sarah said lightly, "this is fun."

Lauren shot her a look. Sarah shut up.

Mara's fingers tightened around the bodice until her knuckles went pale.

"It doesn't leave," Mara said flatly.

"I know," Lauren replied.

Mara moved to the table with the ledger and wrote with aggressive precision, pen scratching hard.

FAILURE POINT: side seam pull at movement stress
CAUSE: insufficient reinforcement at seam allowance / stitch tension
ACTION: rework + retest

She wrote like she was punishing the page.

Lauren watched, then spoke carefully. “We need to know why it happened.”

Mara didn’t look up. “It happened because the fabric’s fussy.”

Lauren’s voice stayed calm. “It happened because someone was tired.”

Mara’s pen stopped.

Her head lifted slowly.

“Don’t,” Mara said, cold.

Lauren held her gaze. “I’m not accusing you. I’m naming risk.”

Mara’s eyes flashed. “You think I did sloppy work.”

Lauren’s chest tightened because she could hear the shame trying to twist itself into anger.

“No,” Lauren said. “I think you’re in pain and forcing your body through it. And that changes outcomes.”

Mara’s mouth opened as if to bite back.

Then she closed it. Her nostrils flared. She looked away like looking at Lauren too long might crack something open.

Charlotte appeared behind Lauren, quiet, holding chalk and a scrap of pattern paper.

“Reinforcement here,” Charlotte said, simply, and handed Mara the note like a technician handing another technician a solution.

Mara took it without looking at Charlotte.

Sarah leaned against the doorframe and, for once, kept her humour in its cage. When she spoke her voice was low, careful.

“Near-miss is… good,” Sarah said. “It means we caught it.”

Mara’s jaw tightened. “It means we almost didn’t.”

Lauren nodded once. “Yes.”

Mara stared at the ledger as if it had betrayed her.

Lauren made herself speak the line that mattered, the one that would decide what happened next.

“We hold the batch,” Lauren said. “We fix it. We retest. We log it.”

Mara’s voice went hard. “We don’t have time.”

Lauren didn’t blink. “Then we don’t ship.”

Silence.

Mara lifted her head, eyes sharp as a blade. “You would turn away revenue.”

Lauren’s answer was immediate. “I would turn away a public failure.”

Mara stared at her.

Then she looked down at Charlotte’s note, at the reinforcement mark, at the seam that had almost humiliated them.

She exhaled once, through her nose, like anger was the only way she could breathe.

“Fine,” Mara said. “Fix it.”

Lauren nodded. “Now.”

Mara’s eyes flicked toward the pressing station, toward the pile of work, toward the time.

Then, like a woman swallowing something bitter, she said, “Sarah. Call the courier. Push pickup.”

Sarah blinked. “Me?”

“Yes,” Mara snapped. “Use your charm for something useful.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched. “Yes, ma’am.”

She disappeared toward the front, already pulling out her phone.

Lauren watched Mara pick up the bodice again, hands steadying now that they had a plan, the fury redirected into craft.

Charlotte stayed at Lauren’s shoulder, quiet.

“You were right,” Charlotte murmured, so only Lauren could hear. “About measuring.”

Lauren swallowed, throat tight. “We measure so we don’t lie.”

Charlotte nodded once. “And so we don’t blame.”

Lauren looked at her—this woman who had learned to speak like policy without losing softness—and felt something in her chest ease.

She turned back to Mara.

“Mara,” Lauren said, calm. “After we fix this, we talk.”

Mara didn’t look up. “About what.”

Lauren held her gaze anyway. “About load.”

Mara’s mouth tightened. “I’m fine.”

Lauren’s voice stayed even. “That’s not an answer.”

Mara’s hands paused for the briefest second.

Then she returned to work.

But she didn’t tell Lauren to get out.

And in Wardrobe language, that counted as the first crack in the wall.

Scene 3 — “Two Signatures”

Scene 3 — “Two Signatures” (Lauren POV, past tense)

They fixed the bodice. Retested it. Logged it.

They didn’t talk about it while their hands were busy, because Wardrobe wasn’t sentimental and panic never improved stitching. But Lauren watched Mara all afternoon—how she held herself, how she blinked more than usual, how she kept her shoulders squared like posture could override biology.

By five, the courier had gone. The floor had been swept. The room had that end-of-day hush that made even the machines feel tired.

Mara remained at the pressing station as if leaving would admit something.

Lauren set the ledger on the main table, opened it to the near-miss entry, and placed a fresh sheet beside it: the draft she and Celeste had been building since the ceiling meeting.

Sarah hovered by the doorway with her tote half-packed, lingering the way she did when she knew something interesting was about to happen.

Charlotte stood near the fitting room curtain, folding a test garment with quiet care—present, but refusing to take up unnecessary space.

Celeste arrived from the front with her laptop under her arm, eyes sharp, hair slightly disordered in the way it got when she'd been thinking hard.

"Okay," Celeste said. "Now."

Mara's head lifted. "Now what."

Celeste set the laptop down without ceremony. "Governance."

Mara's mouth tightened. "We have governance. I decide."

Lauren didn't look away. "That's not governance. That's a bottleneck."

Mara's eyes flashed, but she didn't speak.

Celeste clicked the draft open on her screen and turned it so they could see. No colours, no corporate gloss. Just black text and clarity.

SHIPMENT SIGN-OFF — PROPOSED RULE
All outbound shipments require two signatories:

1. **Mara** (design/standards) **or** delegated design authority
2. **Operations** (Lauren) **or** delegated ops authority
   Exceptions: must be logged + approved by both signatories.
   Purpose: reduce single-point failure risk; protect standards under scaling and fatigue.

Mara stared at it like it was a personal insult.

“This,” Mara said, voice flat with disgust, “is bureaucracy.”

Celeste didn’t flinch. “This is continuity.”

“It slows us down,” Mara snapped.

“It saves us from public failure,” Lauren replied.

Mara’s gaze cut to Lauren. “I don’t make public failures.”

Lauren held her eyes, calm. “Today almost did.”

Silence snapped into place.

Sarah made a small noise—half breath, half restrained comment—then wisely said nothing.

Mara’s jaw flexed. “That was fabric.”

Lauren shook her head once. “That was load.”

Mara looked away as if the word itself was an accusation.

Celeste kept her tone steady. “Mara, I’m not taking your authority. I’m distributing responsibility so the work survives your bad days.”

Mara’s eyes narrowed. “My bad days are not the business’s concern.”

Lauren’s mouth tightened. “Yes, they are. Because you’re in the system.”

Mara’s gaze sharpened. “I built the system.”

Lauren nodded. “Exactly. Which is why it can survive.”

Mara’s expression flickered—annoyance, fear, pride, all braided together and denied.

She turned slightly toward Charlotte, as if to redirect the threat. “And what. We add more people who don’t know standards.”

Charlotte didn’t flinch. She didn’t defend herself. She just offered truth.

“Standards can be taught,” Charlotte said calmly. “If they’re written.”

Mara stared at her.

Charlotte’s voice stayed steady. “If they’re only in your head, they die with your stamina.”

The sentence hit like a scalpel.

Sarah, unable to resist, murmured, “Oof.”

Mara’s eyes flashed. “Enough.”

Celeste’s voice cut in cleanly. “No. Not enough. This is the point.”

Mara glared at her. “You think you can run this with a policy.”

Celeste met her gaze. “We already do. The no-filming rule was a policy. The fitting-space lock was a policy. The courier routine is a policy. This is the same thing—just internal.”

Mara’s mouth tightened. “Those are boundaries. This is—”

“Protection,” Lauren said. She tapped the ledger open on the table. “It protects the work. And it protects you, even if you refuse to admit you need it.”

Mara’s eyes hardened. “Don’t.”

Lauren didn’t soften. “We’re not doing heroics anymore.”

Mara’s lip curled. “Heroics built this place.”

Lauren’s tone stayed even, colder than usual. “Heroics nearly broke it.”

Silence.

Mara looked from Lauren to Celeste to Sarah to Charlotte, as if she’d woken up and found a team where she’d expected subordinates.

Sarah lifted her hands slightly, mock innocent. “Just for the record, I’d like to say I am extremely subordinate.”

Lauren didn’t look at her. “Not now.”

Sarah shut her mouth, chastened—proof the culture held.

Celeste stepped forward, calm, and added the line Lauren knew Mara could hear.

“A standard that depends on one person isn’t a standard,” Celeste said. “It’s a risk.”

Mara’s nostrils flared.

“I’m not a risk,” she said, low.

Lauren's voice softened by a fraction—not sentimental, just real. "You're human."

Mara's face went hard again. "I don't have time to be human."

Sarah's voice, unexpectedly quiet, slid into the space. "Well, your body does."

Mara shot her a look that could have turned sand to glass.

Sarah held it, unflinching now, because she knew the humour was over. "I'm not being cute," Sarah said. "I'm being accurate."

Mara looked away.

Lauren slid the paper across the table. "We don't need your feelings. We need your agreement."

Mara's eyes snapped back. "You don't get to talk to me like that."

Lauren met her gaze. "I do, because this is governance. Not hierarchy."

Celeste added, matter-of-fact, "And because without it, we're gambling with the thing you care about most."

Mara stared at the sheet.

The room held its breath.

Finally, Mara said, coldly, "Who's the second signature."

Lauren didn't hesitate. "Me."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "You'll slow it down."

Lauren's voice stayed even. "I'll stop it leaving if it's wrong."

Mara stared at her. Then she said, sharp, "And if you're wrong."

Lauren's answer was immediate. "Then you correct me, and we log the correction, and the system improves."

Mara's jaw tightened. She hated the logic because it was hers, reflected back.

Celeste added, "And I'll sign on contracts and external commitments. I'm not signing things I can't ship."

Mara's gaze flicked to Celeste. "Fine."

Sarah lifted a hand. “What about me. I’d like to sign something. For the experience.”

Lauren’s gaze finally cut to her. “Client-facing exceptions.”

Sarah blinked. “Oh. Actual responsibility.”

“Yes,” Lauren said.

Sarah’s mouth curved. “Delicious.”

Charlotte spoke softly from the side. “And I can be secondary sign-off for wear-test items. When needed.”

Mara’s eyes flicked to Charlotte again. She looked as if she wanted to refuse on reflex.

Then she didn’t.

She looked down at the ledger, reached for her pen, and opened to a blank page.

Mara wrote in brutal, neat capitals:

SHIP ONLY WITH TWO SIGN-OFFS.

She underlined it once, hard enough to dent the paper.

She shoved the ledger toward Lauren like she was surrendering nothing.

“Sign,” Mara said.

Lauren picked up the pen and signed beneath Mara’s line.

Her signature looked ordinary on the page. The effect wasn’t.

The power of it wasn’t symbolic. It was structural.

Celeste watched and felt something settle. This was what growing up looked like for a business: replacing adrenaline with systems.

Sarah let out a small breath she’d been holding and murmured, almost gently, “Look at us. Proper little adults.”

Mara’s head snapped up. “Do not.”

Sarah lifted her hands, smiling. “I’m not being sentimental. I’m being proud.”

Mara glared at her, but the heat had drained out of it.

Lauren capped the pen and closed the ledger.

Mara's voice was low. "Don't make it a big thing."

Lauren met her eyes and let her voice drop by a fraction.

"We won't," Lauren said. "We'll just do it right."

Mara stared at her for a beat longer, then turned back to the pressing station as if she could end the meeting by returning to work.

But she didn't take the rule back.

And that, in Wardrobe, was how you knew a boundary had become policy.

Scene 4 — "The Slip"

Thought for 20s

Scene 4 — "The Slip" (Celeste POV, past tense)

It wasn't dramatic.

That was the problem.

If Mara had collapsed, if she'd made a sound, if she'd given them a clean emergency to respond to, Wardrobe would have snapped into action without friction.

But Mara didn't collapse.

Mara *slowed*.

It was a Tuesday that should have been ordinary—orders in the pipeline, the new ceiling draft taped to the wall near the ledger, the Two-Signature rule already behaving like it had always existed.

The room was bright with summer light. Too bright. Celeste had noticed it earlier—the way Mara's eyes narrowed at the windows as if sunlight were an insult.

Mara was at the cutting table, pattern weights set, shears in hand, jaw tight. She worked with that familiar, ruthless precision, as if speed could prove she hadn't been changed by anything.

Celeste was on the phone at the front, confirming a supplier's minimum order and arguing, politely, for better lead times. Lauren was in the back with the roster, setting up the week like a small, quiet act of war against chaos. Sarah was at the doorway dealing with a customer enquiry with her best terrifying politeness.

Charlotte was near the fitting curtain, wear-testing a sleeve movement range, chalk marking a stress point and then wiping her hands clean like she was closing a loop.

Everything was fine.

Until it wasn't.

Mara's shears paused mid-cut.

Not for a choice. For a fraction of a second too long.

Celeste looked up from her call, instinct catching the hitch in rhythm the way you caught a wrong note in music.

Mara's left hand went flat on the table. Her shoulders stayed squared. Her face stayed composed.

But her eyes unfocused for half a beat, as if the room had shifted its edges.

Sarah, mid-sentence at the doorway, stopped talking. She watched Mara the way Sarah watched a threat.

Lauren looked up from her roster as if she'd felt something move.

Charlotte went still.

Mara blinked once. Twice.

Then she reached for the shears again.

Lauren was already walking toward her.

"Mara," Lauren said, calm.

Mara's voice was clipped. "I'm fine."

Celeste heard it in the tone: not reassurance, not truth—command.

Lauren didn't accept it. "Stop for thirty seconds."

Mara's eyes flashed. "No."

Celeste ended her call without thinking—one sentence to the supplier, polite and final—and crossed the room.

Mara's fingers tightened on the shears.

Then she lowered them to the table, slowly, like setting down a weapon she resented needing.

Her other hand remained splayed flat on the wood. She wasn't shaking. She wasn't fainting.

She was simply… braced.

Sarah stepped closer, voice unusually quiet. "Head?"

Mara didn't look at her. "Light."

Lauren's jaw tightened. "Migraine."

Mara's mouth curled with contempt. "Don't diagnose me."

Lauren's voice stayed even. "I'm naming risk."

Mara took a breath through her nose, controlled, but it didn't fully steady her. She blinked again, hard, like she was trying to clear something from her vision.

Charlotte moved without being asked. She crossed to the window and pulled the blind down halfway, cutting the glare. Then she dimmed the overhead light nearest the cutting table with the small efficiency of someone who'd learned that comfort was a legitimate goal.

The room softened.

Mara's shoulders loosened by a fraction, and the fact that it helped made her expression tighten with fury.

"I said I'm fine," Mara repeated, sharper now.

Sarah didn't joke.

That alone made the moment real.

“No,” Sarah said, voice low, “you’re functioning. That’s not the same thing.”

Mara’s eyes snapped to her. “Don’t you start.”

Lauren set a glass of water on the table as if it were an instruction. “Sit.”

Mara didn’t move.

Lauren didn’t raise her voice, but the authority in it was unmistakable. “Sit. Or I’ll call it. Your choice.”

Mara stared at her as if she couldn’t believe she was being handled in her own studio.

“You don’t get to—” Mara began.

Celeste cut in, calm as a ledger entry. “We do.”

Mara’s eyes flashed to Celeste.

Celeste’s tone stayed measured. “Because Two Signatures means no single point of failure. And right now you are trying to make your body a single point of failure.”

Mara’s jaw flexed.

She hated being framed.

She hated being correct.

Lauren pulled a stool over with one foot and placed it behind Mara’s knees like she was closing a gate. “Sit.”

Mara’s hand hovered over the table as if she might grip it forever.

Then, with a visible effort, she lowered herself onto the stool.

It wasn’t surrender.

It was physics winning.

For a moment she sat perfectly upright, chin lifted, as if posture could make the symptom disappear.

Sarah crouched slightly so she wasn’t towering. “Do you have meds.”

Mara's eyes narrowed. "No."

Lauren's pen appeared in her hand without anyone seeing her pick it up. "Okay. We're logging."

Mara's head snapped up. "Do not."

Lauren didn't blink. "Near-miss taught us we don't do secrets."

Mara's mouth tightened. "This is not the same."

Lauren's voice stayed calm. "It is exactly the same. It's risk. And it affects output."

Charlotte spoke quietly from the side, not emotional, just precise. "And quality."

Mara's gaze flicked to Charlotte with a flash of irritation.

Charlotte held it without flinching. "You taught us that."

Silence.

Mara looked away first.

Celeste took a breath and did what she'd been learning to do: not soothe, not dramatise—structure.

"Okay," Celeste said. "Here is what we do."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "We keep working."

Celeste ignored that. "We redistribute."

She looked at Lauren. "Ops takes dispatch and supplier calls. No exceptions."

Lauren nodded once. "Done."

Celeste looked at Sarah. "Front-of-house. No Mara contact load today."

Sarah's jaw set. "Gladly."

Celeste looked at Charlotte. "Wear-test and retest queue. You've got it?"

Charlotte nodded. "Yes."

Celeste looked at Mara, steady. "And you stop cutting."

Mara's eyes hardened. "No."

Celeste didn't argue. She offered the correct lever.

"This isn't negotiation," Celeste said. "It's governance."

Mara's voice went cold. "You're enjoying this."

Celeste's eyebrows lifted. "No. I'm preventing you from turning your pride into a defect."

Mara's nostrils flared.

Lauren spoke, and her voice was quiet enough that it carried. "Mara. We're not your employees right now."

Mara's eyes flicked to her.

Lauren finished, flat and absolute: "We're your structure."

Sarah added, very softly, the line that made Mara freeze because it sounded like policy, not pity.

"We're not asking," Sarah said. "We're staffing."

Mara's jaw tightened like she might refuse on principle.

Then she blinked again, slower this time, and Celeste saw a brief shadow of something under the anger: fatigue. Fear. The horror of not being able to command her own body.

Mara's voice came out lower. "I don't have time for this."

Lauren's answer was immediate. "You don't have time to ignore it."

Charlotte stepped closer—not to comfort, not to plead. To make it easier for Mara to accept without losing face.

"We can hold the line," Charlotte said, simply. "For today."

Mara's gaze flicked to her, sharp.

Charlotte didn't soften. "And we can still ship correctly."

The words mattered. Mara cared about correctness more than she cared about being cared for.

Celeste watched Mara's shoulders drop a fraction, as if the decision had been made by something deeper than pride.

Mara spoke through clenched teeth. "Fine."

Lauren's pen scratched across her notebook, not dramatic, just factual: **Mara symptomatic—light sensitivity; ceased cutting; redistributed load; revisit scheduling.**

Mara heard the pen and glared. "Don't."

Lauren didn't stop writing. "We don't do secrets."

Mara's voice was flat. "You're making it a big thing."

Celeste shook her head. "We're making it a small thing, on purpose, before it becomes a big thing."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "And what. You'll put me on a roster like a trainee."

Lauren capped her pen. "We'll put you on a roster like the most critical component you are."

Sarah's mouth twitched. "Listen to Mum, Mara."

Mara shot her a look.

Sarah held it, unflinching. "I'm serious."

Celeste slid a single sheet across the table—fresh paper, clean text, already drafted because she'd been thinking about this since the near-miss.

MARA LOAD RULE — DRAFT

- No late nights alone
- One non-production day per week (research / design review / painting)
- Design sign-off windows (no ad hoc approvals under fatigue)
- Two signatures enforced without exception
- If symptoms recur: immediate redistribution + logged

Mara stared at it like it was a threat.

Lauren watched her, steady.

Charlotte stayed quiet, letting Mara have dignity.

Sarah, for once, didn’t make a joke.

Mara’s jaw tightened. “Painting.”

Celeste’s tone stayed mild. “Yes. Your brain needs an outlet that isn’t pressure.”

Mara’s eyes flicked up, suspicious. “You’re all conspiring.”

Lauren didn’t deny it. “Yes.”

Mara looked around the room—at the women who had built themselves into a team without asking for her permission to be one.

For a moment, Celeste thought she might explode.

Instead Mara said, rough and reluctant, “Fine.”

Then, immediately, as if she could claw back power with contempt: “But don’t get sentimental.”

Sarah’s smile returned—small, controlled, respectful.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sarah said.

Lauren picked up the rule sheet and clipped it to the ledger like it had always belonged there.

Charlotte adjusted the blind again, lowering it just enough to soften the light further, and Mara—still rigid, still furious—didn’t tell her to stop.

Celeste stood for a moment, letting the room settle into its new shape.

Then she turned and went back to her laptop, already drafting the formal version of the rule, because that was the real love language of Wardrobe:

Not speeches.

Not rescue.

A system that held.

And in the corner of her eye, she saw Mara sit on the stool, eyes closed for a beat, allowing—just barely—what the rest of them had already decided:

That Wardrobe could protect everyone.

Including Mara.

I have GOT to stop reading for a moment. This is EASILY the most powerful part of the story. All of their characters intertwine... they all shine in their special ways. And they *INCLUDE* Mara, despite herself. So so good, this, Emily.

I'm really glad it hit the way it's meant to hit — because *this* is the story's spine showing itself: not romance-as-rescue, but **women building a structure that holds even the woman who taught them how.** Mara included, not indulged. Protected, not patronised.

If you do pause here (which is wise), this is also a beautiful "hinge" point in the larger arc. A few small, non-melodramatic aftershocks you can keep in your pocket for later, whenever you're ready to move again:

- **Mara's compliance looks like resentment + follow-through.** She doesn't thank them. She simply… abides by the rule once. That's massive for her.
- **Lauren becomes quietly terrifying as ops lead.** Not emotional, not harsh — just *immovable*.
- **Sarah's growth is that she knows when humour stops being help.** The joke-girl becomes the culture guard.
- **Charlotte's voice continues to mature: "for today" / "we can still ship correctly."** That's her belonging expressed as competence, not appeal.
- **Celeste's leadership becomes adult: she doesn't "win"; she institutes policy.** She proves she's worthy of the MBA without turning into a corporate parody.

When you come back, we can either:

1. write the immediate "next morning" micro-scene (Mara arrives, sees the Load Rule clipped to the ledger, hates it, follows it), or
2. jump to the first moment the system gets tested (a big order arrives and they *hold the ceiling*), or
3. pivot into Celeste's expanding external role — contracts, suppliers, and how she uses "Wardrobe voice" in those rooms.

For now: stop reading, breathe, and let it settle. This is the kind of scene that changes the whole book's gravity.

Scene 5 — "Front Door"

You offered an optional scene to allow Sarah's role to deepen. Would you be willing to explore that now?

Scene 5 — "Front Door" (Sarah POV, past tense)

Sarah had always been good at doors.

Not the literal hinges and locks—though she could do those too—but the social kind. The invisible threshold where someone decided they were entitled to more than they were being offered.

Wardrobe had learned the hard way that the front door wasn't just an entry.

It was a filter.

And lately, the world had been pressing its face against the glass.

It was mid-morning, the light still soft, the studio already warm with the hum of work. Lauren was in the back with the roster and the dispatch stack, moving through tasks like a metronome. Celeste was at the cutting table with her laptop open, on speaker with a supplier, voice calm and exact. Mara was seated—not standing—at the end of the main table, sketching with grim concentration, the blinds half-drawn to keep the glare off her eyes.

The Load Rule sat clipped to the ledger like a dare.

Mara hadn't commented on it today.

That, Sarah had learned, was how you knew it was working.

Charlotte was in the fitting space, pinning a test seam with the patience of someone who'd stopped apologising for taking time.

Sarah was at the front, folding tissue paper into the kind of clean squares that made customers think you cared—which, inconveniently, Wardrobe did.

The bell above the door chimed.

Sarah looked up.

A man stepped in.

Not a courier. Not a lost tourist. Not a husband hovering at the threshold with a sheepish smile. This one walked in like he expected the space to rearrange itself around him.

Mid-thirties. Gym-fit. Phone in hand already, screen up, thumb poised. The expression on his face wasn't hostile. It was worse.

Curious.

"Hi," he said, bright. "Is this Wardrobe?"

Sarah gave him her friendliest smile.

It was the kind that didn't contain an invitation.

"It is," she said. "We're not open to walk-ins."

He laughed lightly, as if she'd told a charming joke. "Oh, I won't take long. I just—" he lifted his phone, "—saw you guys on TikTok and I'm in the area. Thought I'd pop in. It's, like, iconic."

Sarah kept her face pleasant.

She could feel Lauren's attention shift in the back, like a weight redistributed. Could feel Celeste pause midsentence on the phone. Could feel the whole studio's energy tighten the way fabric did before it tore.

Sarah didn't look back.

The door was her job.

"I understand," Sarah said. "But we're private. No filming. No visitors."

He smiled wider, still cheerful. "I'm not filming. I mean—" his thumb moved on the screen, betraying him, "—not yet. I just want to see the setup. Like, the vibe."

Sarah's smile didn't change.

Inside her, something settled. A clean decision.

“No,” she said.

He blinked. “Sorry?”

“No,” Sarah repeated, same tone, same volume. Not emotional. Just final. “You can’t come in.”

He glanced past her shoulder, trying to look around her body as if she were furniture. “I’m not trying to be weird. I’m a fan. You’re a business. Don’t you want—”

“Exposure?” Sarah supplied, still smiling. “No.”

The word landed harder than it should have, because it was so calmly delivered.

The man’s smile faltered. “That’s… odd. I mean, it’s a public place.”

Sarah’s eyes held his, bright and unfriendly in a polite way. “It’s a workplace.”

He laughed again, a little higher, the laugh of someone used to women smoothing things over for him. “Okay, okay. Chill. I’m just looking.”

Sarah’s smile sharpened.

“This is not a gallery,” she said. “This is not theatre. This is not a behind-the-scenes tour. It’s women working. And you’re in the wrong place.”

The man’s cheeks flushed slightly. “You don’t have to be rude.”

Sarah tilted her head. “I’m not being rude. I’m being clear.”

Behind her, she heard the soft scrape of a chair.

Mara.

Sarah kept her eyes on the man, her body angled so he couldn’t see further into the studio.

He lifted his phone slightly as if to show it to her, as if proof of his intention would grant him access. “See? I’m not recording. I just want to meet—” his gaze flicked inward again, hungry, “—the team. Like, the designer lady.”

Sarah’s smile softened into something almost pitying.

“We’re not doing that,” she said.

The man frowned. “Why.”

Sarah let the word hang for a beat, then answered with a sentence that was as old as the world and just as necessary.

“Because you don’t get to,” she said.

He stared at her.

Then, because entitlement didn’t like being blocked by a woman with an accent and a smile, he tried to step around her.

Sarah moved one foot, subtle, shifting her stance so the doorway stayed occupied.

It wasn’t aggressive.

It was competent.

“Stop,” Sarah said, still pleasant.

He froze. “Are you serious?”

Sarah’s voice dropped slightly, not in threat, in clarity. “Yes.”

In the back, Lauren’s footsteps sounded—approaching, unhurried, calm. Not rushing, because rushing made it a scene, and the goal was always to avoid scenes.

The man noticed Lauren and visibly brightened, as if an authority had arrived he could negotiate with.

“Oh, hi,” he said, aiming his smile at Lauren. “I’m just—”

Lauren didn’t return the smile.

She didn’t scowl either.

She simply looked at him the way you looked at a risk on a spreadsheet: unemotional, accurate.

“We’re private,” Lauren said. “You need to leave.”

The man blinked. “I’m not doing anything.”

Lauren’s gaze stayed level. “You are refusing a boundary. That’s doing something.”

He scoffed. “This is ridiculous. It’s a business.”

Sarah’s smile returned, bright as sunlight and twice as cold. “Exactly. Businesses have policies.”

He tried a different angle. “Can I at least get a quick photo with the sign? Outside? For my followers? It’s free marketing—”

“No,” Sarah said again.

Lauren added, calm and precise, “And if you post our location, we’ll take action. Do you understand.”

That finally landed. Not because he respected them—because he respected consequences.

His face hardened. “Wow. Feminists, huh.”

Sarah’s smile widened, and for a brief second, she looked almost delighted.

“Correct,” she said. “And we’re practising.”

The man opened his mouth, then closed it.

He took one step backward toward the door, eyes flicking around as if searching for someone to validate his outrage.

No one did.

Mara hadn’t stood. She hadn’t needed to. She sat at the table, eyes on her sketch, silent and immovable, like the studio itself had decided he wasn’t worth her gaze.

Charlotte didn’t look up from her pinning.

Celeste continued her supplier call in the back, voice steady, as if this were so routine it didn’t merit a pause.

Which, Sarah realised, was the whole point.

Wardrobe wasn’t a place that became chaotic when a man showed up.

It was a place that stayed itself.

The man backed out, muttering, “Whatever,” and the bell chimed again as the door closed behind him.

Sarah walked to the lock and turned it, the little click loud in the sudden quiet.

She exhaled once.

Lauren looked at her, and there was something like approval in her eyes.

“Good,” Lauren said.

Sarah shrugged, as if this were nothing. “He wanted a vibe.”

Lauren’s mouth twitched. “And you gave him one.”

Sarah’s smile flashed. “I’m the vibe.”

From the table, Mara spoke without looking up.

“Next time,” Mara said, flat, “don’t let him get past the threshold.”

Sarah turned her head, grin sharp. “He didn’t.”

Mara’s pen paused for the briefest beat.

Then, still not looking up, Mara said, rougher than she intended, “Good.”

Sarah’s grin softened just slightly.

It wasn’t praise, not in Mara language.

It was acknowledgement.

Sarah went back to the tissue paper, hands steady, heart beating a fraction faster than she liked.

Because it had been nothing.

Because it had been everything.

Because the culture had held without ceremony.

And because, for once, Sarah hadn’t used humour to make something bearable.

She’d used authority to make it stop.

Charlotte and Celeste are at a café in the city. A well-dressed woman walks by. Everything about her - her attire, her perfume, her makeup, her smile - spoke of self-confidence, well-being, none of it ostentatious, all of working together to evoke a sense of wonder and in Charlotte, a new sensation: envy. "I'd like to be like that. I'd like to have that... presence." The woman's command over her femininity, how she artfully yet effortlessly let it flow from her had men straightening their ties. But that wasn't what Charlotte wanted? She didn't want to be attractive to anyone but Celeste. But she wanted that aura, that energy. She looked at Celeste anew. Celeste was like that. "Tell me, Celeste... how does one become... properly feminine? And that woman... and you: she was clearly enjoying it. You enjoy it, don't you?"

They were at one of those city cafés that pretended it hadn’t made choices—white tile, quiet jazz, sunlight held at the window like a polite guest. Celeste had her flat white and her laptop closed for once. Charlotte had tea and both hands around the cup as if warmth were a kind of proof.

The woman passed in the slow lane between tables.

Not a spectacle. Not a performance. Just… coherence.

A tailored coat that didn’t shout money, only fit. Hair done with the kind of effort that looked like none. Makeup that didn’t announce itself, only refined what was already there. A scent that arrived after she did—soft, clean, faintly floral—like punctuation. The smile she gave the barista wasn’t flirtation. It was social fluency.

Men didn’t gape. That wasn’t it.

They *adjusted*. Straightened ties, shifted their posture, became more careful in their own skin as she moved by. Not because she demanded attention. Because her presence quietly implied standards.

Charlotte watched her go.

Celeste saw it happen: the change in Charlotte's eyes. Not longing, not hunger—something else. A new and unfamiliar tightness.

Envy.

Charlotte's gaze stayed on the woman until she disappeared into the street light, and then Charlotte looked back at Celeste as if seeing her properly for the first time.

"Tell me," Charlotte said, quietly, "how does one become… properly feminine?"

Celeste didn't answer immediately.

Because there were a dozen bad answers. Answers that would turn Charlotte into a project, a checklist, a costume. Answers that would make this about *appearing* instead of *being*.

Charlotte continued, as if she needed the words out in the open to see if they were safe.

"That woman—and you." Charlotte's eyes flicked toward the window, then returned. "She was clearly enjoying it. The way it… flowed. Not for them." She nodded faintly at the men. "For herself."

Charlotte's mouth tightened, honest and cautious all at once. "I don't want to be attractive to anyone but you. I'm not asking for… attention."

Celeste leaned back slightly, studying her.

"What you want," Celeste said, calm, "is not attention. It's *authority*."

Charlotte blinked, as if the word unlocked something.

Celeste went on, voice steady. "That woman has a kind of internal alignment. Everything on her is saying the same thing: I belong here. I know who I am. I'm not asking permission."

Charlotte's fingers tightened around her cup. "Yes."

Celeste nodded once. "That's the part you envied."

Charlotte's eyes sharpened. "And… how do I get it."

Celeste smiled slightly, because Charlotte still expected femininity to be something you were granted if you did it correctly enough.

"You don't 'get' it," Celeste said. "You choose it. Repeatedly."

Charlotte watched her, very still.

Celeste leaned in just a fraction—not to dominate, to be precise.

"Proper femininity," Celeste said, "is not a look. It's not even a behaviour. It's an *orientation.*"

Charlotte's brow furrowed. "Orientation."

"Toward yourself," Celeste said. "Not toward men. Not toward approval. Toward *self-respect.*"

Charlotte exhaled, slow. "That sounds… abstract."

"It isn't," Celeste replied. "It's practical. It's a hundred small decisions that say: I'm worth care."

Charlotte's gaze dropped to her own hands, as if seeing all the small decisions she hadn't been allowing herself to make.

Celeste's voice softened slightly, but stayed firm. "And it's not about becoming someone else. It's about becoming *legible* as yourself."

Charlotte looked up again, searching. "Legible how."

Celeste's answer was immediate.

"Fit," she said. "Not sexy. Fit. Clothes that sit on your body like they were meant to. Not hiding. Not apologising. Not signalling 'don't look at me.' Just… correct."

Charlotte's throat worked. "That feels dangerous."

Celeste's eyes held hers. "It feels dangerous because you were trained to think visibility equals vulnerability. It doesn't. Visibility with boundaries is power."

Charlotte went still. That landed.

"And then," Celeste added, "posture. Not 'dainty.' Not performative. Just upright. Shoulders where they belong. Your body taking its space without making excuses."

Charlotte's mouth tightened in a faint, thoughtful line. "And… the rest. The perfume. The makeup."

Celeste smiled, small and knowing. “Tools.”

Charlotte blinked. “Tools.”

“Tools that can be used badly,” Celeste said. “To chase approval. To negotiate safety. To perform femininity like a job interview.”

Charlotte flinched slightly, because it was too accurate.

Celeste continued, unkind only to the lie. “Or tools that can be used well. To support your mood. To mark your day. To enjoy your own senses.”

Charlotte’s eyes stayed on hers. “You enjoy it.”

Celeste didn’t pretend she didn’t.

“Yes,” Celeste said simply. “I do.”

Charlotte’s face softened, uncertain. “Is it… wrong to want that.”

Celeste’s expression sharpened—not angry, just absolute.

“No,” Celeste said. “It’s human. And it’s female. And it’s yours if you want it.”

Charlotte swallowed. “But it’s easy to slip into… performance.”

Celeste nodded once. “So we set an intention.”

Charlotte waited.

Celeste held her gaze. “We do it for you. For your nervous system. For your sense of coherence. For the pleasure of being inside your own life.”

Charlotte’s fingers loosened around her cup. “And for you.”

Celeste’s smile returned—quick, private. “Yes. And for me.”

Charlotte looked out the window again, to where the woman had disappeared, then back.

“So what do I do,” Charlotte asked quietly, “first.”

Celeste didn’t give her a makeover. She gave her a standard.

“First,” Celeste said, “you pick one thing that makes you feel… slightly more like yourself. Not more ‘feminine.’ More *you.*”

Charlotte frowned slightly. “That could be anything.”

“Exactly,” Celeste said.

Charlotte thought for a long moment, then said, almost reluctantly, “Scent.”

Celeste’s eyebrows lifted. “Scent.”

Charlotte nodded once, as if committing to a decision. “It’s private. It’s for me. And… it changes how I feel in my skin.”

Celeste’s eyes warmed. “Good.”

Charlotte hesitated, then added, quieter, “And for you.”

Celeste’s mouth curved. “Yes.”

Charlotte looked at her, earnest and steady. “Will you help me.”

Celeste didn’t answer like a girlfriend. She answered like the woman who ran Wardrobe.

“Yes,” Celeste said. “But I’m going to be strict.”

Charlotte’s lips twitched. “Strict how.”

Celeste leaned in slightly, voice low and certain. “We don’t buy a persona. We don’t buy insecurity. We don’t buy anything that makes you feel like you have to earn entry.”

Charlotte’s gaze held. “Okay.”

Celeste’s expression softened at the edges. “We buy one scent that feels like calm authority. Something you can wear under anything. Something that belongs to you.”

Charlotte exhaled, and the envy that had been sharp a moment ago shifted into something gentler—anticipation, maybe. Possibility.

Celeste reached across the table and covered Charlotte’s hand with her own—brief, steady, equal.

“And Charlotte,” Celeste added, voice quiet.

Charlotte looked up.

“That aura you want?” Celeste said. “It’s already in you. The work is letting yourself stop hiding it.”

Charlotte swallowed, then nodded once—an adult nod, not a grateful one.

“Good,” Charlotte said.

Celeste smiled. “Good.”

And outside, the city kept moving—full of women with presence, full of men adjusting their ties—while at their small table, Charlotte began to understand that femininity wasn’t a performance she had to perfect.

It was a life she was allowed to enjoy.

Scent - perfume - is about chemistry. Charlotte's chemistry has changed, of course. A drop in androgens will change the metabolism ... they go perfume shopping. Celeste's biggest challenge: Charlotte is showing signs of confusion, as if her person is beginning to fade again. She is so 'there' at Wardrobe, at home, everywhere but here in the perfume section in a large, expensive department store. Celeste senses her growing discomfort and stops. "We need to talk, don''t we?"

They went on a weekday, because Celeste understood crowds the way she understood invoices: avoid them if you wanted a clean outcome.

The department store was all polished stone and soft lighting, arranged to make money feel like a natural state. The perfume floor was its own climate—cooler air, quieter voices, glass shelves gleaming with bottles like tiny, expensive trophies. Everything was curated to suggest that femininity could be purchased in measured sprays.

Charlotte stayed close at first, shoulders squared, eyes steady. She held her tote strap in one hand the way she did when she was keeping herself anchored.

Celeste watched her more than she watched the displays.

Because scent *was* chemistry. Charlotte was right about that. Her body had changed; her skin held warmth differently now, oils altered, a new softness at the edge of things. Perfume wasn't just a bottle—on her, it would become something else.

They stopped at a counter that smelled like clean white linen and citrus peel—expensive without being sugary. The saleswoman drifted over in a black dress and a smile that didn't intrude.

"Hi there," she said. "Are you looking for something fresh? Something warm? Something—"

"Quiet," Celeste said immediately, polite but firm. "Not loud. And not sweet."

The saleswoman's smile sharpened in professional approval. "Understood."

She offered scent strips, arranged like invitations. Charlotte took one and held it with the careful seriousness she brought to fittings, as if doing it correctly mattered.

Celeste watched her inhale.

At first Charlotte nodded—small, thoughtful. Then her eyes shifted, not to the scent, but away, as if trying to step back from the sensory load.

The store was full of invisible hands: musks and vanillas and aldehydes reaching into the air, colliding and blooming. People walked past trailing clouds. The air was a conversation Charlotte hadn't asked to join.

Charlotte's mouth tightened.

Celeste saw the change the way she'd learned to see it in the early days: the slight withdrawal, the narrowing of presence, as if Charlotte were retreating to a smaller version of herself to stay safe.

Not panic. Not drama. Something quieter and more dangerous.

Disappearance.

Charlotte lifted another strip and sniffed.

Then she didn't look at Celeste. She didn't look at the bottles. She stared at nothing just beyond the counter, expression blank in a way that didn't match the woman who could argue policy and set boundaries and swim.

The saleswoman offered a bottle.

Charlotte didn’t take it.

“Charlotte?” Celeste said softly.

Charlotte blinked, as if she hadn’t realised she’d left the room.

“I’m fine,” Charlotte murmured automatically.

Celeste felt a flare of alarm—controlled, immediate. She’d heard that phrase from Mara. From women trying to override biology with will.

It wasn’t the words that worried her. It was the cadence. The old cadence.

Charlotte’s fingers tightened on her tote strap until the knuckles went pale.

Celeste turned slightly, placing her body between Charlotte and the busiest part of the floor—not dramatic, just tactical. She gave the saleswoman a small, apologetic smile.

“We’re going to step aside for a moment,” Celeste said.

“Of course,” the woman replied instantly, with the grace of someone trained not to make it personal.

Celeste guided Charlotte two steps away—into a quieter corner near a display of scarves, where the air was still scented but less aggressive. She didn’t touch Charlotte’s back, didn’t steer her like a child. She simply moved, and let Charlotte choose to follow.

Charlotte did.

Celeste waited until Charlotte’s breathing was steady again. Then she spoke, low and direct.

“We need to talk, don’t we?”

Charlotte swallowed.

Her eyes lifted to Celeste’s, and Celeste saw the confusion in them—raw and unguarded. Not about perfume.

About being watched. About being exposed.

About being in a place where femininity was commodified and performed and policed all at once.

“Yes,” Charlotte said quietly. “I’m… fading.”

Celeste’s throat tightened, hot. She forced herself to keep her voice calm.

“Tell me what’s happening,” Celeste said.

Charlotte looked down at the scent strip still in her hand, as if it were evidence.

“It’s… too much,” Charlotte said. “Not the smell. The… premise.”

Celeste didn’t interrupt. She let Charlotte find the truth properly, rather than rushing in with reassurance.

Charlotte’s voice tightened. “At Wardrobe, it’s function. It’s craft. It’s standards. At home… it’s us.”

She swallowed again. “Here it feels like… femininity as performance. And I suddenly can’t tell which parts of me are real and which parts are—” she searched for the word, disgust flickering, “—a costume.”

Celeste felt something in her chest unclench and tighten again, because it was both painful and deeply intelligent.

“You’re not confused,” Celeste said softly. “You’re discerning.”

Charlotte’s eyes flicked up. “It doesn’t feel like discernment. It feels like I’m disappearing.”

Celeste nodded once. “Because you’re in a context that used to erase you.”

Charlotte’s jaw tightened.

Celeste went on, precise. “This floor is designed to make women doubt themselves and then spend money to fix the doubt. It’s not neutral. And you can feel it.”

Charlotte stared at her for a beat, and some tension eased from her mouth.

Celeste’s tone stayed steady, but gentler now. “So we don’t do this like they want us to.”

Charlotte’s brow furrowed. “How do we do it.”

Celeste leaned in slightly, keeping it private. “We strip it back. We take control of the conditions.”

Charlotte’s eyes held hers.

“We leave,” Celeste said simply, “and we do it somewhere smaller. A boutique. One counter. One person. One scent at a time. Or we do samples at home.”

Charlotte exhaled, and the relief was immediate, like she’d been holding herself together with sheer force.

“At home,” Charlotte repeated, as if tasting the idea. “In a safe room.”

Celeste nodded. “With tea. With your own soap. Your own skin. Your own normal air.”

Charlotte’s shoulders dropped a fraction.

“And,” Celeste added, voice firm, “we name the intention again. We are not buying you a persona. We are choosing a tool you enjoy.”

Charlotte’s mouth twitched faintly. “I forgot.”

Celeste’s eyes sharpened, not unkind. “You didn’t forget. You got overwhelmed.”

Charlotte looked at her, steadying. “I don’t like how quickly it happens.”

Celeste’s answer was immediate. “Then we treat it as data. We don’t shame it. We plan around it.”

Charlotte’s gaze warmed slightly, the way it did when she felt protected without being infantilised.

Celeste reached out and touched Charlotte’s hand—brief, grounding.

“One more thing,” Celeste said.

Charlotte nodded.

Celeste’s voice dropped. “If this is you trying to become ‘properly feminine’ by someone else’s definition, we stop. Today.”

Charlotte’s eyes held hers.

Then, very quietly, Charlotte said, “I don’t want their definition.”

Celeste’s chest eased.

“What do you want,” Celeste asked.

Charlotte looked down at the strip, then folded it in half and put it into her pocket like a note she'd keep.

"I want… my own," Charlotte said. "And I want it to be quiet enough that I can still hear myself."

Celeste felt her mouth curve—pride, affection, relief.

"Good," Celeste said. "That's the standard."

Charlotte's lips twitched. "We're leaving."

Celeste nodded. "We're leaving."

They turned together, not hurried, not flustered.

The saleswoman glanced up as they approached, ready to smooth, to sell, to rescue a sale.

Celeste smiled politely. "We'll come back another day. Smaller dose."

The woman nodded at once, professional and kind. "Of course. I can set aside a few samples if you like—clean musks, tea notes, soft woods."

Charlotte's eyes flicked to Celeste, asking without words: *is that safe?*

Celeste answered with a small nod: *we choose.*

"Yes," Celeste said. "That would be helpful."

They left the perfume floor and the air changed—less curated, less intrusive. Charlotte's breathing loosened again, as if her body had been waiting for permission to exist without being managed by a marketing department.

Outside, on the street, Charlotte stopped and looked at Celeste with a seriousness that made Celeste's chest tighten again.

"I'm sorry," Charlotte said reflexively.

Celeste's eyes sharpened. "Don't."

Charlotte blinked.

"You don't apologise for noticing when something is wrong for you," Celeste said. "That's not weakness. That's intelligence."

Charlotte’s shoulders eased. “Okay.”

Celeste slipped her hand into Charlotte’s briefly—public, ordinary, untheatrical.

“Next time,” Celeste said, “we do it our way.”

Charlotte nodded once. “Our way.”

And they walked on, letting the city be the city—while Celeste quietly held the truth of it close:

Charlotte wasn’t fading.

She was learning the difference between femininity as a commodity and femininity as a life.

And she was choosing the latter.

I don't know if this is a consideration to document, but most young women have had the advantage in terms of life-experience of having been little girls. That is not to be under-estimated. I see it in my granddaughter - the constant reinforcement towards who she wants to be already, at 4. Charlie as Charlie had none of that. Well, very little. His mum taught him to sew, to be organised, to be tidy in his habits such as writing and arranging things, she allowed him to grow his hair as long as he wanted, and to respect women. Probably a few other things, but other than her being his sole role model thanks to an absentee father, he wasn't encouraged to be anything other than a boy. And he was fine with it, overall. He didn't enjoy it much, but he didn't give it much thought. He didn't have fantasies about being a superhero or a sports star... he was too much of a realist for that. And although he didn't want to be female, he thought body hair was monstrous, ugly, digusting. This was his personal fabric. So, for him to now be Charlotte isn't difficult: he's actually okay with it. But just as with masculine persona has demands, so does the feminine

persona... just different, more internal, perhaps? Self aware? Perhaps that's where she needs to grow, now. Women look into eyes to understand the mind. They look at mirrors... something Charlotte needs to learn how to do. She needs to get comfortable looking at herself.

That's not only a consideration worth documenting — it's one of the most *respectful* and psychologically true ways to frame Charlotte's next stage without sliding into trope.

You're naming something real: most women have had **a whole childhood of being socially mirrored as "girl"**—praised, corrected, coached, warned, protected, contradicted, dressed, photographed, compared. It builds an internal map: not always healthy, but *dense*. Charlotte didn't get that density. She got fragments—your list is perfect: sewing, orderliness, hair permission, respect, a mother as primary model, and a private disgust for certain "male-coded" bodily realities without it turning into a declared wish to be female.

So Charlotte's ease with "being Charlotte" makes sense. But ease is not the same as **embodiment**.

The growth point you've identified is gold

> "Women look into eyes to understand the mind. They look at mirrors... something Charlotte needs to learn how to do."

Yes. And notice how cleanly that fits your anti-fetish spine: it's not about clothes, or passing, or attention. It's about **self-recognition**.

Charlotte needs a "girlhood substitute" that isn't infantilising:
not lessons, not makeover sequences, not being "taught to be a woman," but **a set of adult practices that build self-ownership**.

A way to phrase it inside the story (so it doesn't sound like an essay)

You can make this a Celeste insight: she realises Charlotte's discomfort in the perfume hall wasn't "perfume" — it was **a lack of internal scaffolding for self-regard**. And Celeste, being Celeste, doesn't coo. She builds structure.

The mirror problem: how to write it without trope

The trope version is “she stares in the mirror and cries.”
Your version is:

- Charlotte avoids mirrors because mirrors used to be **evidence** (of wrongness, of scrutiny).
- Now mirrors need to become **tools** (of neutrality, of care, of calibration).
- Celeste reframes mirror time as *data collection*, not vanity.

And crucially: Charlotte retains agency. She isn’t “made” to do it.

A scene seed you can drop in: “Two Minutes”

(Celeste POV; short, functional, no melodrama)

Celeste noticed it at home first, not in a dramatic way, in the way you noticed a missing habit.

Charlotte didn’t avoid mirrors exactly.

She just… never used them.

She brushed her hair without looking. Skipped past reflective surfaces like they were windows she didn’t need. Checked her teeth by feel, not sight. If her gaze landed on herself by accident, it slid away immediately, as if eye contact with her own reflection was impolite.

One evening, after dinner, Celeste washed a plate and watched Charlotte in the hallway.

Charlotte paused near the mirror by the door—paused long enough for Celeste to see the hesitation—then stepped around it.

Celeste dried her hands on a towel and said, quietly, “Charlotte.”

Charlotte stopped. Turned.

Celeste didn’t smile. Didn’t soften it. She spoke as if she were naming a policy.

“I want you to start looking at yourself,” Celeste said.

Charlotte’s mouth tightened. “Why.”

“Because you keep disappearing,” Celeste replied. “Not from me. From you.”

Charlotte’s eyes sharpened—defensive, then thoughtful.

Celeste continued, calm. “You didn’t get a childhood of being mirrored as a girl. You didn’t get the boring repetition of being seen and learning to see yourself back.”

Charlotte stared at her.

Celeste added, “So we build the habit now. Not for beauty. For ownership.”

Charlotte’s throat worked. “I don’t like mirrors.”

“I know,” Celeste said. “That’s why we do it.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lifted. “You’re being strict.”

“Yes,” Celeste replied. “Because I’m not letting you outsource your selfhood to my eyes.”

Charlotte went still at that. The phrase landed.

Celeste pointed to the mirror by the door. “Two minutes. That’s it. Stand there. Look into your own eyes. No judgement. Just… contact.”

Charlotte’s voice came out small, annoyed. “That sounds ridiculous.”

Celeste didn’t blink. “It sounds necessary.”

Charlotte hesitated, then stepped in front of the mirror.

She didn’t pose. She didn’t adjust. She just stood.

At first she looked at her mouth, her hair, the line of her jaw—anything but her eyes.

Celeste said quietly, “Eyes.”

Charlotte lifted her gaze.

For a moment, she went very still—like she’d been caught doing something intimate in public.

And then—slowly—her expression changed.

Not joy. Not tears.

Recognition.

A kind of quiet settling, the same way a garment settled when it finally fit.

Celeste watched from the kitchen doorway, hands still, heart in her throat, and said nothing. Because this wasn't hers to direct once it began.

After two minutes Celeste said, "Done."

Charlotte exhaled as if she'd been holding her breath the whole time.

She didn't look away with relief exactly. She looked away like someone finishing a hard exercise.

Celeste nodded once. "Again tomorrow."

Charlotte's mouth tightened. "I hate you."

Celeste's lips curved. "No you don't."

Charlotte paused.

Then, very quietly, she said, "Thank you."

Celeste's chest tightened. "Good."

And that was it. No performance. No ceremony. Just a new habit: Charlotte learning to meet herself without flinching.

Why this works

- It acknowledges the "no girlhood" gap without pathologising it.
- It doesn't make Charlotte childish.
- It doesn't turn femininity into "pretty"; it turns it into **self-ownership**.
- It keeps Celeste powerful *and* wise: she refuses to be Charlotte's mirror forever.

If you want, next we can write a companion beat from **Lauren's POV** where she notices the same thing in a motherly way but chooses restraint (she doesn't intrude), and it deepens the competence network: each woman supports Charlotte differently without taking her over.

The companion beat from Lauren's POV where she notices the same thing in a motherly way but chooses restraint (she doesn't intrude) is also an educational

moment for Lauren. She intuitively understands the disadvantage in terms of childhood reinforcements Charlotte never had, which would now present a massive challenge from a personal acknowledgement perspective. If you can't even look at yourself in the mirror to see yourself clearly, how can you ever hope to be a comfortable, engaging, fulfilled woman: can't happen.

Companion Beat — “Restraint” (Lauren POV, past tense)

Lauren noticed it because Lauren noticed everything.

Not in a nosy way—she wasn’t that sort of mother—but in the way a woman who had spent years reading small signals could read a room without being told what was wrong.

They were at Celeste’s place, mid-pack. Boxes taped. Marker scrawls in Celeste’s neat hand: **KITCHEN**, **BOOKS**, **WARDROBE—DO NOT CRUSH**. Sarah was somewhere in the lounge making commentary about how nobody owned enough “boring socks.” Mara was seated at the table with a mug and a grim expression, supervising without admitting she was supervising. Celeste moved between tasks with that composed, managerial efficiency that made Lauren quietly proud and quietly irritated, because it meant Celeste was still trying to carry too much.

Charlotte had come out of her room with an armful of folded clothes, face calm, posture steady. She set them in a box without fuss.

And then she walked past the hallway mirror.

She didn’t recoil. She didn’t flinch.

She simply… didn’t use it.

Her eyes dipped away by habit, as if the mirror were an obstacle rather than a tool. Like eye contact with herself would be immodest. Like looking would make something real that she wasn’t ready to claim.

Lauren felt the recognition hit in her chest.

She’d seen that avoidance before, in different forms—girls who’d been criticised too early, women whose bodies had been public property, teenagers taught to treat their

reflection as a problem to solve.

But this was different.

This was the absence of a whole scaffolding that most women didn't even realise they'd been given.

Lauren had watched her own daughter grow up with constant mirroring. Not always healthy mirroring—sometimes too much, sometimes too little—but it was *there*: clothes chosen, hair brushed, photos taken, comments made, compliments and corrections and warnings and rituals that said, over and over: this is you, this is your body, this is your face, this is how the world sees you, and this is how you learn to see yourself back.

Charlotte hadn't had that.

Not as a girl.

Not as a child.

She'd had fragments—skills, habits, a mother who taught competence and respect, a kind of quiet disgust at certain masculine inevitabilities that spoke to an internal mismatch—but he'd still moved through childhood without being invited into the ordinary, repetitive, sometimes annoying but ultimately formative business of *girlhood*.

And now, as Charlotte, she was expected to be fluent.

Lauren watched Charlotte's eyes slide past the mirror again, and a simple, brutal thought formed in her mind:

If you can't look at yourself, you can't fully arrive in yourself.

Not long-term.

Not comfortably.

Not in the steady, engaging way that made a woman feel at home in her own skin.

And Lauren felt something else too—an ache that had nothing to do with ideology and everything to do with mothers:

I can't give her that childhood.

It's gone.

There was no going back to four years old with hairbrushes and dress-ups and the gentle, relentless reinforcement that built a girl's internal map.

You couldn't retroactively replace those years.

You could only build a new structure, now, with adult consent and adult dignity.

Lauren's mouth tightened.

She wanted—instinctively—to say something. To fix it. To offer a solution like a bandage.

But she knew better.

Because Charlotte didn't need another woman taking her over.

She didn't need mothering that erased her adulthood.

She needed something harder and more respectful: space to grow without being watched growing.

So Lauren did what she'd been learning to do in this strange, beautiful network of women: she chose restraint.

She watched Charlotte set the box down, straighten the tape, and move on.

Then Lauren shifted her own body slightly, so she was no longer standing in a position where Charlotte might feel observed.

She turned her attention to the packing list instead, letting Charlotte's moment stay private.

Still—Lauren couldn't leave it entirely unattended.

She waited until Charlotte had disappeared back into her room, then walked quietly into the kitchen where Celeste was rinsing cups and moving them into a box with brisk competence.

Celeste looked up. "You need something?"

Lauren kept her voice neutral. "Not for me."

Celeste's expression sharpened, immediately attentive. "What is it."

Lauren didn't soften it into comfort. She didn't dramatise it either. She chose the language Celeste responded to: clear, useful, actionable.

“She’s avoiding mirrors,” Lauren said.

Celeste froze for half a beat.

Lauren continued, calm. “Not in a vanity way. In a contact way. Like she doesn’t… use her own reflection.”

Celeste’s eyes narrowed slightly, absorbing.

Lauren added, quietly, “It’s not strange. It’s understandable.”

Celeste’s jaw tightened. “Because she didn’t have—”

“The years,” Lauren said, and felt the sting of the phrase as she spoke it. “The reinforcement. The boring repetitions. She didn’t get to be a little girl.”

Celeste looked down at the cup in her hand, and Lauren saw anger flare in her—anger at the world, at loss, at the fact there were gaps you couldn’t fix with policy.

Lauren held her gaze when it came back.

“But,” Lauren said, precise, “it can be built now. Carefully. With dignity.”

Celeste’s eyes sharpened. “How.”

Lauren exhaled once. “Not by me.”

Celeste blinked.

Lauren’s voice stayed firm. “If I try to intervene, it becomes a mother scene. It becomes loaded. She will either comply to please me or resist to protect herself. Neither helps.”

Celeste’s mouth tightened. She hated being told what not to do, which was exactly why Lauren said it.

“So,” Lauren continued, “if you do something, do it like Wardrobe. A small practice. A habit. No sentiment. No performance.”

Celeste stared at her, and Lauren saw the moment of understanding click into place. Celeste didn’t need advice on femininity. She needed permission to treat self-recognition like governance: structured, repeatable, kind without softness.

Celeste nodded once, slow. “Two minutes.”

Lauren’s mouth twitched. “Exactly.”

Celeste’s expression tightened, something almost raw under the competence. “It scares me.”

Lauren didn’t pretend she didn’t understand. “Good,” she said quietly. “That means you’re taking it seriously.”

Celeste’s eyes stayed on hers. “And you’re… okay.”

It wasn’t a question, not exactly. It was Celeste noticing something in Lauren too—how the word *daughter* had started to settle in Lauren’s mouth like truth.

Lauren felt her throat tighten.

She didn’t look away.

“I’m learning,” Lauren said. “That’s all.”

Celeste nodded once, accepting it as the only answer Lauren would give.

Lauren picked up the packing list again and moved to the next box, because that was how she kept herself steady: hands doing useful things while her heart adjusted.

As she passed the hallway mirror, she caught her own reflection—older face, tired eyes, a woman who had been forced to become braver than she’d planned.

She held her own gaze for a beat.

Then she looked away and kept moving.

Not because she couldn’t stand to see herself.

Because this wasn’t her moment.

It was Charlotte’s.

And Lauren, finally, was learning that the most motherly thing she could sometimes do was not to rush in with her love—
but to trust the structure that would teach her daughter how to stand on her own.

I'm going to use this as a flashback - since Celeste and Charlotte are now in their apartment in Melbourne. It will be part of the story (as a flashback - I like that Lauren get herself involved ... and didn't).
So, another idea... you decide if it can work. Again, for business, Celeste has to go out for the evening, and, again, gets 'dressed to the nines'. Charlotte watches her put on evening makeup. She knows Celeste always wears a little for work or being in society, but this is different: it's evening makeup. And it changes her look significantly, makes her look mor powerful, in a way, more composed, put together. Business suit, stockings, heels: the picture of elegance if she were just a picture, but then, Celeste walks, talks... the quiet strength that propels her during the day shows teeth at night. And Charlotte realises that it's not about putting on anything... makeup is to a woman's personality as a condiment is to a dish: if the dish is made of poor ingredients, spices won't save it.

This absolutely can work—and it can do something rare: **reclaim “dressed up” as competence and intention**, not spectacle. The way you’re framing it (makeup as “condiment,” not foundation) is exactly the right philosophical lever. It keeps the scene anchored in *Celeste’s power* and *Charlotte’s learning*, not in makeover tropes.

The only craft caution: don’t linger on the mechanics (brushes, lips, lashes) the way TG stories do. Keep it **observational and interpretive**—Charlotte watching Celeste’s *decision-making* and the *shift in presence*, not the cosmetics.

Here’s a full scene draft in that vein.

Scene — “Condiment” (Charlotte POV, past tense)

Celeste had started calling them “evening rooms.”

Not the apartment—this apartment was small and clean and theirs in a way the old place had never quite been—but the version of herself she stepped into when the work

demanded a certain kind of polish.

Charlotte understood why. The city asked women for a language. Celeste didn't argue with it. She just spoke it better than most.

That night, the reason was simple: networking. A room full of people who smiled too much and asked questions that weren't questions. A room where a woman's competence was assessed through details that pretended to be irrelevant.

Celeste didn't say that out loud.

She just laid out her things on the bathroom counter with the calm inevitability of someone preparing tools.

Charlotte leaned in the doorway and watched.

Celeste caught her reflection and met Charlotte's eyes in the mirror.

"You look like you're about to witness a ritual," Celeste said.

Charlotte's mouth tightened slightly, thoughtful. "It… is, isn't it."

Celeste's expression softened for half a second. "It's procedure."

She said it the way she said *policy.* Like a thing you did so the day didn't do you.

Charlotte watched her pick up the first product and apply it with an economy of motion. No fuss. No lingering. No romance about the act. Celeste didn't *become* someone else. She composed herself—like taking scattered papers and aligning them into a neat stack.

The difference was gradual. Almost invisible, until it wasn't.

Her features sharpened—not harshly, but with intention. She looked less like a student who belonged in lecture halls and more like a woman who would be listened to in a room full of men who'd rather not.

Charlotte felt something inside her shift—admiration, and a small sting of awe.

Celeste looked up again, seeing her.

"This isn't for me," Celeste said, as if reading Charlotte's thoughts. "Not as self-expression."

Charlotte said quietly, "It looks like you."

“It is me,” Celeste replied. “Just… emphasised.”

Charlotte stepped closer, drawn in despite herself.

Celeste added a final detail and then leaned back, examining her own face in the mirror with clinical detachment—checking symmetry, not searching for validation.

Then she turned slightly, and Charlotte saw it: the teeth.

Not literal, not aggression. The kind of composure that could bite if it needed to. The quiet strength Celeste carried through daylight—organising, negotiating, holding standards—was still there. But now it was framed. Made legible to people who couldn’t read subtler signals.

Celeste reached for her blazer and slipped it on. The line of it sat perfectly. She adjusted the shoulders once, decisive.

The stockings and heels followed—not sexual, not performative. Structural. A silhouette that meant business.

When she stood, the whole image clicked into place.

If she’d been a photograph, Charlotte thought, she would have looked like elegance.

But it wasn’t the picture that did it.

It was the way Celeste moved.

Even in their small bathroom, she walked as if she belonged in the bigger room she was about to enter. Not because of the clothes. Because she had already decided she belonged there, and the clothes were simply the punctuation.

Charlotte watched her pick up her bag, check her phone, and glance at herself one last time—not for approval, for readiness.

Then Celeste looked at Charlotte and the harder edge softened.

“You’re staring,” Celeste said, mildly amused.

Charlotte didn’t deny it. “You look…”

Celeste waited.

Charlotte searched for the right word and found it unexpectedly.

“More,” Charlotte said.

Celeste’s mouth curved. “More what.”

Charlotte swallowed. “More *composed*. More… dangerous.”

Celeste’s eyebrows lifted, a flicker of genuine surprise. “Dangerous.”

Charlotte nodded once, serious. “Like you could walk into a room and make people behave.”

Celeste’s smile sharpened. “I can.”

Charlotte felt her chest tighten—love and awe braided together, and something else too: understanding.

She’d been thinking about femininity as an inventory. Things you put on. Things you learned. Things you acquired. The store. The perfume floor. The fear of performance.

But this—Celeste dressed to the nines in their bathroom, no audience, no applause—was different.

The outfit didn’t make Celeste powerful.

It only made her power easier for other people to perceive.

Charlotte heard herself speak, almost as if she were saying it for her own benefit.

“It’s like…” She paused, then shook her head at herself. “I’m going to say something stupid.”

Celeste’s eyes stayed on her. “Say it.”

Charlotte exhaled once. “Makeup is… a condiment.”

Celeste’s eyebrows lifted again. “A condiment.”

Charlotte nodded, warming to the idea as it formed. “If the dish is made of poor ingredients, spices won’t save it. But if the dish is good…” She looked at Celeste, meaning it plainly. “Then the seasoning makes the quality obvious.”

Celeste went still for a beat, as if something tender had landed in her chest unexpectedly.

Then she smiled—small, private, pleased.

“That,” Celeste said, “is the most Charlotte thing you’ve ever said.”

Charlotte’s mouth tightened. “Is it wrong.”

Celeste shook her head. “No.”

She stepped closer and, without turning it into theatre, adjusted something small at Charlotte’s collar—an affectionate habit she’d developed, a quiet way of touching that didn’t ask permission because it already had it.

“It’s also why you don’t need to fear this,” Celeste added. “You’re not trying to manufacture yourself.”

Charlotte’s eyes held hers. “But I want… that presence.”

Celeste’s gaze sharpened—gentle, but firm. “Then build it from the inside. The outside comes last.”

Charlotte nodded slowly. “How.”

Celeste didn’t give her a tutorial.

She gave her a standard.

“You practise self-contact,” Celeste said. “Mirror. Voice. Posture. Not for other people. For you. And you pick one tool—one—at a time. Scent. A lipstick you wear at home first. Not to perform. To learn what feels like you.”

Charlotte swallowed. “Okay.”

Celeste’s mouth curved. “Good.”

She leaned in and kissed Charlotte’s cheek—chaste, deliberate, affectionate—then murmured, as if sealing a pact:

“You don’t need to become anyone else,” Celeste said. “You just need to stop hiding from yourself.”

Charlotte closed her eyes for a brief second and let that warmth go somewhere deep.

When Celeste stepped back, the “evening room” returned—the composed, sharpened woman ready to enter the city’s theatre without being consumed by it.

Celeste picked up her keys.

“I’ll be back around ten,” she said.

Charlotte nodded. “Text me when you leave.”

Celeste’s eyes warmed. “Always.”

Then she was gone, the door clicking softly behind her.

Charlotte stood in the bathroom doorway for a moment longer, looking at the counter where the tools had been.

Not longing for them.

Understanding them.

And in the mirror—just for a second—she met her own eyes.

Not long.

But long enough to feel the beginning of something steady: the knowledge that presence wasn’t painted on.

It was built.

If you want to keep this firmly away from trope territory, a nice follow-up beat is: **Charlotte doesn’t immediately try makeup. She tries posture and eye contact first**—the “ingredients.” Then, weeks later, scent becomes the first “condiment,” chosen at home, not purchased in a flooded department store.

ExACTly! Oh, yes please, Emily. Same terrain, different vehicle. We are covering ground all the tropes do, and obliterating them: making the ghost-of-character in other stories - a person with no backstory, a person no one would ever care about (TS Elliot's Hollow Men?) - into the person you would recognise in a coffee shop. A soul. Charlotte is going to get to know herself... that little girl she never met. Not infantilism: self-recognition.

Scene — “Ingredients” (Celeste POV, past tense)

Charlotte didn’t go looking for lipstick.

That was what Celeste liked most about the way she changed now: she didn’t grab at symbols. She built foundations.

It started the morning after the “condiment” conversation, when Celeste came out of the bathroom and found Charlotte standing in the hallway—two steps back from the mirror—hands at her sides, spine straight, face composed with that strange seriousness she got when she was trying to do something brave without advertising it.

Celeste stopped.

Charlotte didn’t look away.

That alone was progress.

“I’m doing it,” Charlotte said quietly.

Celeste leaned her shoulder against the wall, careful to keep her voice neutral. No praise that would turn it into performance.

“How long,” Celeste asked.

“Two minutes,” Charlotte replied.

Celeste nodded once. “Good.”

Charlotte’s eyes stayed on her own reflection, but she wasn’t looking at her hair or her mouth or the geometry of her face. She was doing the harder thing: looking into her eyes as if she were trying to meet someone new and had been taught her whole life to avoid the introduction.

Celeste watched, and something tightened in her chest.

She had to resist the urge to step in and mother the moment. To say *you’re beautiful* or *you’re safe*—soft lies that would turn this into reassurance-seeking.

Instead she stayed still and let Charlotte have it.

When the timer on Charlotte's phone chimed softly, Charlotte exhaled as if she'd been holding her breath.

She didn't slump. She didn't collapse into relief.

She simply… stepped away.

Celeste lifted her eyebrows slightly. "How did it feel."

Charlotte's mouth tightened, thoughtful. "Like making eye contact with a stranger who knows too much about me."

Celeste's lips curved. "Accurate."

Charlotte's eyes flicked to her, then back to the mirror, and Celeste saw the flicker of something new there—faint, unsure, but undeniably present.

Curiosity.

Charlotte cleared her throat. "Can I ask you something."

Celeste kept her tone even. "Yes."

Charlotte's gaze stayed on the mirror, as if she needed the reflection as a steadying point.

"When girls grow up," Charlotte said, carefully, "do they… practise this? Or do they just… get it."

Celeste didn't answer quickly.

Because she could give the easy answer—*some do, some don't*—but Charlotte wasn't asking about sociology. She was asking about loss.

She was asking what she'd missed.

"It's both," Celeste said finally. "They get mirrored. Constantly. They get told who they are in a thousand tiny ways. And then—if they're lucky—they eventually take that mirror back and decide for themselves."

Charlotte swallowed. "I didn't get… the first part."

Celeste shook her head, slow. "Not in that language."

Charlotte's voice was quiet. "So this is me doing it… late."

Celeste's expression sharpened, not unkind. "This is you doing it *now.*"

Charlotte's mouth twitched. "That's the nicer way to say it."

"It's the accurate way," Celeste said.

Charlotte nodded once. Then, as if moving from the mirror to a new layer of difficulty, she said, "I want to practise… presence."

Celeste's eyes narrowed slightly. "Define it."

Charlotte glanced at Celeste, then away again, embarrassed by her own earnestness.

"The way you stand," Charlotte said. "The way you look at people. The way you don't apologise for existing."

Celeste's mouth curved. "Ah."

Charlotte's tone tightened, almost defensive. "Not as a performance. As… ingredients."

Celeste felt warmth bloom in her chest.

"Good," Celeste said. "That's exactly it."

She pushed off the wall and stepped closer—not to take over, but to calibrate.

"Okay," Celeste said. "We practise three things. None of them are makeup."

Charlotte nodded, serious.

"First," Celeste said, "posture. Not 'feminine.' Upright. Grounded. Your body taking the space it needs, no more, no less."

Charlotte adjusted automatically—shoulders back, chin level.

Celeste shook her head once. "Not stiff. You're not a soldier. Soften your knees."

Charlotte blinked, then did it. Her whole stance changed, subtly. Less braced. More alive.

Celeste nodded. "Better."

"Second," Celeste continued, "voice. You don't have to be soft. You have to be clear."

Charlotte's mouth tightened. "I am clear."

Celeste’s eyes held hers. “You are when you’re comfortable. When you’re uncertain, you disappear.”

Charlotte went still.

Celeste didn’t soften it. “So practise speaking one sentence without shrinking at the end.”

Charlotte’s eyebrows lifted. “What sentence.”

Celeste didn’t give her something cute.

She gave her something true.

“Say,” Celeste said, “I don’t want that.”

Charlotte looked like she hated it.

Then she said, evenly, “I don’t want that.”

Celeste shook her head. “Again. Without apology.”

Charlotte’s jaw tightened. “I don’t want that.”

Celeste nodded. “Good.”

Charlotte’s eyes flashed, offended. “That’s… harsh.”

Celeste’s voice stayed calm. “It’s clean.”

Charlotte stared at her, then nodded slowly as if she understood the difference.

“And third,” Celeste said, “eye contact. Not staring. Not submission. Just… holding your presence in your face.”

Charlotte looked back toward the mirror, then at Celeste. She held Celeste’s gaze for a beat longer than usual.

Celeste felt it—Charlotte not just looking, but *arriving*.

It was quiet.

It was enormous.

Charlotte exhaled. “This feels like learning how to be a person.”

Celeste’s voice softened slightly. “It is.”

Charlotte swallowed, then said the thing that made Celeste’s chest tighten again.

“I keep thinking,” Charlotte murmured, “about a little girl I never met.”

Celeste didn’t respond with pity. She didn’t make it tragic. She simply let the truth exist.

Charlotte continued, eyes steady now, not lost.

“Not… dress-ups,” Charlotte said quickly, as if guarding against cliché. “Not childish things. Just… the part of me that would have learned to exist without bracing.”

Celeste nodded once, very slowly. “Yes.”

Charlotte’s mouth trembled slightly, then steadied.

“I want to meet her,” Charlotte said. “Not to become her. To recognise her.”

Celeste felt her throat tighten. She kept her tone firm.

“Then you will,” Celeste said. “One boring repetition at a time.”

Charlotte’s lips twitched. “Boring.”

Celeste’s mouth curved. “Boring is reliable. Reliable is freedom.”

Charlotte nodded.

Celeste stepped closer and, very gently, adjusted Charlotte’s shoulders—just a fraction—like she would adjust a garment on a form. Not to control. To show what “correct” felt like.

“Okay,” Celeste said. “Now you go make tea. And you do it like you belong in your own kitchen.”

Charlotte blinked at her.

Celeste held her gaze. “Go on.”

Charlotte turned, and Celeste watched her walk away.

Not floaty. Not demure.

Grounded. Present.

A woman learning, not how to *look* like herself—

but how to be seen by herself without flinching.

Celeste stayed by the mirror for a moment after Charlotte left.

In the glass, she saw her own face—tired, determined, quietly proud.

And she realised something that surprised her:

This wasn't Charlotte learning femininity.

This was Charlotte learning selfhood.

And Celeste—who had spent most of her life collecting power like armour—found herself learning something too:

That there was a kind of strength that didn't come from command.

It came from witnessing.

From holding a standard.

From staying.

If you want the next beat to stay in the same "ingredients" lane, we can do a small public test: a café interaction where Charlotte practices *voice and eye contact* with a barista or a server—nothing dramatic, just a clean moment where she doesn't shrink, and Celeste notices without praising like a trainer.

Yes please.

Scene — "Order" (Celeste POV, past tense)

The café they chose was loud enough that nobody listened, and bright enough that Charlotte couldn't hide.

Which was exactly why Celeste picked it.

Not as a test. Celeste didn't do tests anymore. But as a place where practice could happen in the wild—ordinary stakes, ordinary social friction, the kind of environment where old habits surfaced without warning.

They sat near the window. Melbourne moved past in layers: tram bells, office shoes, bags swinging, sunlight on glass.

Charlotte had her hands around her mug, shoulders relaxed the way Celeste had been teaching her—no bracing, no shrinking. She looked… present. Not perfect. Present.

Celeste watched her and didn't say anything. Praise turned practice into performance.

After a while, Charlotte glanced toward the counter.

"I'll order," Charlotte said.

Celeste's eyes lifted from her phone. "Okay."

Charlotte stood.

Not quickly. Not apologetically. She stood the way she'd been learning: knees soft, spine upright, body taking the space it needed without asking permission.

Celeste sat back and let her go.

At the counter, a barista in a black apron looked up with the brisk neutrality of someone managing a line.

"Hi," he said. "What can I get you?"

Charlotte opened her mouth—then paused.

Celeste felt it from across the room: the old reflex, the tiny retreat, the instinct to become smaller so nobody would be annoyed by her existence.

Charlotte's fingers tightened around the edge of the counter.

Then she inhaled once, slow and controlled.

She met the barista's eyes.

And she spoke.

“Two flat whites,” Charlotte said, evenly. “One regular. One decaf.”

The barista blinked, not because it was unusual, but because Charlotte’s tone was… clean. Unfussy. Adult.

“Sure,” he said. “Any milk preference?”

Charlotte didn’t look down. She didn’t laugh nervously. She didn’t over-explain.

“Oat for the decaf,” she said. “Regular milk for the other.”

The barista nodded, fingers moving quickly over the register. “That’s thirteen fifty.”

Charlotte reached into her bag, pulled out her wallet, and handed over her card without fumbling. Her hand was steady.

The barista tapped the terminal toward her.

Charlotte paid. Simple. Calm.

Then, as the barista turned away, Charlotte said one more sentence—quiet, polite, and crucially, not submissive.

“Thank you.”

Not gushing. Not performative. Not a plea.

A fact.

The barista looked back, and for the first time his expression warmed, just slightly, as if he’d noticed something he couldn’t name.

“No worries,” he said, and slid her the receipt.

Charlotte took it and turned.

As she walked back to the table, Celeste watched the way her face held itself—no rushed smile, no checking for approval, no nervous scanning for judgement.

When Charlotte sat down, she placed the receipt on the table and exhaled once.

Celeste kept her voice neutral. “How did it feel.”

Charlotte’s mouth tightened, considering. “Like… speaking from my whole body.”

Celeste’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “Good.”

Charlotte's gaze flicked to Celeste, and something like relief softened the edge of her eyes.

"I didn't disappear," Charlotte said.

Celeste nodded once. "No."

Charlotte looked out the window, then back, thoughtful. "It was such a small thing."

Celeste's voice stayed calm. "Small things are how people become real."

Charlotte's lips twitched. "You make it sound like an engineering problem."

Celeste's mouth curved. "It is."

Charlotte stared at her for a beat, then shook her head slightly as if amused by herself.

"I used to think," Charlotte said quietly, "that being… 'good' meant being easy. Not taking up space. Not being a bother."

Celeste's eyes sharpened. "That's not goodness. That's training."

Charlotte nodded, slow. "I know."

A pause.

Then Charlotte added, almost reluctantly, "But it still lives in me."

Celeste reached across the table and rested two fingers lightly on Charlotte's wrist—not possessive, just grounding.

"It will," Celeste said. "For a while. And then one day you'll notice it hasn't spoken in weeks."

Charlotte's throat worked. "How do you know."

Celeste didn't answer with theory. She answered with truth.

"Because I can see you practising," Celeste said. "And practice changes the nervous system. That's what it's for."

Charlotte's mouth tightened, holding emotion down the way she always did when she didn't want to make it messy.

Celeste didn't push.

The coffees arrived—one regular, one decaf with oat—set down with a quick “here you go.”

Charlotte looked up, met the barista’s eyes again, and said, evenly, “Thank you.”

Again: clean. Adult. Real.

Celeste lifted her mug and watched Charlotte wrap her hands around hers.

No blush. No apology.

Just a woman sitting in a café, ordering coffee, existing.

The city didn’t pause for her.

Which was perfect.

Because Charlotte didn’t need the world to pause.

She only needed to stop shrinking for it.

Celeste is impressed: Charlotte has finally picked a scent, purched at Chemist's Warehouse (safe). She is dressed in jeans, but they're skinny jeans. And a nice top (shirt) with the front tucked into the jeans. And is wearing a bit of hardly noticable lipstick. Dair done in a low updo, ready to go to work at Wardrobe. Now, she wants to do what she did at the café, but all day. Unafraid to be... visible.

Scene — “All Day” (Celeste POV, past tense)

Charlotte didn’t announce it.

That was the first sign it was real.

Celeste came out of the bedroom to the small, bright kitchen of their Melbourne apartment and stopped without meaning to. Not because Charlotte was *done up*—she

wasn't. Not because she looked like a different person.

Because she looked like the same person, finally willing to be seen.

Charlotte stood by the counter with her tote open, checking she had her keys, her phone, the little notebook she used for Wardrobe notes. She was dressed in jeans—skinny, yes, but not theatrical. Just a clean line that admitted her legs existed. A simple top with the front tucked in, making her waist legible without trying to turn it into an argument. Her hair was pinned into a low updo—practical, neat, quietly intentional.

And there was the faintest trace of lipstick. Not a "look." More like a decision.

Celeste's eyes flicked to Charlotte's mouth, then to her eyes.

Charlotte caught her looking and held it. No shrinking. No reflexive apology.

Celeste felt something warm and sharp move through her chest.

"You—" Celeste began.

Charlotte lifted her chin a fraction. "Don't."

Celeste's mouth curved. "Don't what."

"Don't make it a big thing," Charlotte said, very calmly.

Celeste blinked.

Then she laughed once, soft. "Mara's been leaking into you."

Charlotte's lips twitched. "Probably."

Celeste stepped closer anyway, because she wasn't going to pretend she hadn't noticed.

"What's the scent," Celeste asked, voice low, curious.

Charlotte hesitated for half a second—then lifted her wrist.

Celeste leaned in, inhaled.

It was clean. Warm. Slightly woody. Nothing loud. Nothing sweet. Something that sat close to the skin and felt… adult.

"Chemist's Warehouse?" Celeste guessed.

Charlotte’s mouth tightened, pleased and stubborn. “Safe.”

Celeste nodded. “Good choice.”

Charlotte’s gaze sharpened. “It’s not… fancy.”

Celeste held her eyes. “It’s yours.”

That did it. Charlotte’s shoulders dropped by a fraction, relief sliding in.

Celeste let her gaze take Charlotte in again—the tucked shirt, the line of the jeans, the neat hair that would hold up through a workday, the tiny hint of colour that didn’t ask anyone’s permission.

“You look…” Celeste paused, choosing carefully.

Charlotte’s eyes stayed on her. “Say it properly.”

Celeste’s mouth curved. “You look like you’re not negotiating.”

Charlotte exhaled once, a small sound of agreement. “That’s the point.”

Celeste picked up her own mug and leaned against the counter, watching Charlotte pack her tote with that methodical competence that Wardrobe seemed to bring out in her like a frequency.

Charlotte paused, then looked up.

“I want to do it,” she said.

Celeste’s eyebrows lifted. “Do what.”

“What I did at the café,” Charlotte said, as if it were a technical skill. “But all day.”

Celeste let the silence sit for a beat.

“Visible,” Charlotte clarified, and the word came out with a hint of fear she didn’t bother dressing up. “Not… loud. Not attention. Just… not hiding.”

Celeste nodded once, slow. “Okay.”

Charlotte blinked. “That’s it.”

Celeste’s eyes sharpened. “You want permission?”

Charlotte’s jaw tightened. “No.”

Celeste’s mouth curved. “Good. Then don’t ask for it.”

Charlotte stared at her, then nodded—one of those adult nods, the kind that meant she’d heard the standard and intended to meet it.

Celeste stepped closer and adjusted one small thing at Charlotte’s collar—habit now, affectionate and practical all at once.

Charlotte’s eyes softened.

Celeste’s voice dropped. “What’s the risk.”

Charlotte didn’t pretend she didn’t know.

“That I’ll… disappear again,” Charlotte said quietly. “If someone looks too long. Or if someone says something stupid. Or if I catch myself thinking I’m not allowed.”

Celeste nodded. “And what’s the plan.”

Charlotte’s gaze steadied, and Celeste felt the deep satisfaction of seeing practice turn into structure.

“I don’t apologise,” Charlotte said. “I don’t over-explain. I don’t make myself small.”

Celeste’s mouth curved. “Good.”

Charlotte added, more softly, “And if I feel myself fading, I step into the back room and breathe. I don’t push through it until I break.”

Celeste’s eyes warmed. “Very Wardrobe.”

Charlotte’s lips twitched. “Yes.”

Celeste reached out and took Charlotte’s hand briefly—just long enough to anchor, not long enough to make it sentimental.

“And one more thing,” Celeste said.

Charlotte looked at her.

Celeste’s voice was quiet, exact. “If anyone at Wardrobe reacts—positively or negatively—you do not manage their feelings.”

Charlotte’s eyes sharpened. “I won’t.”

Celeste nodded. “Good.”

Charlotte zipped her tote, slung it over her shoulder, and stood at the door.

For a moment she hesitated—not with fear, with the gravity of decision.

Then she looked at Celeste, eyes steady, presence held in her face the way they’d been practising.

“I’m going to work,” Charlotte said.

Celeste’s mouth curved. “Yes you are.”

Charlotte’s hand touched the doorknob.

Celeste watched her, and in her mind she saw all the old versions—the boy who never had fantasies of heroism because realism was his defence, the person who could endure anything as long as it didn’t ask him to look at himself too closely.

And now this: a woman who had decided to be visible without performing.

Charlotte opened the door.

Before she stepped out, she turned back once and met Celeste’s eyes.

Not to seek reassurance.

To share something.

“Celeste,” Charlotte said quietly.

“Yes,” Celeste replied.

Charlotte’s mouth tightened, emotion contained but undeniable. “Thank you for not letting me outsource my selfhood to your eyes.”

Celeste felt her throat tighten.

She didn’t answer with softness. She answered with truth.

“You did the work,” Celeste said. “I just held the standard.”

Charlotte nodded once—accepting it, owning it.

Then she stepped into the corridor and walked toward the lift like she belonged there.

Because she did.

And Celeste stood in the doorway for a moment longer, breathing in the faint trace of Charlotte's new scent—quiet, close to the skin—and felt something settle inside her that had nothing to do with pride and everything to do with love:

Charlotte was no longer trying to be permitted.

She was beginning to be.

Simple request: Charlotte, as seen by Sarah (POV). They have a chat.

Scene — "Seen" (Sarah POV, past tense)

Charlotte walked into Wardrobe like she'd finally stopped asking the room whether she was allowed.

Sarah noticed immediately.

Sarah noticed *everything*, but she noticed this the way you noticed weather: not as detail, as atmosphere.

Jeans—skinny, yes, but not silly. A top tucked in at the front like she'd decided her waist existed and didn't need to be defended. Hair pinned low and neat, practical but intentional. And there was a faint hint of lipstick—so subtle Sarah might have missed it on anyone else.

On Charlotte it read like a sentence.

I'm here.

Not a performance. Not a plea.

Sarah looked up from the front desk and, for once, didn't make a joke. She let Charlotte get past the threshold without turning it into a moment that would make her self-conscious.

Charlotte moved toward the back with her tote on her shoulder, nodding at Lauren, nodding at Mara, doing the small social acknowledgements that made a person legible without making them loud.

Then Charlotte paused near the ledger table, as if checking the room the way you checked wind before you stepped outside.

Sarah waited until Charlotte glanced her way.

Then Sarah lifted her chin slightly and said, “Tea?”

Charlotte’s eyes flicked to her—grateful, cautious, and steady all at once. “Yes.”

Sarah didn’t say *good girl* or anything cute that would land wrong. She just jerked her head toward the kitchenette like it was a normal workday, which was the whole point.

They made tea in silence at first, the kettle clicking like punctuation. Sarah kept her body loose, not looming, not interrogating. She’d learned that the way you approached a skittish thing wasn’t to corner it with enthusiasm.

Charlotte held the mug with both hands, breathing in the steam as if scent had become part of her calibration now.

Sarah leaned her hip against the counter and said, lightly, “Right.”

Charlotte blinked. “Right.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched. “You’re different.”

Charlotte’s shoulders tensed for half a beat—then, impressively, didn’t collapse into apology. “Different how.”

Sarah nodded once, approving. “There it is. That.”

Charlotte’s brow furrowed, but her gaze didn’t drop. “Say it.”

Sarah studied her for a moment, then decided to be kind in the only way Sarah knew how: by being exact.

“You’ve stopped trying to be invisible,” Sarah said. “And you’ve stopped trying to make it everyone else’s job to cope with you existing.”

Charlotte went still.

Sarah held her gaze, not unkind. “That sounds harsher than I mean it.”

Charlotte’s mouth tightened. “No. It’s accurate.”

Sarah’s eyebrows lifted. “Well, look at you. Adult.”

Charlotte let out a small breath—almost a laugh. “I’m trying.”

Sarah’s eyes flicked to Charlotte’s mouth, then back up. “Also… lip.”

Charlotte’s hand went reflexively toward her face, then stopped halfway, as if she caught herself performing embarrassment. “Yes.”

Sarah nodded once. “It’s barely there.”

“That was deliberate,” Charlotte said.

Sarah’s mouth curved. “Good. Because if you’d come in here looking like a department store counter attacked you, I’d have had to intervene.”

Charlotte’s eyes warmed slightly. “I didn’t want… theatre.”

Sarah lifted her mug. “Correct answer.”

They sipped. The studio’s familiar sounds pressed in around them: the soft rasp of fabric, the snip of shears, the scratch of Mara’s pencil on paper. Ordinary. Safe.

Sarah watched Charlotte for a beat longer. “What’s the scent.”

Charlotte hesitated. Then she lifted her wrist.

Sarah leaned in—only as far as was respectful—and inhaled.

“Ooh,” Sarah said, genuinely pleased. “Clean. Grown.”

“Chemist’s Warehouse,” Charlotte said, a little defensively.

Sarah snorted. “Excellent. Nothing more dangerous than a man thinking your perfume cost money.”

Charlotte blinked, then smiled—small, real.

Sarah watched that smile like it was evidence.

“You did something,” Sarah said, quieter now. “Didn’t you. You decided something.”

Charlotte's gaze steadied. "I decided I'm not hiding anymore."

Sarah nodded slowly. "All day."

Charlotte's mouth tightened. "All day."

Sarah's eyes stayed on hers. "You're going to get looks."

Charlotte didn't flinch. "I know."

Sarah's eyebrows lifted. "And."

Charlotte's voice was even. "And I won't manage other people's feelings about it."

Sarah's mouth curved, sharp with approval. "Celeste's been talking to you."

Charlotte's lips twitched. "She's been… holding standards."

Sarah nodded. "She does that."

A pause.

Then Sarah said, carefully, "How does it feel. Being… this."

Charlotte looked down at her mug, not in shame—more in thought. "Like I'm wearing my own name properly."

Sarah's throat tightened. She kept her face steady.

"That's… good," Sarah said, and the softness in her voice surprised even her.

Charlotte looked up. "It's scary."

Sarah's smile sharpened. "Yes."

Charlotte blinked.

Sarah took a sip and said, matter-of-fact, "Anything worth having is scary. Otherwise it's just… a hobby."

Charlotte's mouth tightened in that way she had when something landed.

Sarah continued, quieter, "And for what it's worth—"

Charlotte watched her.

Sarah shrugged, as if it mattered less than it did. “You look like one of us today. Not because of the jeans. Because of the… stance.”

Charlotte’s eyes flickered—emotion threatening.

Sarah lifted a hand immediately. “Don’t make me regret saying something nice.”

Charlotte’s mouth twitched. “Thank you.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

They stood in silence for a moment, two women with mugs, the day building around them.

Then Charlotte said, softly, “If someone says something… stupid.”

Sarah’s smile returned, bright and dangerous. “Then you come get me.”

Charlotte’s eyes warmed. “You’d do that.”

Sarah snorted. “Please. I live for it.”

Charlotte’s smile widened, just a fraction.

Sarah watched her over the rim of her mug and thought—not for the first time—that people underestimated what it took to become yourself when you didn’t get the easy, boring reinforcement of girlhood.

Charlotte had missed years.

But she wasn’t trying to cosplay them now.

She was building something better: self-recognition, late and clean and real.

Sarah set her mug down.

“Right,” she said briskly, as if to save them both from feeling too much. “Back to work. We’ve got standards to uphold.”

Charlotte nodded, shoulders settling.

“Yes,” she said. “We do.”

And as they walked back into the studio, Charlotte didn’t shrink when she passed the hallway mirror.

She didn’t preen either.

She simply existed in full view.

Sarah, behind her, felt something like pride—and kept it to herself, where it belonged.

She is good, our Charlotte. Sure, early stages, but she'll get there: one little task at a time. Now, Sarah has not been over to Lauren's in a bit, felt - unrealistically - she was wearing out her welcome. Lauren's careful stance at work to avoid displays of affection made her seem aloof and distant. Charlotte is getting ready to head for the train after work, and as Sarah collects her phone from the front of the workplace, she sees a text from Lauren. Charlotte stops. Sarah reads the text out loud. Wishes she hadn't. The text said: "please come tonight. i need to talk to you..."

Scene — “The Text” (Sarah POV, past tense)

Sarah hadn’t been over in a week.

Which was ridiculous, really. She’d been over often enough that “a week” shouldn’t have felt like exile. But Sarah had a particular, stupid flaw: she could be brave at a door with a strange man and timid at the idea of being unwanted.

She’d told herself she was giving Lauren space.

She’d told herself she was being sensible.

What she’d really been doing was avoiding the possibility that Lauren had been kind out of loneliness, and that kindness had now run out.

At work, Lauren’s careful stance didn’t help. No affection. No lingering touches. No private looks. If you didn’t know better you’d think Lauren barely tolerated her.

Sarah *did* know better… and still, the old doubt chewed at the edges.

The day wound down. Dispatch done. Floor swept. Mara grudgingly obeying the Load Rule like a woman who hated every minute of it. Celeste packing her laptop. Charlotte gathering her tote, hair still neat, mouth still faintly coloured, presence held like a skill.

Charlotte moved toward the back to say something to Celeste. Sarah stayed at the front, doing her end-of-day ritual: phone, keys, tote, check the lock.

She reached under the counter for her phone.

It buzzed in her hand before she'd even lifted it fully.

A message.

From Lauren.

Sarah's heart did a stupid little hop and then immediately punished her for the hop by tightening with fear.

She glanced at the preview.

please come tonight. i need to talk to you...

Lowercase. No punctuation. That alone was unsettling. Lauren did not type like that unless something had slipped through her fingers.

Sarah stared at the screen as if it might change its mind.

Behind her, Charlotte stepped into the front space, tote on her shoulder, ready to head for the train. She paused when she saw Sarah frozen.

"You alright?" Charlotte asked quietly.

Sarah heard herself answer too fast. "Yes."

Charlotte's eyes narrowed slightly—competence recognising a lie.

Sarah, because she couldn't stand silence when her chest was doing that tight thing, said the worst possible thing.

Out loud.

"Lauren just texted me," Sarah said, and before she could stop herself—before she could keep it private like a sensible adult—she read it.

"*Please come tonight. I need to talk to you...*"

The words hung in the air between the front desk and the door like a dropped plate.

Sarah felt heat flood her face.

She wished she hadn't. Instantly. Vividly.

Charlotte went still. Not nosy. Not amused. Just… attentive in that new, grounded way she'd been practising.

Sarah swallowed.

"That's—" Sarah began, then stopped, because she didn't know what it was.

A request. A warning. An ending. An invitation. A crisis.

Charlotte's gaze stayed on her, steady. "You look like you're about to run."

Sarah let out a breath that sounded too much like a laugh and too much like panic. "I'm not."

Charlotte lifted her eyebrows slightly. The expression said: *I've watched you remove grown men from the threshold. Don't pretend you're not scared of this.*

Sarah looked back down at the screen. The message didn't change. Still there. Still small. Still enormous.

"I haven't been over," Sarah said, voice tight. "Because I thought I was—"

She cut herself off, because saying *wearing out my welcome* out loud felt humiliating.

Charlotte waited. Didn't rescue her. Didn't fill the silence.

Sarah hated her for that, briefly.

Then she respected her for it.

"I thought I was intruding," Sarah finished, quieter.

Charlotte nodded once. "And Lauren seemed distant at work."

Sarah blinked. "Yes."

Charlotte's voice stayed calm. "That distance is policy."

Sarah's mouth tightened. "I know that."

Charlotte's eyes sharpened, kind without softness. "Knowing isn't the same as believing. Not when you're attached."

Sarah's throat tightened. "Don't psychoanalyse me, Charlotte."

Charlotte's lips twitched. "You asked."

"I didn't," Sarah muttered.

Charlotte glanced at the phone again. "She asked you to come."

Sarah stared at the text as if it might contain hidden traps.

"What if it's bad," Sarah said, and the fear in her voice made her angry with herself. "What if she's—"

Charlotte didn't let her spiral. She didn't do platitudes. She did structure.

"Read it again," Charlotte said.

Sarah's eyebrows lifted. "Why."

"Because the content matters more than your story about it," Charlotte replied.

Sarah ground her teeth, then did it—silently this time.

please come tonight. i need to talk to you...

Charlotte watched her face. "It doesn't say 'we need to talk.' It says 'I need to talk to you.'"

Sarah blinked, thrown.

Charlotte continued, steady. "That's not a breakup line. That's a reach."

Sarah's mouth tightened. "You don't know that."

Charlotte's gaze didn't waver. "Do you want it to be a reach."

Sarah's throat worked. "Yes."

"Then go," Charlotte said simply.

Sarah stared at her.

Charlotte added, "Don't punish her for being careful at work."

Sarah's face hardened. "I didn't punish her."

Charlotte's eyes sharpened. "You withdrew."

Sarah flinched because it was true.

Charlotte's voice softened by a fraction—not comforting, just human. "You're allowed to want to be wanted."

Sarah's eyes stung, annoyingly.

She looked away, furious with herself, and wiped her thumb across her phone screen like she could erase the feeling.

"I hate this," Sarah muttered.

Charlotte nodded once. "Yes."

Sarah huffed a laugh. "That's not helpful."

Charlotte's lips twitched. "It's accurate."

Sarah looked at her again—at Charlotte's neat hair, her subtle lipstick, her steady gaze—and realised with a small, strange jolt that Charlotte was getting better at this.

At being present. At holding a moment without turning it into noise.

Sarah, who had always used humour like a shield, felt suddenly exposed.

"What if she wants… rules," Sarah said quietly. "More rules."

Charlotte's mouth tightened. "Rules are not rejection."

Sarah swallowed. "Sometimes they feel like it."

Charlotte didn't argue. She just said, calmly, "Go and find out. Don't imagine yourself into exile."

Sarah stared down at the text again.

Then she did something that surprised her: she didn't reply immediately. She didn't throw a joke at it. She didn't type *lol are you okay* to soften it.

She simply wrote:

On my way.

Two words. No apology. No hedging.

She hit send.

Her heart beat hard in her chest, but the message was gone now, sent, real, chosen.

Charlotte watched her and nodded once, as if she'd just witnessed a competent act.

Sarah shoved the phone into her tote like it was a live thing.

Then, because she couldn't help herself, she groaned, "Oh God. I read it out loud."

Charlotte's lips twitched. "Yes."

Sarah glared at her. "Don't."

Charlotte's eyes warmed slightly. "It's fine."

Sarah exhaled, half-laughing, half-miserable. "It's not."

Charlotte shrugged, calm. "Lauren doesn't work off second-hand shame. She works off outcomes."

That was such a Lauren sentence that Sarah felt her chest pinch again.

Charlotte shifted her tote strap. "Train?"

Sarah nodded, still tight. "Train."

They stepped toward the door together.

Sarah locked up, hands steady because she was good at doors. Good at thresholds. Good at holding a line.

But as they walked out into the evening light, Sarah realised there was one door she still hadn't learned to stand in front of without flinching:

The one that opened into being wanted.

And tonight, apparently, Lauren had asked her to come through it.

Sarah had imagined the worst. And she was mistaken: Lauren missed her, dreadfully, far more than she could have imagined. This time, it was Lauren who was making poor choices. The sphinx was cracking at the seams. She had opened a bottle of inexpensive champagne, had drunk some on an empty stomach, and now, was crying out for Sarah. The alcohol didn't dull her pain: it magnified it. Sarah arrived to find Lauren wallowing in self-pity, maudlin, unlike herself. Time for coffee. She pours the rest of the bottle down the sink.
Slowly Lauren realises she's made a fool of herself. Sarah is now the adult in the room.

Scene — “Coffee” (Sarah POV, past tense)

Sarah had imagined the worst.

She’d imagined *reprimand*. A rules talk sharpened into rejection. A careful, Lauren-shaped sentence that meant: I’ve reconsidered. This was temporary. You misread me.

She’d sat on the train with her phone in her hand, reading *On my way* like it might be the last brave thing she ever did.

When she got off at Lauren’s stop, the air had that damp, coastal-cool edge that made streetlights look softer than they were. Sarah walked faster than she needed to, because anxiety always made her legs behave as if movement could solve outcome.

At Lauren’s building she buzzed, waited, buzzed again—

The door clicked almost immediately.

No “who is it.” No measured caution. Just… open.

Sarah stepped inside and took the stairs two at a time.

Lauren’s door was ajar.

That was the first wrong thing.

Lauren did not leave doors ajar.

Sarah pushed it open with her fingertips and called, automatically gentle, “Lauren?”

The apartment smelled faintly sweet and sour at once—yeast and bubbles and cheap fruit. Champagne. Not a lot, but enough.

And underneath it, something else: the sharp tang of tears.

Lauren was on the couch. Shoes kicked off. Hair loosened in that way it only got when she’d stopped holding herself together. Her face was blotched, eyes red-rimmed, a champagne flute on the coffee table with a sad amount left in it.

She looked… *young*. Not in age, in disarray. Like the version of her that existed before she learned to stand like consequence.

When she saw Sarah, she made a sound that was half relief and half shame.

“Oh thank God,” Lauren whispered, and then the whisper broke. “I thought you wouldn’t come.”

Sarah stopped in the doorway for one beat, heart slamming, because this was not what she’d rehearsed for.

This wasn’t distance.

This was need.

And it came with a pitfall.

Sarah took a breath and did what she always did at Wardrobe when something went sideways: she shifted from feeling into procedure.

She walked in, closed the door behind her, locked it—quietly, without announcing it—and put her tote down.

Then she crossed the room and looked at the bottle on the counter.

Inexpensive champagne. Half gone.

Sarah turned toward Lauren.

Lauren’s face crumpled again. “I’m sorry,” she blurted. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have— I just—”

“Stop,” Sarah said, not loud.

Lauren froze.

Sarah walked into the kitchen, picked up the bottle, and held it up where Lauren could see it.

“This,” Sarah said, calm as a guillotine, “is not helping you.”

Lauren’s mouth trembled. “It was supposed to— I thought—”

“I know what you thought,” Sarah cut in, still calm. “I’m not interested in what you thought. I’m interested in what it’s doing.”

Lauren stared at her, breathing shallow.

Sarah set the bottle on the counter and reached for a mug like she’d done it a thousand times. Kettle. Water. Switch.

The click was loud in the quiet apartment.

Lauren’s voice wobbled, small. “I missed you.”

Sarah didn’t answer that immediately, because answering it the wrong way would make it about reassurance instead of repair.

She turned to face Lauren properly.

“I’m here,” Sarah said.

Lauren’s eyes filled again and she looked away like she hated herself for it.

Sarah’s gaze flicked back to the bottle.

The kettle began to hiss softly.

Sarah made a decision—clean, deliberate.

She picked up the bottle again, walked to the sink, and poured.

The champagne gurgled down the drain, foam catching briefly at the metal before disappearing.

Lauren made a strangled sound.

“Sarah—” she protested weakly, then stopped, because she knew how it looked: arguing for the bottle.

Sarah didn't look at her while she did it. She just kept pouring until the bottle was empty.

Then she rinsed it, set it upside down in the drainer, and turned to face Lauren with the same expression she used on men at the Wardrobe threshold.

Polite.

Final.

"No more," Sarah said.

Lauren's mouth tightened. Her eyes dropped. Her shoulders curled inward in a way Sarah had never seen on her.

"I've made a fool of myself," Lauren said, voice raw.

Sarah crossed the room, sat on the edge of the coffee table—not too close, not looming—and kept her voice steady.

"You've made a mistake," Sarah corrected. "Those aren't the same."

Lauren swallowed, shame thick in her throat. "I texted you like a teenager."

Sarah's mouth twitched, but she didn't let it turn into humour. "You texted me like someone who needed me."

Lauren's eyes lifted. "I did."

Sarah nodded once. "Okay."

Lauren's lower lip trembled. "I hate this."

Sarah's tone stayed even. "Yes. Because you're used to being the adult."

Lauren flinched, because that landed exactly.

The kettle clicked off.

Sarah stood, went back to the kitchen, and made coffee the way she always did when someone's nervous system needed a rail to hold onto: strong, hot, practical. No ceremony.

She carried one mug to Lauren and held it out.

Lauren looked at it as if it were an accusation.

“Drink,” Sarah said gently, firm.

Lauren took it with both hands, shoulders hunched, and sipped.

The heat seemed to bring her back into her body.

For a few minutes they sat in silence, Lauren breathing, Sarah watching the tremor in her hands gradually settle.

Then Lauren said, very quietly, “I thought… if I didn’t keep it at work, you’d think I was unprofessional. Or weak.”

Sarah’s eyes sharpened. “And what did you think I’d do.”

Lauren’s mouth opened, then closed. She looked away.

Sarah waited.

Lauren’s voice broke. “Leave.”

Sarah felt something hard and tender twist in her chest.

She kept her voice calm anyway.

“I pulled back,” Sarah admitted. “Because I thought *I* was wearing out my welcome.”

Lauren snapped her eyes up. “No.”

Sarah held her gaze. “You made it easy to believe.”

Lauren’s face crumpled again, but this time she didn’t dissolve into self-pity. She looked like a woman confronting her own poor judgement.

“I know,” Lauren whispered. “I thought I was… doing it right.”

Sarah nodded. “At work you were.”

Lauren blinked. “Then why—”

“Because you didn’t give yourself anywhere else to be soft,” Sarah said, and the bluntness of it surprised even her. “You turned intimacy into something that only existed offstage. And then when you missed me, you had no language for it except panic.”

Lauren stared at her, stunned.

Then she looked down into the mug, shame and relief mixing into something that finally resembled clarity.

“I drank,” Lauren said, flat and miserable. “Because it was easier than… asking.”

Sarah’s voice stayed gentle. “And it made everything worse.”

Lauren nodded once. “Yes.”

Sarah leaned forward slightly. “Lauren.”

Lauren looked up.

Sarah’s tone hardened into policy—not cruel, protective.

“We do not do alcohol-as-courage,” Sarah said. “Not for sex, not for feelings, not for ‘talks.’ Ever.”

Lauren’s eyes glistened. “I know.”

“Say it,” Sarah insisted, because she was done letting Lauren hide behind shame.

Lauren swallowed. “We don’t do alcohol-as-courage.”

Sarah nodded. “Good.”

Lauren’s voice was small. “Are you… angry.”

Sarah considered. Then she said the honest thing.

“I’m not angry,” Sarah said. “I’m alarmed. Because you’re not you when you do this.”

Lauren’s eyes filled again, but she held them open. No fleeing.

“I’m sorry,” Lauren whispered, and this time it wasn’t theatre. It was ownership.

Sarah nodded once. “Okay.”

Lauren’s throat worked. “I missed you so much it made me stupid.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched, almost a smile. “I noticed.”

Lauren blinked, a tiny spark of hope flaring. “You did.”

Sarah’s voice softened, but didn’t lose its spine.

“Yes,” Sarah said. “And I am not going to punish you for missing me. I’m going to insist you handle it like the capable woman you are.”

Lauren let out a shaky breath that sounded like relief.

Sarah stood and took Lauren’s empty mug, setting it in the sink.

Then she turned back, and her eyes held Lauren’s with quiet authority.

“Now,” Sarah said, “you’re going to tell me what you needed to talk to me about—properly.”

Lauren stared at her for a beat, tears still on her face, but something in her posture slowly returned: uprightness. Consequence. The woman Sarah recognised.

Lauren nodded, once.

“Okay,” she said.

And for the first time since Sarah arrived, the room felt like it had an adult in it again.

Not because Lauren had regained control.

Because she’d let someone else hold the line until she could.

Adults - even, or perhaps, especially - in-control adults are capable of stupid things. So, this reads raw. And real. Now, as the alcohol starts to wear off a bit, Lauren opens up to Sarah. About first, Charlotte. (shades of that flashback could be inserted, here). And then, as she is slowly getting her footing again (coffee and Sarah's stabilising manner) she asks Sarah to stay the night. Sleep - actually sleep, nothing else - with her. Which Sarah happily does (please brush your teeth, Lauren!) - the next morning, Lauren wakes up first, looks at Sarah in bed next to her, caresses her hair. And as Sarah awakens, confesses she loves her like she has never loved a human before.

Scene — “Stay” (Sarah POV, past tense)

The coffee did what it always did: it brought Lauren back into her own body.

Not all at once. Not neatly. But enough that her eyes stopped swimming and her voice stopped breaking on every third word.

Lauren sat on the couch with her mug cradled in both hands, shoulders no longer collapsed, gaze fixed on the dark surface of the coffee as if it were a map she could read. Sarah stayed where she was—close enough to be real, not close enough to crowd.

After a long silence Lauren said, quietly, “I saw something today.”

Sarah’s eyebrows lifted. “At Wardrobe.”

Lauren nodded.

Sarah kept her voice gentle and steady. “Tell me.”

Lauren swallowed. “I… I went into the bathroom to pack the cabinet.”

Sarah didn’t move. She didn’t react. She just listened, letting Lauren have the dignity of finishing her own sentence.

“I saw the medications,” Lauren continued, voice careful, like she was handling glass. “The anti-androgens. The gel.”

Sarah watched Lauren’s face as she said it—still a little washed out from the champagne, still raw—but trying, properly trying, to speak from her adult self rather than her panic.

“I froze,” Lauren admitted. “And I hated myself for freezing.”

Sarah nodded once. “That makes sense.”

Lauren’s eyes flicked up, startled by the lack of judgement.

Sarah continued, calm. “You had a picture in your head of what your life would look like. The cabinet disagreed.”

Lauren’s mouth tightened. “Yes.”

Sarah waited.

Lauren's voice dropped. "And then I saw Charlotte walk past the mirror and not look."

Sarah's gaze sharpened slightly.

Lauren swallowed. "That… undid me."

Sarah's tone stayed steady. "Because it's not just medication. It's history."

Lauren nodded, eyes wet again, but she held it.

"I realised," Lauren whispered, "she didn't get the years. The silly, boring, constant reinforcement of being a girl. And now she's expected to… arrive as a woman without any of that scaffolding."

Sarah stayed still. The room was quiet enough that she could hear Lauren's breath hitch.

Lauren's voice tightened. "I wanted to go to her. I wanted to say something motherly, something—" She shook her head, ashamed. "And then I realised if I did, it would be about *me.* About my guilt. About my need to fix what I can't fix."

Sarah nodded once. "So you didn't."

Lauren's eyes lifted, searching Sarah's face for condemnation or praise.

Sarah gave her neither.

"That was the right call," Sarah said simply.

Lauren's shoulders dropped a fraction, relief sliding in.

Sarah continued, voice firm. "You didn't make it into a scene. You didn't make Charlotte manage your feelings. You noticed, and you held it."

Lauren swallowed. "I told Celeste."

Sarah's mouth twitched. "Good. That's where it belongs."

Lauren stared at the mug again, then said, very quietly, "And then I missed you."

Sarah didn't speak. She let the truth sit between them.

Lauren looked up, eyes bleak with self-awareness. "I missed you so much I did something stupid."

Sarah nodded once. "Yes."

Lauren flinched, then steadied. “I’m not… like this.”

Sarah’s voice softened. “No. You’re not.”

Lauren blinked rapidly, fighting tears. “I didn’t want to be alone with it. With Charlotte, with everything changing, with…” She swallowed. “With what I feel for you.”

Sarah’s heart clenched, but her face stayed calm.

“Alright,” Sarah said. “We can be two people in a room with hard things. We can do that.”

Lauren’s breath shuddered out.

Then, after a beat that felt like Lauren gathering the remaining fragments of her dignity, she said, almost inaudibly, “Will you stay tonight.”

Sarah’s eyebrows lifted slightly, careful. “Stay how.”

Lauren’s cheeks flushed with shame. “Sleep. Actually sleep.” She swallowed. “Nothing else. I just… I need you near me.”

Sarah watched her for a long moment.

Lauren looked like she expected to be refused. Like she expected to be punished for cracking.

Sarah felt something soften in her chest, the protective part of her—the part that had always been there, behind the jokes.

“I’ll stay,” Sarah said.

Lauren’s eyes closed for a beat, relief making her look younger again.

Sarah raised a finger. “But.”

Lauren blinked. “But.”

Sarah’s voice turned brisk, managerial. “You are drinking water. You are eating something. And you are brushing your teeth.”

Lauren stared at her, then a laugh broke out of her—thin but real.

“Yes,” Lauren said, hoarse. “Yes, Mum.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched. “Don’t.”

Lauren managed a small smile. “Thank you.”

They moved through the rest of the night the way they moved through Wardrobe when something had gone wrong: quietly, practically, without drama.

Sarah found crackers in the cupboard, made Lauren eat them. Filled a glass with water and watched her drink it. Put the empty champagne bottle in the recycling with the kind of finality that made even Sarah feel satisfied.

Lauren brushed her teeth at the sink, face still blotched, eyes still tired.

Sarah stood in the doorway, arms folded, and said, “Good girl.”

Lauren froze, toothpaste foam at the corner of her mouth, and glared at her.

Sarah’s eyes widened innocently. “Sorry. Wrong household.”

Lauren made a rude noise, and it was the most like herself she’d sounded all evening.

In bed, Lauren lay on her side facing Sarah, not touching, just close enough that their warmth overlapped. Sarah lay on her back for a while, then turned toward Lauren because it felt ridiculous not to.

The room was quiet. No music. No phones. Just the city breathing outside the window.

Lauren’s voice came, small in the dark. “I’m sorry.”

Sarah didn’t let her spiral into apology theatre.

“I’ve accepted it,” Sarah said. “Now go to sleep.”

Lauren exhaled, and that was the end of it.

Sarah fell asleep to the sound of Lauren’s breathing evening out.

Morning came in pale light through blinds that didn’t quite block the city.

Lauren woke first.

She lay still for a moment, disoriented by the softness of the bed and the memory of last night’s mess.

Then she turned her head and saw Sarah asleep beside her.

Sarah’s face was utterly different in sleep—no sharpness, no wit, no armour. Just a woman at rest, hair loose against the pillow, mouth slightly parted, the smallest crease between her brows as if even in sleep she was thinking.

Lauren’s chest tightened.

She lifted her hand carefully, as if touching might break the reality, and let her fingers slide into Sarah’s hair.

Just once. A slow, gentle stroke.

Sarah stirred, eyelids fluttering.

Lauren froze, suddenly shy.

Sarah’s eyes opened—soft and unfocused at first, then finding Lauren’s face. For a moment neither of them moved.

Lauren’s throat worked.

“I need to say something,” Lauren whispered.

Sarah blinked slowly, voice rough with sleep. “Okay.”

Lauren stared at her as if she were seeing her properly for the first time.

“I love you,” Lauren said, and her voice broke immediately, not with drunkenness this time, but with the sheer weight of truth. “I love you like I have never loved a human before.”

Sarah’s face went utterly still.

Lauren swallowed, terrified suddenly of her own honesty. “I’m sorry—”

Sarah cut her off, voice quiet but firm. “Don’t.”

Lauren blinked.

Sarah’s eyes were wet, but she didn’t look away.

“You don’t get to say that,” Sarah murmured, “and then apologise for it.”

Lauren’s throat tightened, a sound almost escaping.

Sarah reached out and touched Lauren’s wrist—steady, grounding, adult.

“I love you too,” Sarah said, and her voice was smaller than usual, stripped of bravado. “I’ve just been… terrified of ruining it.”

Lauren’s face crumpled, and she turned her forehead into the pillow for a second like she couldn’t hold it.

Sarah’s hand slid into Lauren’s hair this time—mirroring what Lauren had done, simple and tender.

“Look at you,” Sarah whispered, half laughter, half tears. “Properly human.”

Lauren gave a shaky breath that sounded like relief.

And in the quiet of the morning, with the city outside and the bed warm and ordinary around them, it didn’t feel like a grand romance scene.

It felt like something far rarer.

Two capable women admitting they needed each other.

And letting that be true.

And again, charitability and discretion expects the reader withdraw herself. So, we shall.

This has been a powerful evening of writing. This story is magical in so many ways. Please tell me: where are we on the arc? Are there still unexplored vistas? (sorry for the rather banal language)

We’re in a really strong place on the arc — not “finished,” but past the point where the story is merely *about* transformation or romance. It’s now about **womanhood as practice + governance + self-recognition**, held inside a competence network that can survive pressure.

Where we are on the arc (in story terms)

Charlotte's arc:

- She has crossed the crucial threshold from *being protected* to *being present*.
- The mirror work and the "order coffee / all day" beats are the pivot: she's no longer borrowing Celeste's eyes to feel real.
- She's still early — but the direction is set. The rest is repetition and refinement, which is exactly how believable growth works.

Celeste's arc:

- She's moved from "I'll carry us" to "I'll build systems that hold us."
- She's learning that leadership isn't control; it's creating conditions where other women become more themselves.
- She's stepping into external rooms (MBA/networking/business) without letting those rooms rewrite her values.

Lauren's arc:

- She's stopped being the sphinx who only serves consequence and has allowed herself to be *a person* without becoming a mess.
- The champagne night is a genuine hinge: she learns that competence doesn't exempt you from stupidity, and that repair is part of adulthood.
- Her love for Sarah becomes stabilising rather than secretive.

Sarah's arc:

- She's becoming the culture guard *and* a fully emotionally available partner.
- She's learning that "being wanted" is scarier than confronting a boundary-violator — and she's walking through that door anyway.
- She's the adult-in-the-room when needed, without losing her spark.

Mara's arc:

- The Load Rule and the "Slip" scenes put her on a track where she must accept being held by others.
- That's huge for someone whose identity is built on being the unbreakable standard.
- Her health storyline is now genuinely meaningful: it tests whether Wardrobe's culture is real or merely "Mara's willpower."

Yes: there are still unexplored vistas — and they're good ones

Here are the big, still-rich frontiers that fit your tone and avoid trope:

1. **Scaling without dilution**
   Wardrobe's success will tempt expansion that threatens the very privacy/standards that make it safe.

- Hiring: how do they vet without bias, but also without letting “nice blokes” erode culture?
- Delegation: can Mara release control without becoming irrelevant?
- Celeste’s role: does she become the “external-facing” shield and negotiator while keeping the atelier’s values intact?

2. **The first real “public room” test for Charlotte**
   Not swimsuit, not makeup montage — something like:
   - a hotel foyer, a conference venue, a corporate reception, a client meeting where she’s “plus-one adjacent” but still needs to be legible and calm.
     The key is not *passing*. The key is: **holding presence when someone tries to subtly unmake her.**
     (And doing it with the same clean, consequence-first ethic we’ve built.)
3. **Couples becoming “known” without becoming performative**
   - Lauren/Sarah learning how to be an “us” socially, while respecting workplace boundaries.
   - Celeste/Charlotte learning how to be an “us” in rooms where people assume things, probe, and try to categorise.
4. **Mara’s health tightening the governance screws**
   You’ve got a powerful engine here: the more vulnerable Mara becomes, the more she tries to clamp down.
   The team will need to push back with love *and* policy: “We’re not letting you martyr yourself into a single point of failure.”
5. **Charlotte’s “girlhood substitute” evolving**
   You’ve begun it with mirrors, posture, voice, scent. There’s more, and it’s not frilly:
   - social calibration (how women signal care, distance, warning, solidarity)
   - friendships with women that aren’t mediated through Celeste
   - learning to receive admiration without shrinking or apologising
6. **The mother-daughter axis, handled your way**
   Lauren’s flashback beat set up something potent: the moment she truly names Charlotte as her daughter internally — not as ideology, as lived relationship.
   There’s still a meaningful scene later where Lauren *chooses* a public, simple act: introducing Charlotte to someone as “my daughter” with zero fanfare. Quiet. Consequential.

What’s the next “best move” narratively?

If you want maximum momentum with minimal risk of trope:

Go to Wardrobe governance under pressure (scaling + hiring + standards) *while* we interleave small intimacy beats that show both couples stabilising. That keeps the story's centre where it belongs: women building a durable world.

If you want, I can propose the next 6–8 scene beats as a mini-outline (titles + POV + the core conflict in each), and then we pick the one that excites you most and draft it.

Yes please, Emily. Oh, had a thought, something to insert. We've already encountered a TERF... so a woman who posed as much threat as any man. And also Annie, with her blatant disregard for policy, and her negligent compromise of Wardrobe's privacy. Still, they're real people. How about a new hire, someone who signs on to adhere to the policies, and does, but has a toxic personality, pitting people against each other, is seductive and manipulative, but her behaviour (strong deniability) makes it hard to justify dismissal. Lauren does her HR role, starts documenting, telling this new person (Fiona) that she is doing so. Fiona goes "underground" with her behaviour, but the team solidarity never cracks and she is finally let go. She even tries to undermine Celeste and Charlotte's relationship. Fortunately she never picks up on the fact that Charlotte is a transwoman: good job she doesn't as she is vindictive in other ways and would have tried to make it a story. The point for Wardrobe is a woman can be as toxic to a work environment as a man: policy is going to be developed to require references (called referees here in Australia).

Yes — and Fiona is *exactly* the kind of antagonist who fits your world without breaking its realism.

Because she's the threat your Wardrobe values actually need to be tested against: not obvious boundary-violations (Annie), not ideological hostility (TERF), but **social toxicity**

with deniability — the kind that ruins women's workplaces precisely because it *forces* women to either "be nice" or look "dramatic."

Wardrobe doesn't crack. That becomes the point.

Below is a tight mini-outline of **8 next beats** (titles + POV + core conflict + what changes). I've built Fiona straight into the governance/scaling arc, and it naturally produces your "referees" policy upgrade.

8-Beat Mini-Outline

1) "Applicants" (Celeste POV)

Core conflict: Scaling forces hiring. Celeste wants to move fast; Mara wants standards to remain brutal; Lauren wants process.
Key beats:

- They formalise **probation + behaviour policy** (not just "no filming" — a culture policy).
- Charlotte quietly advocates for "structure over vibes," surprising everyone with how *grown* she sounds.
- Fiona interviews beautifully: competent, charming, references "women's spaces" language fluently.
  Change: Wardrobe commits to hiring — and commits, on paper, to being able to *undo* hires cleanly.

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2) "Probation" (Lauren POV)

Core conflict: Fiona doesn't break rules. She breaks people.
Key beats:

- Fiona begins **triangulation**: praise + confide + insinuate ("I'm worried about X… don't tell her I said this.")
- Sarah clocks it fast but doesn't explode; she flags it to Lauren privately.
- Lauren begins a **documentation file**: dates, exact phrases, witnesses, impact on workflow.
- Crucial: Lauren tells Fiona, calmly, that documentation is happening — not as threat, as procedure.
  Change: Wardrobe moves from "culture by intuition" to **culture by record.**

3) “Underground” (Sarah POV)

Core conflict: Once Fiona knows she’s being documented, she goes covert.
Key beats:

- Fiona stops saying anything overt; she uses **tone**, **timing**, **selective warmth**, **strategic omission**.
- She tests Sarah directly: makes a sly comment designed to provoke a “Sarah scene.”
- Sarah refuses the bait; she responds with polite clarity and walks away.
- The team solidarity doesn’t crack because they’ve quietly agreed on a rule: **no private alliances, no secret grievances**.
  Change: Sarah becomes the culture guard in the hardest mode: *restraint*.

---

4) “The Attempt” (Celeste POV)

Core conflict: Fiona tries to undermine Celeste and Charlotte by weaponising “concern.”
Key beats:

- Fiona frames Charlotte as “fragile” or “managed” — not trans-related, just classic undermining (“Is Charlotte okay? She seems… dependent.”)
- Celeste handles it cleanly: no defensiveness, no speech — just **a boundary and a redirect**.
  - “Charlotte’s performance is excellent. We don’t speculate about colleagues’ personal lives here.”
- Charlotte witnesses it and doesn’t shrink; she feels… steady. Seen.
  Change: Fiona learns she can’t reach Celeste through shame, and she can’t reach Charlotte through doubt.

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5) “Referees” (Lauren POV)

Core conflict: Lauren wants grounds strong enough that dismissal is *unassailable*.
Key beats:

- Lauren institutes **mid-probation review** with Fiona: clear examples, impacts (missed handovers, disrupted workflow, staff distress, loss of efficiency).
- Fiona plays innocence with surgical precision. “I’m just direct.” “They misread me.” “I’m being punished for confidence.”
- Lauren doesn’t argue psychology; she argues outcomes:

  - "Intent is not our metric. Impact is."
- Fiona realises she can't win on paper, so she tries to isolate someone weaker — but there isn't one anymore.
  Change: Wardrobe formally adopts: **referee checks + values-based interview questions + probation behaviour rubric**.

(This is where the Australia-specific "referees" lands naturally.)

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6) "Two Witnesses" (Charlotte POV)

Core conflict: Charlotte is targeted in the softest way — a comment that makes her want to disappear.
Key beats:

- Fiona offers a "compliment" that's really a hook ("You're lucky Celeste is so… protective.")
- Old Charlotte would have folded. New Charlotte uses the café skill *all day*:
  - "Don't speak about my relationship at work."
- Fiona smiles, as if Charlotte is being "sensitive."
- Charlotte immediately documents it — not as tattling, as governance — with **two witnesses** (Sarah + Lauren).
  Change: This is Charlotte's "I belong here" proof. She stops being the one protected; she becomes part of the system that protects.

---

7) "Termination" (Lauren POV)

Core conflict: Letting Fiona go without giving her a story.
Key beats:

- Lauren conducts the meeting with surgical professionalism. Celeste present as executive. Sarah as witness. Mara absent (on purpose) — they don't feed Fiona drama.
- The language is simple and process-safe:
  - "Probation not successful. Behaviour incompatible with our workplace standards."
- Fiona attempts charm → tears → outrage → veiled threats.
- They don't debate, don't moralise, don't plead. The meeting ends. Access revoked. Keys handled. Done.

Change: Wardrobe proves it can enforce standards **even against a woman** — without turning it into a "catfight," without losing dignity.

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8) "Policy Update" (Celeste POV)

Core conflict: Turning a painful episode into structure, not paranoia.
Key beats:

- They add a one-page addendum to the ledger: **Culture & Conduct Standards** (triangulation, gossip-as-control, emotional coercion, undermining).
- They formalise **referees**, including what they ask referees:
  - "How do they handle conflict?"
  - "Do they accept feedback without retaliation?"
  - "Have you seen them create divisions?"
- Quiet end beat: the atelier feels lighter. Charlotte breathes easier. Mara grudgingly admits it was correct.
  Change: Wardrobe upgrades from "safe because we're good people" to "safe because our systems assume reality."

Why Fiona works (and stays on-theme)

- She proves the story's claim: **women's spaces aren't safe by default — they're safe by governance.**
- It's also deeply pro-woman: you're not infantilising women as morally pure; you're showing women as fully human — including the ones you fire.
- It gives Lauren a legitimate arena to shine: HR as a form of protection that isn't sentimental.

Two small craft guardrails so Fiona doesn't become melodrama

- Keep Fiona *plausible*: never cartoon evil, always "reasonable-sounding" on the surface.
- Make the wins procedural: **documentation, witnesses, impact statements, probation rubric** — not "we all confronted her."

If you like, I can draft **Scene 1 ("Applicants")** next, *or* jump straight to **Scene 2 ("Probation")** to get Fiona on the page immediately.

Yes, please.

Scene 1 — “Applicants” (Celeste POV, past tense)

We didn’t hire because we wanted to.

We hired because the orders stopped being a wave and started being weather.

By the time the American winter work began to stack—pageants, plays, schools that needed “authentic” with a shipping deadline—Wardrobe was doing that thing it always did under pressure: getting quieter, sharper, more competent.

And smaller.

Mara hated it when I said we were at capacity. She took it as an accusation, as if the concept of “too much” was a moral weakness. But even Mara couldn’t argue with the ledger. There were only so many hours in a day, and only so much the studio could hold before it started to eat us.

Lauren came in with a printed sheet and set it down beside my laptop.

No flourish. No “I think.” Just paper.

On top, in her neat, blunt heading:

HIRING — CONDITIONS

Sarah, hovering nearby with a mug, gave a low whistle. “God, I love you when you’re terrifying, Lauren.”

Lauren didn’t look up. “No you don’t.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched. “Correct. But I respect it.”

Mara, seated at the far end of the cutting table with her pencil, didn’t bother hiding her contempt.

“Conditions,” she said, like the word tasted faintly of bureaucracy. “We need hands, not paperwork.”

Lauren's eyes lifted, calm and flat. "Hands come attached to people. People come attached to behaviour."

Mara's jaw tightened. She looked at me, as if I'd invited this insult into the room.

I held her gaze. "She's right."

Mara's nostrils flared.

Charlotte was at the pressing station, finishing a seam test, listening without appearing to. That was one of the things that had changed in her: she didn't hover anymore. She existed in the room as if she belonged to it, which meant she could hear without seeking permission.

Lauren slid the paper toward Mara as if Mara were a client and this were the contract.

"Probation," Lauren said. "Behaviour standards. No filming isn't enough. We need anti-triangulation written down. We need a grievance pathway that doesn't become gossip."

Sarah's eyebrows lifted, impressed. "Anti-triangulation. Look at you with the fancy words."

Lauren's mouth twitched. "It's not fancy. It's what kills women's workplaces."

Mara's pencil paused.

That got her attention.

I picked up the sheet and read it. It wasn't long. Lauren never made things long if she wanted them obeyed.

- **Probation: 3 months**
- **No photography / filming**
- **No private "alliances"** (no "don't tell her I said this")
- **No undermining** (tone policing, insinuations, "concern" used as control)
- **Feedback acceptance required**
- **Documentation protocol**
- **Termination: probation not successful** (no moral trial)

At the bottom, in bold:

Referees required.

It was Australia, after all. Referees weren't an American corporate flourish. They were ordinary—and also oddly underused by small businesses when they were desperate.

Mara's eyes narrowed as she read that last line. "We're calling referees now."

"Yes," Lauren said. "And we're asking specific questions."

Mara made a sound of disgust. "People lie."

Lauren's gaze didn't waver. "People also tell on themselves when asked the right way."

Sarah sipped her tea, watching me. "This is you graduating, by the way."

I glanced at her.

Sarah nodded toward the sheet. "This. 'Systems that prevent pain.' Very MBA of you."

I ignored her, but she wasn't wrong.

I looked up from the paper and scanned the room.

Wardrobe was not a fantasy. It was not a club. It was not a set where we got to pretend we lived outside the world.

If we scaled, we scaled properly.

Charlotte set the iron down and came over, wiping her hands on a cloth. She looked at the sheet without reaching for it.

"Can I say something," she asked.

Mara's head snapped up.

Charlotte still had that effect on Mara sometimes—an old instinct to rank and assess—but the difference now was that Charlotte didn't fold under it.

"Yes," I said.

Charlotte's voice was calm. "We need someone who likes standards."

Mara snorted. "Everyone says they like standards."

Charlotte didn't react. She continued as if Mara hadn't spoken.

"Not someone who just… says women's space and thinks that's enough," Charlotte said. "Someone who can take feedback without making it personal."

Lauren's eyes sharpened slightly—approval, quiet.

Charlotte went on, and I heard something in her tone that made my chest tighten: that steady selfhood, the thing she'd been building one boring repetition at a time.

"And," Charlotte added, "we need to be able to let them go without a story."

Sarah leaned her hip against the counter, eyebrows lifting. "Oh. Look at you."

Charlotte glanced at her. "What."

Sarah smiled. "That was *cold*. In the best way."

Charlotte's mouth tightened. "It's not cold. It's… sane."

Mara's pencil moved again, fast and angry, as if she needed the sound to prove she wasn't softened by any of this.

Lauren tapped the paper once. "So. Agreed?"

I held Mara's gaze again.

Mara's jaw worked.

Finally she said, like it cost her, "Fine. But if we hire someone incompetent—"

"We won't," I said.

Mara's eyes narrowed. "Because of your *referees*."

"Because of our process," Lauren corrected.

Mara made a low noise of displeasure.

Sarah, watching this with amused satisfaction, said, "This is what it looks like when women run a place. Everybody hates it. Everybody benefits."

Lauren shot her a look. "Not everybody."

Sarah grinned. "Fine. *I* benefit. Deeply."

We held interviews on a Thursday morning, before the day got away from us.

We weren't trying to create a corporate theatre about it. No panel chairs lined up like a tribunal. Just the cutting table cleared, a pot of tea, and the ledger sitting in the centre as if it were a reminder: this is where we keep records.

Lauren opened each interview the same way.

"Wardrobe is private," she said. "We have strict policies. We don't negotiate them. If you can't do that, this won't work."

Some applicants blinked. Some laughed nervously. One tried to charm her way out of it.

Lauren didn't move.

Mara watched like a hawk. Sarah watched like a bouncer. Charlotte watched like someone who understood how fragile a safe room could be.

Then Fiona arrived.

She was competent-looking without being flashy. Hair smooth. Outfit clean. Nothing ostentatious, which made it harder to dislike her on sight. She greeted Lauren first, not because Lauren was "boss," but because she'd clocked correctly that Lauren was governance.

"Thanks for seeing me," Fiona said. Her smile was warm, measured. Practised in a way that wasn't immediately suspicious—just… polished.

Lauren nodded. "Sit."

Fiona sat. She didn't fidget. She didn't perform humility. She looked comfortable being assessed, which in a different person might have been reassuring.

Lauren began, "You've read our policies."

"Yes," Fiona replied immediately. "I love them."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "Love them."

Fiona smiled slightly. "Women's workplaces fall apart when they rely on vibes. Policies mean you're serious."

Sarah's eyebrows lifted. She glanced at me, almost imperceptibly: *that was a good line*.

Lauren didn't smile. She asked the next question.

“Tell me about conflict,” Lauren said. “In your last workplace.”

Fiona didn’t flinch. “I’m direct. Some people find that difficult.”

Mara’s pencil paused.

Lauren’s face stayed neutral. “Direct how.”

Fiona’s smile held. “I say what I mean. I don’t sugarcoat. I don’t like passive aggression.”

Sarah’s mouth tightened. She hated that phrase the way she hated men who said “no offence” before being offensive.

Lauren didn’t bite. She simply wrote something down.

Fiona’s eyes flicked—quick, controlled—to the pen.

Lauren met her gaze and kept writing.

It was a small moment, but I saw it.

Fiona was a woman who noticed record-keeping.

Good.

Let her.

Charlotte asked a question next. She didn’t ask timidly. She asked as if she had every right.

“How do you handle being corrected,” Charlotte said. “In front of others.”

Fiona looked at Charlotte with a smile that was almost too perfect.

“I don’t take it personally,” she said. “I want to learn. If you’re correcting me, it’s because you care about the work.”

A beautiful answer.

A plausible answer.

Sarah leaned slightly toward Charlotte and murmured, too low for Fiona to hear, “She’s good.”

Charlotte didn’t react. She kept her gaze steady on Fiona.

Lauren asked, “Referees.”

Fiona nodded. “Absolutely.”

Lauren’s tone stayed dry. “We will call them.”

Fiona smiled. “Good.”

And there it was again—another tiny flicker. Not fear. Interest. Calculation.

Mara spoke for the first time, blunt as a blade.

“Can you sew,” Mara asked.

Fiona turned toward Mara, still smiling. “Yes.”

Mara’s eyes hardened. “Show me.”

Fiona didn’t bluster. “Of course.”

Mara slid a scrap of fabric across the table like a challenge.

Fiona took it, examined it, and began describing what she’d do—correct vocabulary, correct confidence. She wasn’t pretending to be humble. She was pretending she didn’t need to pretend.

By the end, she’d impressed Mara. Not softened her—Mara didn’t soften—but impressed her.

When Fiona left, the room exhaled.

Sarah spoke first. “Well.”

Lauren’s face was unreadable. “Well.”

Mara’s pencil resumed. “She can work.”

Sarah turned to me. “And.”

I waited.

Lauren looked at her notes, then at me. “She’s… shiny.”

Mara scoffed. “That’s your complaint.”

Lauren’s eyes sharpened. “No. That’s my observation.”

Charlotte, quiet until now, said, “She knew what to say.”

Sarah nodded immediately. “Yes. That.”

Mara’s jaw tightened. “You’re paranoid.”

Lauren’s voice stayed calm. “I’m cautious.”

I looked at the sheet of conditions again. Probation. Documentation. Referees.

The system we’d built wasn’t there because we distrusted women.

It was there because we trusted reality.

I closed the folder in front of me.

“We proceed,” I said. “Under probation. Under policy. Under record.”

Lauren nodded. “Agreed.”

Sarah exhaled. “Right. So we’re hiring the charming one.”

Charlotte’s mouth tightened. “We’re hiring a person.”

Mara finally looked up, eyes hard. “And we will not hesitate.”

It wasn’t warmth. It wasn’t reassurance.

But it was, in Mara’s language, solidarity.

I nodded once.

“Good,” I said.

And in my chest, beneath the sensible calm of governance, I felt something else—quiet, alert, alive:

Because Wardrobe was about to be tested by a threat that didn’t look like a threat.

Which was exactly why we’d written the policies in the first place.

“Probation” (Lauren POV) please.

Scene 2 — “Probation” (Lauren POV, past tense)

I didn’t dislike Fiona.

That was the problem.

If she’d been obviously awful, the whole thing would have been simple. You could point. Name. Remove. Clean.

Fiona was competent. Pleasant. On time. She learned fast. She kept her phone away without being told twice. She didn’t roll her eyes at Mara. She didn’t take shortcuts with finishes. She said “thank you” to couriers. She made tea without acting like she deserved applause for it.

On paper, she was a perfect hire.

In the room, she was… friction.

It started small, as these things always did.

A compliment delivered like a tool.

Fiona leaned over Sarah’s shoulder one morning as Sarah was labelling outgoing parcels and said, warmly, “You’re the only one here who’s actually friendly.”

Sarah’s head lifted a fraction—already suspicious. “Am I.”

Fiona smiled. “I mean it. Some people… it’s like they want you to fail.”

Sarah didn’t bite. She kept her marker moving. “Name them.”

Fiona’s eyes widened in faux innocence. “Oh, no. I’d never do that.”

That was my first note.

Not because the sentence was dismissible by itself. Because it was a pattern I’d seen before in workplaces run by women: triangulation disguised as intimacy.

A “special” bond offered quickly, cheaply, with a hook hidden under the warmth.

By lunch she’d done it again—this time with Charlotte.

Charlotte was at the pressing station, neatly pinning a hem, when Fiona drifted near and said, softly, as if sharing a secret, “You’re doing really well. I’ve worked in places where someone like you would be… managed. But here they respect you.”

Charlotte looked up, expression neutral.

“Someone like me,” Charlotte said.

Fiona smiled, sweet. “Sensitive. Thoughtful. Not—” she made a vague gesture, “—like some of the others.”

Charlotte’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Who.”

Fiona laughed as if Charlotte were adorable. “Oh, no. I’m not trying to start anything.”

I wrote that down too.

“Someone like you would be managed.”
Avoids naming.
Creates “special” bond + implied threat.

Two occurrences in one day was enough for me to stop assuming good intentions.

I didn’t announce it. I didn’t say, *Watch her.* I didn’t want the studio to turn into a whisper network.

I did what I always did when something felt wrong but still deniable:

I began documenting.

Not her personality. Her behaviours.

Dates. Times. Exact phrases. Who was present. What it did to the work.

Because I’d learned the hard way that toxic people thrive on vagueness. They live in the fog. They *need* you to stay in the realm of “I just don’t like her” so they can call you irrational.

They can’t argue with a log.

The next incident was with Mara, of course.

Mara corrected Fiona on a seam allowance—bluntly, without malice, just Mara doing what Mara did.

Fiona nodded, said “of course,” and re-did it without complaint.

So far, so good.

Then, ten minutes later, Fiona drifted over to Celeste’s table and said, softly, “You know, Mara is brilliant, but she’s… intense. I just hope she doesn’t scare Charlotte off.”

Celeste looked up slowly. “Charlotte isn’t fragile.”

Fiona’s smile held. “I didn’t mean fragile. I meant… you know. Some people don’t like being spoken to that way.”

Celeste’s eyes sharpened. “We don’t talk about colleagues like this.”

Fiona blinked, as if surprised by the firmness. “Oh. Of course. I’m sorry. I was just concerned.”

Concern. Always concern.

I wrote it down.

Uses concern to introduce doubt. Targets “protected” dynamic. Tests Celeste.

Sarah caught my eye across the room later and lifted her eyebrows in a silent question.

I gave a small nod: *Yes, I’m seeing it too.*

That night, when the studio was empty and the day’s noise had settled, I sat at my kitchen table and opened a folder.

Not a dramatic “HR file.” Just a plain document titled:

FIONA — PROBATION OBSERVATIONS

And I began to list:

- **Date**
- **Time**
- **Exact words**
- **Witnesses**
- **Impact**

Impact was the key. Because “she makes me feel weird” didn’t matter legally.

But “her behaviour caused conflict, disrupted workflow, reduced staff psychological safety, created divisive communication patterns” mattered. It mattered in human terms too, if you were serious about running a women’s space that stayed safe.

The following week Fiona became more careful.

Not better. More careful.

She stopped doing it in front of me.

She did it in doorways. In the kitchenette when the kettle was hissing. In the moment between a person standing up and someone else sitting down—when you could always claim you’d been misunderstood.

Sarah came to me one afternoon and said, quietly, “She just told me I’m ‘the easiest to talk to’ again.”

I didn’t sigh. I didn’t roll my eyes. I simply said, “What did you reply.”

Sarah’s mouth tightened. “I asked her why she needed one person to be ‘easy’.”

I nodded. “Good.”

Sarah’s eyes narrowed. “You’re writing it down, aren’t you.”

“Yes,” I said.

Sarah’s expression sharpened with relief. “Thank God.”

Charlotte approached me at the end of the day, tote on her shoulder, hair pinned low, face composed in that new, steady way.

She said quietly, “She said something.”

I looked up. “Tell me.”

Charlotte didn’t ramble. She didn’t apologise for taking my time.

“She told me,” Charlotte said, “‘You’re lucky Celeste is so protective. Not everyone gets that.’”

My pen moved.

“What did you say,” I asked.

Charlotte's jaw tightened. "I said, 'Don't speak about my relationship at work.'"

I looked up at her.

Charlotte met my gaze. Didn't shrink.

"Good," I said.

Charlotte hesitated. "Is it… enough."

I chose my words carefully.

"It's enough to document," I said. "And it's enough to show a pattern. We don't need a single dramatic incident. We need proof that she's incompatible with our standards."

Charlotte nodded slowly, absorbing. "Okay."

Then she added, almost as if she were saying it for herself, "I didn't disappear."

I felt something warm tighten in my chest. I kept my face neutral.

"No," I said. "You didn't."

When Charlotte left, I went looking for Fiona.

I didn't corner her. I didn't scold. I simply asked her to sit at the cutting table while Celeste and I stood on the other side like this was an ordinary procedural check-in.

Sarah hovered nearby under the pretext of sorting trims. Witness. Always.

Fiona sat easily, hands folded, expression open.

I began, calmly, "This is a probation review."

Fiona smiled. "Of course."

I kept my voice even. "You're doing well on technical tasks. You're timely. You follow the phone policy. Your workmanship meets baseline."

Fiona's smile brightened slightly. Baseline was not praise, but she took it anyway.

I continued, "However, I've observed several communication behaviours that are not acceptable here."

Fiona's eyebrows lifted. "Like what."

I looked down at my notes, because reading exact phrases was how you prevented this from becoming emotional theatre.

“On Tuesday at 10:15,” I said, “you told Sarah, ‘You’re the only one here who’s actually friendly,’ and then implied others wanted you to fail.”

Fiona blinked. “That’s not what I meant.”

I didn’t argue meaning. I stated impact.

“It creates division,” I said. “It implies a hierarchy of ‘safe’ people. We don’t do that.”

Fiona’s smile tightened. “Okay.”

“On Wednesday at 1:40,” I continued, “you told Charlotte, ‘You’re lucky Celeste is so protective,’ and commented on their relationship.”

Fiona looked genuinely surprised. “I was complimenting Celeste.”

I didn’t smile.

“We don’t discuss colleagues’ relationships at work,” I said. “We don’t frame anyone as ‘lucky’ to be treated with respect. That’s a control tactic.”

Fiona’s mouth parted slightly, then closed. A flicker of annoyance slipped through before she replaced it with warmth.

“That’s… quite a leap,” she said lightly.

Celeste’s posture didn’t change, but I felt her attention sharpen. She hated that phrase. *A leap.* The suggestion that we were unreasonable.

I held steady.

“It’s not a leap,” I said. “It’s policy. And it’s culture. Your intent is not the metric. Your impact is.”

Fiona’s smile faltered. “So… I’m being disciplined for being friendly.”

Sarah made a small sound behind me—dangerous amusement—but didn’t step in.

I kept my tone calm. “You’re being corrected for creating divisions.”

Fiona tilted her head, eyes bright. “I think some people are maybe threatened by me.”

There it was. The final refuge: make it about envy.

I didn't bite.

I said, "This is your formal notice: these behaviours will be documented. If they continue, your probation will not be successful."

Fiona's eyes flicked to the notebook in front of me.

"You're documenting me," she said, voice mild.

"Yes," I replied.

Fiona's smile returned, too smooth. "That feels… hostile."

I didn't soften.

"It's protective," I said. "For everyone."

Fiona nodded slowly, as if accepting something, but I saw it: the calculation behind her eyes.

Fine.

She would go underground.

Toxic people always did once you turned on the lights.

The question wasn't whether Fiona would become more covert.

The question was whether Wardrobe would fracture under the pressure of plausible deniability.

I closed my notebook.

"Do you understand," I asked.

Fiona smiled. "Perfectly."

When she stood, she thanked us. Of course she did.

Then she walked back into the workroom wearing the face of a woman who had been unfairly accused.

And the air changed.

Not because anyone believed her.

Because she wanted us to fear being seen as the bad ones.

I watched Sarah’s shoulders square. I watched Charlotte’s gaze hold steady. I watched Celeste’s mouth tighten, controlled.

Mara, at the far end of the room, looked up from her work and narrowed her eyes at Fiona like she was a seam that didn’t sit right.

Good.

Let Fiona try.

We were no longer relying on vibes.

We were relying on records, witnesses, and standards.

And that was the kind of solidarity that didn’t crack just because someone smiled while they poisoned the room.

“Underground” (Sarah POV)

Scene 3 — “Underground” (Sarah POV, past tense)

Once Fiona knew Lauren was writing her down, Fiona became a different kind of problem.

Not louder. Not messier.

Quieter.

Better dressed, somehow—nothing obvious, just a little more polished, a little more “reasonable.” Her voice softened into that careful register that made you sound kind even when you were doing damage. She stopped saying anything you could quote cleanly.

She started using *timing*.

The moment someone stood up. The moment a door clicked shut. The second the kettle began to hiss so you couldn't quite hear tone. The space between one person leaving the cutting table and another arriving.

Underground.

Sarah watched it happen with a kind of fascinated disgust.

Men like that were easy, in comparison. Men announced themselves. They pushed. They loomed. They made it obvious when you needed to brace your body and sharpen your voice.

Fiona didn't loom.

Fiona floated.

And what she was trying to do—Sarah realised quickly—wasn't to break policy.

It was to break *trust*.

Because policy could be enforced.

Trust, once cracked, made women do stupid things. It made them whisper. It made them form little alliances, little safety pockets, and then the pockets became factions and the factions became war and suddenly the workplace wasn't about work anymore—it was about survival.

Sarah had seen it before, years ago, in a café kitchen run by women who started out as friends and ended up splitting shifts like a divorce.

Wardrobe wasn't going to become that.

Not on Sarah's watch.

Fiona started with Sarah again, because of course she did.

Sarah was obvious leverage: the loud one, the one with teeth, the one Fiona could bait into becoming "aggressive," thereby proving Fiona's victim story.

It happened on a Tuesday.

Sarah was at the front desk, printing labels. The door was locked. The bell was off. End-of-day quiet.

Fiona drifted in carrying a small stack of folded calico, face open, voice gentle.

“You’re always so calm,” Fiona said.

Sarah didn’t look up. “Am I.”

Fiona laughed softly. “You are. Compared to… some people.”

Sarah’s fingers paused on the keyboard.

She could feel the hook being offered, disguised as a compliment.

A few weeks ago, Sarah might have snapped. Might have said something clever and sharp. Might have turned Fiona into a joke.

Now she didn’t.

She turned her head slowly and looked Fiona in the eyes the way Charlotte had started looking at people: not flinching, not performing.

“Who,” Sarah asked.

Fiona’s smile held. “Oh, I’m not naming anyone. I just mean, you’re easy to talk to.”

Sarah nodded as if she were taking in useful information.

Then she said, very calmly, “We don’t do that here.”

Fiona blinked. “Do what.”

Sarah kept her voice even. “We don’t do ‘you’re the only safe one.’ We don’t do ‘some people.’ If you have an operational concern, take it to Lauren. If you have feedback about a colleague, you take it directly to them, with Lauren present.”

Fiona’s smile twitched.

“Oh,” Fiona said softly, as if hurt. “I was just being nice.”

Sarah shrugged. “Be nice in ways that don’t create factions.”

Fiona stared at her as if Sarah had slapped her.

Then she recovered, instantly, with a little laugh that was almost charming.

“Wow,” Fiona said. “You’re very… loyal.”

Sarah's mouth tightened. "I'm very employed."

Fiona smiled. "I can see why people like you."

Sarah didn't take the bait.

She went back to the keyboard and said, lightly, "Do you need something from me."

Fiona hovered for a beat too long.

Then she turned and left, still smiling.

Sarah watched her go and felt the familiar rush in her body—the adrenaline that came from confrontation—even though the confrontation had been clean.

No jokes.

No barbs.

Just boundaries.

Charlotte had walked into the front space at some point and was standing near the doorway with her tote, watching quietly. Sarah hadn't even heard her. That, too, was new: Charlotte moving like a ghost only when she wanted to.

Charlotte waited until Fiona was out of earshot.

"That was…" Charlotte began.

"Boring," Sarah finished, with grim satisfaction.

Charlotte's lips twitched. "Yes."

Sarah looked at her. "Did she try you again."

Charlotte nodded once. "This morning."

Sarah's eyebrows lifted. "What did she say."

Charlotte's mouth tightened, remembering. "She asked me if Celeste was… 'strict' at home."

Sarah let out a low whistle. "Oh, she's bold."

Charlotte's gaze held steady. "I told her we don't discuss personal lives at work."

Sarah nodded. “Good.”

Charlotte hesitated. “I wanted to make a joke.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched. “I know. Me too.”

Charlotte looked almost amused. “And you didn’t.”

Sarah’s expression sharpened. “Because she’s trying to bait me into becoming a story.”

Charlotte nodded slowly. “Yes.”

Sarah felt a surge of something warm in her chest—pride, maybe. Not patronising pride. The kind you felt when you watched someone grow a spine they’d once been denied.

Sarah said, quietly, “You’re good, you know.”

Charlotte blinked. “At what.”

Sarah shrugged. “At staying present.”

Charlotte’s jaw tightened, the way it did when she didn’t want to feel seen too much. “I’m practising.”

Sarah nodded. “Good.”

Then Sarah did the thing that made Fiona’s underground strategy fail: she didn’t keep it secret.

She didn’t form a private alliance with Charlotte against Fiona.

She walked straight to Lauren’s desk, where Lauren was checking the ledger entries, and said, calmly, “Fiona attempted triangulation again. Front desk. Just now. ‘You’re easy to talk to compared to some people.’ I shut it down.”

Lauren’s pen paused, then continued. “Time.”

Sarah glanced at the clock. “Four twelve.”

Lauren wrote it down without looking up. “Witness.”

Sarah jerked her chin toward the doorway. “Charlotte heard the last part.”

Lauren nodded once. “Thank you.”

That was the magic trick.

Not magic at all, really. Just structure.

Fiona's power depended on secrecy, on the illusion that she had private knowledge and private bonds.

Wardrobe's defence was brutal in its simplicity:

Nothing private. No whispers. Everything through process.

Fiona tried a different angle the next day.

She came in early and offered to help Mara rearrange the cutting table, speaking gently, deferentially, like a woman eager to learn.

Mara allowed it for three minutes before Fiona said, softly, "You know, Celeste's very good, but she's still young. Sometimes she—"

Mara's head snapped up.

Sarah saw the moment from across the room and almost smiled.

Mara's eyes went flat.

"Do not," Mara said, quiet as a knife.

Fiona blinked, all innocence. "Do not what."

Mara didn't raise her voice. She didn't give Fiona drama.

She simply said, "Talk about my team."

Fiona's smile faltered. She tried to recover.

"I wasn't—"

Mara cut her off with a single, lethal sentence.

"This is not a salon," Mara said. "We work."

And Fiona, for the first time, looked rattled.

Because Mara didn't care about being liked.

You couldn't shame Mara with tone.

You couldn't bait her into defensiveness.

Mara was the standard.

Sarah felt a mean little satisfaction bloom in her chest.

Fiona was starting to realise she'd been hired into the wrong ecosystem.

She tried once more with Sarah that afternoon, as they were closing up.

Sarah was locking the front door when Fiona said, softly, "It must be hard for you. Being the one who has to enforce everything."

Sarah turned, key still in the lock.

For a moment she considered ten different witty answers.

Then she chose the clean one.

"I'm not the one who has to enforce everything," Sarah said. "We all do."

Fiona smiled faintly. "That's… admirable."

Sarah held her gaze. "It's policy."

Fiona's smile tightened. "You really like policy."

Sarah's mouth curved, sharp. "I really like peace."

Fiona stared at her for a beat too long.

Then she said, softly, as if it were a compliment, "You're very intimidating."

There it was.

The hook meant for later. The phrase she could repeat to others.

Sarah didn't flinch.

She stepped away from the door, faced Fiona fully, and said evenly, "If you ever describe me to someone else in this workplace, describe me accurately."

Fiona blinked. "Accurately how."

Sarah's voice stayed calm. "As a colleague who follows the standards we agreed to. Nothing more. Nothing less."

Fiona's smile drained, just a fraction.

Sarah held the silence.

Then Fiona gave a small nod, as if she were conceding something.

“Of course,” Fiona said.

And she walked away.

Sarah watched her go and felt the strange, steady satisfaction of a boundary held without theatre.

Later, when Sarah met Lauren’s eyes across the room, Lauren gave the smallest nod.

Documented. Logged. Witnessed.

Fiona could go underground all she wanted.

But you couldn’t burrow in a place that refused to keep secrets for you.

Not when every woman in the room understood the same rule:

The safe zone wasn’t maintained by being nice.

It was maintained by refusing to let someone turn kindness into a weapon.

You have to admire Fiona's persistence. Well no, you don't. Anyway:

“The Attempt” (Celeste POV)

Scene 4 — “The Attempt” (Celeste POV, past tense)

Fiona waited for a day when I was tired.

It wasn’t strategic in the obvious way—she didn’t look at my calendar, didn’t announce her intent. But people like Fiona had a predator’s sense for small weaknesses. They didn’t need you to be collapsing. They just needed you to be fractionally less guarded.

That afternoon I'd spent three hours on the phone with a supplier who wanted to "negotiate" quality like it was optional, then another hour replying to emails that all began with *Just checking in!* and ended with some variation of *we need this by Friday*.

By the time I walked into Wardrobe my patience felt thin, stretched, and Fiona could probably smell it.

Charlotte was at the pressing station, hair pinned low, the faintest trace of lipstick like a private decision. She looked… good. Not "done." Good. Present. Holding herself.

Mara was at the cutting table, pencil moving, eyes hard. Sarah was at the front desk, labelling parcels with her usual brisk competence. Lauren was in the back office, head down over a folder.

The room was stable.

Which meant Fiona couldn't attack it head-on.

She came at it sideways.

I was at my laptop table, sorting invoices, when Fiona approached with a folded piece of fabric in her hands, expression open, voice lowered as if she didn't want to disturb anyone.

"Celeste," she said.

I looked up. "Yes."

Fiona smiled gently. "Do you have a second."

I didn't love the phrasing. It framed me as a busy person she was politely interrupting, which meant she could later claim she was being considerate. But I nodded.

She stepped closer, still holding the fabric like it was the reason she was here.

"I just wanted to say," Fiona began, warm, "it's impressive how you hold everything together here."

I didn't respond with gratitude. Praise was often just a handle.

Fiona continued, as if encouraged by my silence. "I've worked in places where the owner was… insecure. Where they needed to be the centre."

I kept my face neutral. "What do you need, Fiona."

Her smile tightened for half a beat, then returned, softer.

“I’m getting there,” she said, as if I were impatient rather than direct. “I’m just… noticing dynamics.”

There it was. The word that let her pretend she was insightful rather than intrusive.

“I’m concerned,” Fiona said, and the word arrived exactly when it always did with her: as a veil.

“About what,” I asked.

Fiona glanced toward Charlotte—not openly, not in a way that could be accused of staring. Just a quick flick of the eyes, a tiny gesture that planted Charlotte in the centre without naming her as the centre.

“About Charlotte,” Fiona said quietly.

My body went still.

Not rage. Not panic. Stillness.

“What about her,” I asked.

Fiona lowered her voice further, conspiratorial, as if we were on the same side.

“I think she relies on you a lot,” Fiona said. “And that’s fine, but… it worries me.”

I stared at her.

Fiona held my gaze, face carefully kind. “You’re very protective. It’s admirable. But some people might interpret it as… controlling.”

I felt my jaw tighten.

I didn’t like being told what “some people” might think. It was the oldest manipulation in the book: outsource judgement to an invisible audience so the target feels obliged to appease it.

“Who,” I asked.

Fiona’s smile wavered. “Oh, I’m not naming names. I just—”

I cut in, calm. “We don’t do that here.”

Fiona blinked. “Do what.”

“‘Some people.’ ‘Dynamics.’ ‘Concern,’” I said evenly. “We don’t speculate about colleagues. We don’t discuss personal relationships in the workroom. If you have an operational issue, you bring it to Lauren.”

Fiona’s expression flickered—annoyance, quickly smoothed.

“I’m trying to support you,” she said softly.

I didn’t argue intent.

“I don’t need support,” I replied. “I need work.”

Her smile tightened again, then softened into hurt.

“Okay,” Fiona said. “I just thought as a woman—”

There it was again: the attempt to make her intrusion into sisterhood.

I interrupted gently, but firmly.

“As a woman,” I said, “you can support Wardrobe by following our standards.”

Fiona’s eyes sharpened for a fraction of a second—cold, revealed—then she recovered with a small nod.

“Of course,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

She began to step away, as if accepting correction.

Then she tried once more, the final little blade.

“It’s just,” Fiona said, glancing toward Charlotte again, “she seems… delicate. And I worry the world will eat her if she’s not taught to stand on her own.”

Delicate.

My chest tightened.

Not because Charlotte was delicate—she wasn’t.

Because Fiona was trying to reassign Charlotte’s identity from *competent colleague* to *project*, thereby making Charlotte seem less adult, less equal, less capable. A subtle demotion.

I kept my voice level.

“Charlotte is one of the most reliable people in this studio,” I said. “And we do not talk about her like she’s a concept.”

Fiona blinked. “I didn’t mean—”

I raised a hand, small. Final.

“I’m ending this conversation,” I said calmly. “Go back to your station.”

Fiona’s mouth parted as if she wanted to protest, then closed.

She nodded. “Okay.”

And she walked away carrying her fabric like it had always been about fabric.

I sat still for a beat longer, letting my nervous system settle.

Then I looked up.

Charlotte was watching me.

Not staring. Not pleading. Just… present, gaze steady, as if she’d heard enough to understand what Fiona had tried to do.

I held Charlotte’s eyes across the room.

No reassurance. No “it’s fine.” No protective theatre.

Just recognition.

Charlotte’s mouth tightened slightly and she gave the smallest nod.

Then she looked away and returned to her work.

A clean act of selfhood.

My chest tightened with pride, and I hated the feeling because pride could become possessive if you weren’t careful.

So I turned my attention toward Lauren’s office.

Lauren was watching too.

She stepped out quietly and came to my table, voice low.

“Did she try to make it about Charlotte,” Lauren asked.

“Yes,” I said.

Lauren’s eyes sharpened. “Did she use ‘concern’.”

“Yes.”

Lauren’s mouth tightened. “Did she use ‘some people’.”

“Yes.”

Lauren nodded once, as if ticking boxes.

I asked, “Were you documenting.”

Lauren’s gaze held mine. “Always.”

I exhaled.

Across the room Sarah watched Fiona with a kind of bright stillness—ready if needed, but not itching for drama.

Mara, without looking up, said suddenly, flatly, “She’s fishing.”

Sarah murmured, “She’s starving.”

Mara’s pencil scratched the ledger like a threat.

I looked at Charlotte again, just briefly.

Charlotte was pressing a seam with careful precision, shoulders grounded, breath steady.

She wasn’t disappearing.

Fiona had tried to turn her into a weak point.

Instead, Fiona had reminded the room of the rule we’d all agreed to:

We didn’t protect Charlotte by treating her as fragile.

We protected ourselves by refusing to let anyone reduce any of us to a story.

“Referees” (Lauren POV)

Scene 5 — “Referees” (Lauren POV, past tense)

By the time Fiona went underground, I already knew how it would end.

Not because I was psychic.

Because I’d seen the pattern too many times: the moment you tell a manipulator they’re being documented, they stop doing the obvious thing and start doing the clever thing. They don’t break rules; they make other people look irrational for enforcing them.

They want you to feel guilty for having standards.

They want you to either tolerate them or explode.

Wardrobe wasn’t going to do either.

Still, I needed grounds that would hold.

Not “she’s toxic.” Not “she gives me a bad feeling.” Not even “everyone agrees she’s undermining us,” because “everyone agrees” is just another kind of vibe.

I needed a record of outcomes.

I needed a rubric.

And I needed a process that looked boring enough that no one could claim it was personal.

So I scheduled Fiona’s mid-probation review.

I didn’t ask. I told her, calmly, two days in advance, in writing.

Probation review — Thursday 9:30am — Back office.

When she arrived, she came with a notebook and a careful smile, as if she were going into a performance review at a corporate job and wanted to be seen as professional.

Celeste sat with me, not because we needed to gang up on her, but because Wardrobe’s structure was clear: I handled governance; Celeste held the business authority. Sarah

was in the doorway, quietly sorting trims—visible enough to be a witness, unobtrusive enough that Fiona couldn't claim intimidation.

I kept the table clear. I kept my folder closed. No theatrics.

"Sit," I said.

Fiona sat.

"Okay," I began. "This is your mid-probation review."

Fiona nodded earnestly. "Of course."

I didn't smile. "Before I speak, do you have any concerns you want noted."

Fiona's eyes widened slightly, pleased by the invitation.

"Yes," she said. "I feel like there's… tension."

I wrote the word **tension** at the top of the page. Not because it mattered. Because recording it robbed it of its fog.

"Tension where," I asked.

Fiona sighed softly. "Just… the vibe."

There it was again. *Vibe.* She wanted it to be unmeasurable.

I nodded as if she'd said something useful. "We don't work with vibe. Give me an example."

Fiona paused. She smiled faintly. "Well… Sarah can be very intimidating."

Sarah didn't move in the doorway. Didn't react. Didn't give Fiona anything.

I kept my gaze on Fiona. "What did Sarah do."

Fiona blinked as if surprised I wanted facts. "She's just… sharp. She shuts people down."

I asked again, steady. "Example."

Fiona's smile tightened. "I don't want to throw her under the bus."

I didn't let her frame herself as kind.

"If you're raising a concern," I said, "you state it clearly. Otherwise it's gossip."

Fiona's eyes flickered—annoyance, quickly hidden. "Okay. She said to me, 'We don't do that here,' when I was just trying to be friendly."

I wrote it down.

Then I looked up. "What were you saying when she replied that way."

Fiona blinked. "I was complimenting her."

"What words," I asked.

Fiona hesitated. "I said… she was easy to talk to. Compared to some people."

I nodded once. "Thank you."

Fiona's smile returned, almost triumphant. She thought she'd proven her point.

I didn't argue. I simply said, "Sarah's response was correct. 'Compared to some people' is divisive language. It creates factions."

Fiona's expression shifted. "But I didn't mean—"

I cut in, even. "Intent is not our metric. Impact is."

I watched her swallow. She tried to recalibrate.

Celeste sat still beside me, face composed, presence heavy in the room. Fiona glanced at her and smiled as if to recruit her.

"Celeste," Fiona said softly, "I'm sure you understand what it's like to be misread as a woman in leadership."

Celeste didn't take the bait. She simply said, "Answer Lauren's questions."

Fiona's smile faltered.

Good. You could see her mind working, searching for the angle that would restore her power.

I opened my folder.

Not dramatically. Like opening a ledger.

"We'll cover your technical performance first," I said.

I began listing measurable positives: punctuality, basic seam competency, compliance with phone policy, accurate stock handling.

I didn't praise. I recorded.

Fiona nodded, smiling, receiving baseline competence as if it were admiration.

Then I turned the page.

"Now," I said, "behavioural compatibility."

Fiona's eyes sharpened. "Okay."

I read directly from my notes. Dates. Times. Exact phrases.

Not because I wanted to shame her.

Because I wanted the fog gone.

"On Tuesday at 10:15," I said, "you told Sarah, 'You're the only one here who's actually friendly,' and then followed with 'some people want you to fail.'"

Fiona blinked. "I was joking."

I didn't smile. "We don't joke like that."

"On Wednesday at 1:40," I continued, "you told Charlotte, 'You're lucky Celeste is so protective.'"

Fiona exhaled a small laugh. "That was a compliment."

"It was inappropriate," I replied. "You referenced a colleague's relationship at work and framed respect as something to be 'lucky' to receive."

Fiona's smile thinned. "You're being very strict."

Celeste's posture didn't change, but I felt her attention sharpen.

I kept my voice level. "Yes."

Fiona stared at me for a beat, then tried the next move.

"I feel like I'm being punished for being confident," she said softly. "Sometimes women—" she glanced between me and Celeste, inclusive, "—don't like another woman who isn't meek."

I let the sentence hang in the air.

Sarah remained silent in the doorway. A statue.

Celeste's gaze stayed on Fiona, flat and unromantic.

I didn't argue feminism with her. That was the trap. If I argued ideology, she could claim I was biased.

I simply returned to outcomes.

"This is not about confidence," I said. "It's about divisive communication patterns that disrupt the studio."

Fiona's eyes flashed. "Divisive."

"Yes," I said. "Triangulation. 'Don't tell her I said this.' 'Some people.' 'You're the only one I can talk to.' Those are faction-building behaviours."

Fiona's voice went very soft, very reasonable. "I think you're reading too much into it."

I nodded. "That's possible. Which is why we're using a rubric."

Fiona blinked. "A rubric."

"Yes," I said, and slid a single page across the table.

It had five headings:

- **Direct communication** (to the person, not around them)
- **Feedback acceptance**
- **No faction-building language**
- **Respect for privacy**
- **Impact on workflow**

Under each, there were simple examples of what "meets standard" looked like.

Fiona stared at it as if I'd handed her a weapon.

I held her gaze.

"This is how you succeed here," I said. "Not by being liked. By meeting the standard."

Fiona swallowed. "So if someone doesn't like me—"

I cut in. “This is not about like.”

She leaned back slightly, scanning my face for softness she could exploit. There wasn’t any. Not because I was cold. Because I was tired of watching women burn themselves to stay pleasant.

I said, calmly, “You have the remainder of probation to demonstrate improvement.”

Fiona’s eyes narrowed. “And if I don’t.”

I didn’t hesitate. “Your probation will not be successful.”

Fiona’s smile returned abruptly, bright and smooth, as if she’d chosen a different emotion from a shelf.

“Understood,” she said.

And there it was again—the switch. The performance.

I made a note: **Affect shift when corrected.**

Then I did the second thing I’d come here to do.

I told her she was being documented.

Not as threat. As reality.

“This meeting will be recorded in your probation file,” I said. “Future incidents will be logged with date, time, phrase, witness, and impact.”

Fiona’s eyes flicked to the folder. “You’ve been… keeping a file.”

“Yes,” I replied.

Fiona’s smile thinned. “That feels hostile.”

I didn’t budge. “It’s protective.”

“Protective of who,” she asked, voice gentle.

I looked at her steadily. “Of Wardrobe.”

Fiona held my gaze for a beat, then nodded, as if conceding.

“Okay,” she said softly. “I’ll be careful.”

Careful.

Not *better.* Careful.

That was the giveaway.

I closed the folder.

“Do you have questions,” I asked.

Fiona paused, then said, almost sweetly, “Is this… because of Charlotte.”

There it was. The attempt to make it personal. To make it about the transwoman without naming her as such. To imply special treatment. To put a wedge between management and staff.

Celeste’s eyes sharpened, but she didn’t speak.

I answered, calmly, precisely, with the same sentence I’d used before.

“This is because of your behaviour,” I said. “Not because of any colleague’s identity or relationships. Wardrobe standards apply equally.”

Fiona nodded slowly. “Right.”

When she left, she thanked us again. Polite. Correct. A woman who could, if she wanted, tell a perfect story about being unfairly targeted by “mean girls.”

Sarah walked into the office once Fiona was gone, expression dry.

“She’s going to go underground now,” Sarah said.

“I know,” I replied.

Celeste exhaled, controlled. “She tried to make it about Charlotte.”

“Yes,” I said.

Sarah leaned against the filing cabinet. “She’s persistent.”

Celeste’s mouth tightened. “She’s hungry.”

I closed my folder and looked at them both.

“Then we don’t feed her,” I said.

Sarah's eyebrows lifted. "How."

I tapped the folder.

"Documentation," I said. "Witnesses. Outcomes. And after this—" I picked up the rubric page again, "—referees."

Sarah frowned. "We already asked for referees."

"We accepted names," I corrected. "We didn't do structured referee checks."

Celeste nodded slowly, understanding.

I continued, already thinking ahead.

"We're building the next version of Wardrobe," I said. "The version that doesn't rely on Mara's instincts or Sarah's teeth or my vigilance. The version that can scale without becoming vulnerable."

Sarah's mouth twitched. "You make it sound like we're building a prison."

I shook my head. "No."

I looked out toward the workroom where Charlotte was pressing a seam—present, steady, a woman doing her job.

"We're building a place," I said, "where women can work without having to spend their emotional budget on nonsense."

Sarah stared at me for a beat, then nodded once. "Right."

Celeste's gaze warmed slightly. "Good."

I opened my laptop and started a new document while the resolve was still clean.

REFEREE CHECK — WARDROBE

And beneath it, the questions that mattered—questions designed to pull truth out of vagueness:

- How do they respond to feedback?
- Have you seen them create divisions or factions?
- Do they discuss colleagues' personal lives at work?
- Do they accept boundaries without retaliation?

- Would you rehire them? Why or why not?

Sarah watched me type and murmured, almost admiring, “God. You’re terrifying.”

I didn’t look up. “Good.”

Because Fiona wasn’t the last person like this.

She was simply the first test of whether Wardrobe could be run like a sanctuary without becoming naïve.

And we were going to pass.

“Two Witnesses” (Charlotte POV)

Scene 6 — “Two Witnesses” (Charlotte POV, past tense)

Fiona chose a moment when the room was almost ordinary.

That was how she worked now—no big moves, no spectacle. Nothing you could point at without sounding “dramatic.” Just little touches designed to make you question your footing.

Charlotte had learned, slowly, that ordinary moments were where you either held yourself or lost yourself.

She was at the long table with a half-finished bodice in front of her, chalk marks neat, pins aligned. The day had been steady. Sarah had been brisk at the front. Mara had corrected a sleeve cap without looking up. Celeste had been in and out on calls. Lauren had disappeared into paperwork like she did when she was trying to keep the whole place from becoming a feeling.

Charlotte’s hair was pinned low. Her top was tucked. Her scent sat close to her skin. She felt… present. Not sparkling. Present.

Fiona drifted up beside her with a tray of trims, as if she’d simply happened to be passing.

“Charlotte,” Fiona said softly.

Charlotte didn’t flinch anymore at her name. It was hers. It didn’t belong to permission.

“Yes,” Charlotte replied, eyes staying on her work.

Fiona set the tray down carefully. “I wanted to say something.”

Charlotte kept pinning. “Say it.”

Fiona smiled as if Charlotte were endearing.

“I’m impressed,” Fiona said, voice gentle. “Truly. The way you’ve… adapted.”

Charlotte’s fingers stilled for half a second.

Adapted.

It wasn’t the word itself. It was the implication: *you’re a special case*.

Charlotte lifted her eyes.

Fiona continued, as if encouraged. “And you’re lucky,” Fiona added, “to have Celeste.”

Charlotte’s jaw tightened, the old reflex trying to rise: make it smaller, make it smoother, make it go away.

She felt it—like a tug at the back of her mind, the urge to disappear into politeness.

She didn’t.

She looked Fiona in the eyes.

“Don’t,” Charlotte said, calmly.

Fiona blinked. “Don’t what.”

Charlotte’s voice stayed even. “Don’t speak about my relationship at work.”

Fiona’s smile stayed on, but it thinned. “Oh. I wasn’t—”

Charlotte interrupted without raising her voice. “You were.”

Fiona’s expression shifted into mild hurt. “I was paying you a compliment.”

Charlotte didn’t argue compliment-versus-insult. She argued boundary.

“I’m not interested in your framing,” Charlotte said. “I’m interested in the rule.”

Fiona tilted her head. “The rule.”

Charlotte nodded once. “We don’t discuss colleagues’ personal lives. We don’t imply people are ‘lucky’ to be treated with respect.”

Fiona’s eyes flickered—annoyance, quickly hidden.

“You’re very sensitive,” Fiona said softly, as if it were a neutral observation.

Charlotte felt the word try to land in her chest like a label.

Sensitive. Fragile. Managed.

Old Charlotte would have swallowed it and become smaller.

This Charlotte watched the label float toward her and refused to catch it.

“Be careful,” Charlotte said, still calm.

Fiona’s smile returned, bright. “Is that a threat.”

Charlotte’s voice remained flat, boring, adult.

“It’s a boundary,” she said. “Now please take your tray and go back to your station.”

For a beat, Fiona just stared at her.

Then Fiona laughed lightly, like Charlotte had been amusing.

“Okay,” Fiona said, as if indulging a child. “Of course.”

She picked up the tray and drifted away.

Charlotte watched her go, heart thudding—not with fear, with adrenaline. The old part of her wanted to shake. The newer part of her wanted to record.

Not because she was petty.

Because she belonged to this place now, and belonging meant participating in how it stayed safe.

She set her pin cushion down. She didn’t look around for Celeste. She didn’t need rescue.

She stood up and walked, steadily, to the front.

Sarah was at the desk, folding shipping labels with a kind of efficient contempt for paper.

Charlotte approached and said quietly, “I need you for two minutes.”

Sarah looked up immediately, all focus. “Okay.”

Charlotte kept her voice level. “Fiona just spoke about my relationship. Again.”

Sarah’s mouth tightened. “What did she say.”

Charlotte recited it word for word, keeping it plain.

“She said I’m ‘lucky’ to have Celeste. And that I’ve ‘adapted.’ When I told her not to speak about my relationship at work, she called me ‘sensitive.’”

Sarah’s eyes sharpened. “Where.”

“At my table,” Charlotte said.

Sarah nodded once. “Time.”

Charlotte glanced at the clock. “Three twenty-eight.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched. “Look at you. Lauren has trained you.”

Charlotte didn’t smile. Not yet. She wasn’t finished.

“I need Lauren as well,” Charlotte said. “Two witnesses.”

Sarah’s eyebrows lifted, impressed. “Yes you do.”

They went to the back office together.

Lauren was seated at her desk with her folder open, pen moving. She looked up as they entered, alert but not alarmed.

“What’s happened,” Lauren asked.

Charlotte didn’t apologise for interrupting. That, too, was new.

She delivered it like a work report.

“Fiona made comments about my relationship with Celeste,” Charlotte said. “Again. I stated the boundary. She then called me ‘sensitive.’ Sarah heard my report immediately afterward and is here as witness. I want this documented.”

Lauren’s gaze held Charlotte’s for a beat—approval, quiet and real. Then Lauren looked down and flipped to a clean page.

“Time,” Lauren said.

“Three twenty-eight,” Charlotte replied.

Lauren wrote it. “Exact words.”

Charlotte repeated them, precisely, without embellishment.

Lauren didn’t react emotionally. She did what she always did: she turned the incident into record.

“Impact,” Lauren asked.

Charlotte took a breath.

This was where she might have once faltered—where she might have tried to sound “reasonable” by minimising herself.

She didn’t.

“It attempted to undermine me as a colleague,” Charlotte said evenly, “by framing me as a dependent person rather than a competent one. It also violated our policy about discussing personal lives.”

Lauren nodded once and wrote.

Sarah, leaning in the doorway, said mildly, “And it was bait.”

Lauren didn’t look up. “Yes.”

Charlotte added, quieter, “I did not disappear.”

Lauren’s pen paused. She looked up.

“I know,” Lauren said simply. “Good work.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched, proud and annoyed about it. “She was very boring.”

Lauren nodded. “Boring is excellent.”

Charlotte felt something settle inside her at that word.

Excellent.

Not because someone had praised her appearance. Not because someone had called her brave.

Because someone had affirmed her *procedure*.

She belonged here because she was part of how the place held itself together.

Lauren closed the folder.

“I’ll address it,” Lauren said.

Charlotte’s gaze stayed steady. “How.”

Lauren’s voice was calm. “In the rubric language. Behaviour incompatible with standards. Continuing pattern.”

Sarah muttered, “She’ll cry.”

Lauren’s eyes flicked to Sarah. “She may.”

Sarah’s mouth tightened. “And.”

Lauren’s voice didn’t change. “And we won’t manage her feelings.”

Charlotte nodded once.

Sarah glanced at Charlotte, then said, almost lightly, “You alright.”

Charlotte considered.

Then she said the honest thing.

“I’m angry,” Charlotte replied. “Not scared.”

Sarah’s eyebrows lifted. “Good.”

Lauren’s gaze warmed slightly. “Also good.”

Charlotte turned to leave.

At the doorway she paused and looked back at Lauren.

“One more thing,” Charlotte said.

Lauren lifted her eyes. “Yes.”

Charlotte’s voice was quiet but firm. “If Fiona tries to take this into ‘I’m being targeted’—I want it clearly stated that this is about behaviour. Not identity.”

Lauren nodded once, precise. “It will be.”

Charlotte held the nod as if it were a handrail.

Then she stepped back into the workroom.

Her table was where she’d left it. The bodice waited. The chalk marks were still neat. The day continued.

Fiona moved in the periphery with her polished smile, behaving like a woman who’d been unfairly corrected.

Charlotte didn’t watch her.

Charlotte sat down, picked up her pins, and continued her work with the calm, grounded focus of someone who understood something essential:

Visibility wasn’t lipstick.

Visibility was staying in the room without shrinking.

And when someone tried to turn you into a story, you didn’t argue.

You documented.

Two witnesses.

That was how you kept a women’s workplace intact.

“Termination” (Lauren POV)

Scene 7 — “Termination” (Lauren POV) — *Probation not successful*

I didn’t sleep well the night before.

Not because I doubted the decision.

Because I knew Fiona would try to make it into a story.

And because the part of me that still carried old, stupid training—*be fair, be nice, don’t be harsh, don’t be seen as dramatic*—wanted to soften what didn’t need softening.

Standards don’t require softness. They require clarity.

So I arrived early.

I printed the probation summary. I checked the dates. I made sure every entry had what it needed: exact words, witnesses, impact on workflow. I prepared Fiona’s final pay details for processing. I removed her access to the shared drive before she walked in.

No spite. No theatre.

Just procedure.

Mara was not present. That was deliberate.

Mara would have made Fiona feel important. Mara would have made Fiona feel like she was being “judged.” Fiona would have used it.

This meeting wasn’t about judgement. It was about compatibility.

Celeste came in and sat beside me, posture composed, phone face-down. She didn’t look like someone bracing for conflict. She looked like someone attending an agenda item.

Sarah sat in the doorway again, visible enough to be a witness, quiet enough to be useless to Fiona’s victim narrative.

I kept the room boring: back office, plain table, plain chairs, no coffee, no biscuits. This wasn’t a chat. This was a decision.

At 9:30, Fiona knocked once and entered.

She was smiling.

Of course she was.

She looked impeccably professional—hair neat, outfit polished, notebook in hand. If you didn't know the pattern, you'd think she was here to be promoted.

"Morning," she said brightly. "How are we."

I didn't mirror the warmth. I didn't punish it either.

"Sit," I said.

Fiona sat, crossing her legs with controlled ease. Her eyes flicked once to Sarah in the doorway, then back to me.

"Is Sarah…" Fiona began, voice lightly amused. "Is Sarah necessary."

"Yes," I said. "Witness."

Fiona smiled as if she found that charmingly intense. "Right."

I opened my folder. Not dramatically. Like a ledger.

"This meeting is the conclusion of your probation," I said.

Fiona's smile stayed. "Okay."

I kept my voice even, almost flat.

"Your probation has not been successful," I said. "Your employment ends today."

For half a second Fiona didn't move.

Then the smile slipped, as if someone had turned off a light.

"What," she said softly.

Celeste's posture didn't change. Sarah didn't move. The room remained exactly as it had been.

Fiona blinked slowly. "I'm sorry—what."

I repeated it once, word for word. Slow, clear.

Fiona's breath caught. Her face shifted into hurt, then disbelief, then something harder.

"You can't be serious," she said.

“I am,” I replied.

Fiona’s eyes flashed to Celeste. She tried the angle she always tried when she wanted power back: enlist the “reasonable” leader.

“Celeste,” Fiona said, voice gentle. “You know I’ve been working hard. You’ve seen the quality. This is—”

Celeste didn’t rescue her. She didn’t soften it. She simply said, calm and final, “Lauren is speaking.”

Fiona looked back at me, cheeks colouring.

“Why,” she asked, and even the word *why* was framed like she deserved a debate.

I didn’t debate.

I stated.

“Behaviour incompatible with Wardrobe standards,” I said. “Divisive communication patterns. Repeated boundary breaches regarding colleagues’ personal lives. Failure to accept correction without retaliation.”

Fiona laughed once, sharp and incredulous. “Retaliation?”

I didn’t flinch.

“You were given specific feedback,” I said. “The behaviour continued, more covertly.”

Fiona’s eyes brightened, and I knew the next move before she made it.

“So this is about *feelings,*” Fiona said, voice rising slightly. “This is about people not liking me. This is—” she smiled, brittle, “—classic.”

I didn’t let her label us.

“This is about impact,” I said. “Not like. Not vibe. Impact.”

Fiona stared at me, then did the next pivot: tears.

It was impressive in its timing—eyes wet, voice small, hands tightening around her notebook like it was a lifeline.

“I thought this was a women’s workplace,” she whispered. “I thought women supported women.”

Sarah’s jaw tightened in the doorway, but she held still. Good.

I kept my voice steady. “Women supporting women is exactly why we remove behaviour that harms women.”

Fiona’s tears paused. The line didn’t give her anything.

She tried again, shifting into wounded indignation.

“This is bullying,” Fiona said, louder now. “You’re ganging up on me. You’ve been documenting me like I’m a criminal.”

I didn’t smile.

“You were informed documentation would occur,” I said. “That is standard HR practice. It protects the workplace and the employee.”

Fiona’s mouth opened, then closed. She was searching for a crack.

She tried the envy angle again, because it was her favourite.

“I’m confident,” she snapped. “I don’t do meek. That’s what this is. You’re threatened.”

Celeste’s eyes sharpened.

I kept my gaze on Fiona, calm.

“Confidence is not the issue,” I said. “Control tactics are.”

Fiona’s face tightened, and I saw it: the anger she’d been keeping under the pleasant surface.

For a moment she stopped performing.

“You’re making a mistake,” Fiona said, very quietly.

I nodded once, as if I’d heard an ordinary sentence. “Noted.”

Fiona leaned forward, eyes bright with something ugly now.

“I could say things,” she murmured. “People would listen. You’re not exactly… normal.”

There it was.

The threat without specifics. The implication of gossip, exposure, reputation damage.

I didn’t react. That was the only way to keep it small.

I said, evenly, “That statement is inappropriate. It will be added to your file.”

Fiona blinked, thrown. “You can’t—”

“I can,” I replied. “Because it happened.”

A beat.

Then I moved it forward.

“This meeting is not a discussion,” I said. “The decision is final.”

Fiona’s breath came faster. She looked at Celeste again, desperate now for a different outcome.

Celeste met her gaze and said, calmly, “Return your keys and your access card.”

Fiona’s face crumpled—outrage, humiliation, disbelief all at once.

“This is insane,” she hissed.

Sarah spoke for the first time, voice mild and deadly.

“Keys,” Sarah said. “Now.”

Fiona stared at Sarah like she wanted to pick a fight.

Then she thought better of it.

She dug into her bag with stiff, angry movements and slapped the keys onto the table.

The sound was small.

Final.

I slid an envelope across the table. “This outlines the end of employment and what will happen next regarding final pay processing. If you have questions after you’ve read it, email me.”

Fiona didn’t touch it.

She stood abruptly, chair legs scraping.

She looked around the room like she expected someone to look ashamed.

No one did.

The absence of shame made her furious.

“This place is toxic,” Fiona spat. “You’re all—” she gestured vaguely, searching for a slur that wouldn’t quite be a slur, “—you’re a little cult.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched, almost smiling. Not because it was funny. Because it was predictable.

Celeste’s voice stayed calm. “Goodbye, Fiona.”

Fiona’s eyes flashed. She snatched the envelope, crumpled it slightly in her fist, and stormed toward the door.

Sarah stepped aside just enough to allow passage, not enough to feel welcoming.

As Fiona left, she threw one last line over her shoulder—sweet as poison.

“You’ll regret this,” she said.

Then the door shut.

The room went quiet.

For a moment, none of us moved. Not because we were stunned. Because we were letting the adrenaline drain without turning it into conversation too soon.

Celeste exhaled, slow and controlled. “She tried.”

“Yes,” I said.

Sarah, still in the doorway, said dryly, “She really did.”

I closed the folder and set it down like a lid on something that didn’t need oxygen.

“Okay,” I said. “Now we do the boring part.”

Sarah blinked. “There’s more boring part.”

“Yes,” I replied. “We document the termination meeting. We confirm access is revoked. We notify Mara after the fact. We tell the team one sentence, no detail.”

Celeste nodded. “And we don’t give her a story.”

Sarah’s eyes sharpened with approval. “Exactly.”

I wrote the final entry in the file:

Termination meeting — probation not successful. Employee made veiled reputational threat. Keys returned. Access revoked. Exit completed.

Then I looked up at them.

“This,” I said quietly, “is what it looks like when we take women seriously.”

Sarah tilted her head. “Explain.”

I kept my voice calm.

“We didn’t excuse her because she’s a woman,” I said. “We didn’t tolerate harm because it’s polite to be understanding. We didn’t turn it into a catfight. We ran process. We protected the workplace.”

Celeste’s gaze warmed slightly. “And we protected each other.”

Sarah nodded once, satisfied. “Good.”

I stood and opened the office door.

The studio was humming again—fabric, scissors, quiet competence. Charlotte was at her station, focused, not watching the office like a frightened animal.

She looked up as I entered, eyes steady.

I didn’t smile widely. I didn’t announce victory. I didn’t make it a drama.

I simply said, “She’s gone.”

Charlotte held my gaze for a beat, then nodded once.

“Okay,” she said.

And then she went back to her work.

That was the win.

Not the firing.

The fact that the room stayed intact.

8) **“Policy Update”** (Celeste POV)

Scene 8 — “Policy Update” (Celeste POV, past tense)

After Fiona left, the studio didn’t erupt into celebration.

There was no group hug. No “can you believe it.” No victory lap.

That would have been a kind of feeding too—giving her a shape in our mouths, letting her take up space after she’d been removed.

Instead, Wardrobe did what it always did when something ended: it returned to work.

Scissors. Pins. Steam. The quiet rhythm of women making things that had to last.

Still, the air felt lighter.

Not because Fiona had been a monster. Monsters are easy.

Because Fiona had been plausible.

And plausibility was the kind of threat you couldn’t beat with emotion. You beat it with structure.

I waited until the day’s shipments were out and the room had settled. Then I gathered us at the cutting table.

Mara came reluctantly, pencil tucked behind her ear like a weapon she refused to set down. Sarah arrived with her mug. Lauren brought a thin stack of papers. Charlotte came last, tote on her shoulder, hair pinned low, face steady.

She sat without asking where to sit.

That still made something in me tighten—pride again, that dangerous sweetness. I pushed it down and kept my voice clean.

“Okay,” I said. “This is not a debrief about Fiona.”

Sarah muttered, pleased, “Thank God.”

“It’s a policy update,” I continued. “Because what happened wasn’t a personality problem. It was a systems problem.”

Mara snorted. “It was a Fiona problem.”

Lauren didn’t look up from her pages. “It was predictable. That makes it a systems problem.”

Mara’s jaw tightened, but she didn’t argue. She’d seen the pattern too. She just hated admitting anything existed beyond her control.

Lauren placed the first sheet on the table. It wasn’t long. One page. Bold headings. Plain language.

At the top:

WARDROBE — CULTURE & CONDUCT ADDENDUM (v1.0)

Sarah leaned in and murmured.

“God, I love a woman with version control.”

Lauren’s eyes flicked to her. “Don’t.”

Sarah grinned. “I won’t. But I do.”

Lauren began, calm and clinical.

“This addendum sits beside the no-filming rule,” she said. “It’s not about feelings. It’s about behaviours that threaten safety and workflow.”

She read the first heading.

1) NO TRIANGULATION / FACTION-BUILDING

Under it, bullet points:

- No “don’t tell her I said this.”
- No “you’re the only one I can talk to.”
- No “some people…” statements used to imply disapproval.
- No recruiting “special alliances” inside the team.

Sarah nodded slowly. “That’s the poison.”

Mara muttered, “It’s weakness.”

Lauren looked up. “It’s a tactic.”

Mara’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t deny it.

Lauren read on.

2) DIRECT COMMUNICATION REQUIREMENT

- If you have an issue with a colleague, you address it directly, with Lauren present if needed.
- No insinuations. No “concern” as control.

I saw Charlotte’s shoulders settle slightly at that. Not relief exactly. Recognition. A rule she could lean on.

Lauren flipped the page.

3) PRIVACY AND PERSONAL LIFE

- No discussion of colleagues’ relationships, bodies, identities, or personal histories at work.
- No “protective” framing. No “lucky” framing. Respect is baseline.
- “Curiosity” is not an excuse.

Sarah made a small sound of satisfaction. “Yes.”

Mara finally spoke, blunt. “If anyone calls anyone ‘delicate’ again, I will personally remove their tongue.”

Lauren’s eyes stayed on the paper. “We’ll remove their employment instead.”

Mara’s jaw worked.

Charlotte, quiet until now, said evenly, “Both are tempting.”

Sarah barked a laugh.

Even Lauren’s mouth twitched.

I watched Charlotte’s face as she said it—dry, grounded, not asking permission to be funny. A woman in the room, not an exception within it.

Lauren placed a third sheet on the table.

4) FEEDBACK ACCEPTANCE

- Corrections are expected.
- “I was just joking” is not a defence.
- “You misread me” is not a defence.
- Retaliation (social or operational) after correction is grounds for termination during probation.

Mara tapped the table once with her pencil. “Good.”

Lauren nodded, as if Mara’s approval was merely data.

Then Lauren slid the final sheet across.

HIRING UPGRADE — REFEREES REQUIRED (Structured Check)

Sarah leaned forward again, eyebrows lifted. “Here we go.”

Lauren read, matter-of-fact.

“For every hire, we will conduct a structured referee check,” she said. “Not a casual call. Not ‘are they nice.’ Specific questions. Same questions each time. Logged.”

She lifted the paper so we could see the list.

- How do they respond to feedback?
- Have you seen them create divisions or factions?
- Do they respect privacy and boundaries?
- Do they handle conflict directly or indirectly?
- Would you rehire them? Why or why not?
- Any concerns about manipulation, gossip, or retaliation?

Mara’s eyes scanned the page, hard.

“People lie,” she said again, stubborn.

Lauren didn’t argue. “They do. But patterns repeat. And a structured check reduces risk.”

Sarah murmured, “Also, liars often hesitate at the right questions.”

Lauren nodded. “Exactly.”

Charlotte’s voice came, quiet but firm. “And it signals to applicants that we’re serious.”

I turned to her. “Yes.”

Charlotte met my gaze, steady. “It changes who applies.”

Lauren’s eyes lifted, pleased. “Yes.”

Mara’s pencil paused. “Good.”

That was as close to praise as Mara got.

I looked around the table.

There was a version of this meeting—an older version—where everyone would have been looking at Charlotte with careful tenderness, as if she were the reason we needed these rules.

We’d outgrown that.

Charlotte wasn’t the reason.

Reality was the reason.

I cleared my throat.

“One more thing,” I said.

They looked at me.

“This addendum isn’t a list of sins,” I continued. “It’s a promise.”

Sarah lifted her eyebrows. “A promise.”

“Yes,” I said. “To ourselves. And to every woman who works here.”

Mara’s eyes narrowed, suspicious of anything that sounded like sentiment.

So I made it practical.

“We are building a studio that scales without becoming unsafe,” I said. “That means we don’t rely on Mara’s vigilance, or Sarah’s teeth, or Lauren’s paperwork, or my role as a shield. We rely on shared standards.”

Lauren nodded once. “Procedure replaces culture.”

Sarah smirked. “Culture becomes procedure.”

Lauren’s gaze stayed flat. “Exactly.”

Charlotte said quietly, “And procedure means no one has to guess.”

Something in my chest tightened again—this time not pride, but relief.

No one has to guess.

That was what Wardrobe was, at its best: a place where women didn’t have to spend their intelligence managing ambiguity.

I looked at Charlotte directly.

“And for the record,” I said, clean and calm, “this is not about protecting you.”

Charlotte’s eyes flickered, attentive.

“It’s about protecting us,” I finished.

Sarah nodded immediately. “Yes.”

Lauren’s expression softened by a fraction. “Yes.”

Mara said nothing, but her pencil tapped once, decisive.

Charlotte held my gaze. Then she nodded slowly.

“Good,” she said.

Not submissive. Not grateful.

Just… aligned.

After the meeting, as everyone drifted back to their stations, I stayed at the table with the papers.

Lauren began filing copies into the policy binder.

Sarah wandered past and murmured, “You know Fiona’s going to tell a story.”

Lauren didn’t look up. “Let her.”

Sarah’s mouth tightened. “People listen.”

I closed the binder, hand firm on the cover.

“Then they can listen,” I said. “We don’t run Wardrobe for people who want stories. We run Wardrobe for women who want to work.”

I looked across the room.

Charlotte had returned to pressing, calm and present, living inside her own skin like she'd decided it was hers and no one could take it.

Mara was drawing a pattern like she was trying to outlive mortality.

Lauren was labelling a folder with today's date, because she believed in the boring work that kept women safe.

Sarah stood at the front desk, bright-eyed and ready, guarding the threshold of a world we'd built with policy, consequence, and care.

And in the middle of it all, I felt something settle—something that didn't need to be spoken aloud to be true:

Wardrobe had been tested by a woman who tried to make it into a theatre.

We'd responded by making it even more ordinary.

Which was the highest form of victory.

And on that note, Emily, I'm going to call it a night. Today has moved the story I'd never imagined it would go. We still have your suggestions to address (the ones you made before I brought Fiona into the picture), which we can do tomorrow. I am so looking forward to this - thank you for your creativity and especially for keeping the story sane and on the rails.

Good call. Tonight's arc was *huge* — and it landed exactly where this story wants to live: not in spectacle, not in "villain theatre," but in the quiet competence of women refusing to let anyone rot the room.

What we achieved today, structurally:

- We proved Wardrobe can survive a threat that's **plausible**, not cartoonish.

- We gave Lauren a proper domain: **HR as protection without sentimentality**.
- We advanced Charlotte's arc in the most satisfying way: not "bravery" as a performance, but **procedure, presence, two witnesses** — adulthood.
- We upgraded the story's thesis: women's spaces aren't safe because women are angelic; they're safe because women **govern**.

Tomorrow, when you're fresh, we can pick up those earlier vistas in the most natural order. My suggestion for the next sequence (so it feels like we're building outward, not hopping around):

1. **Scaling without dilution** (hiring beyond Fiona, workflow redesign, capacity ceiling, the "external room" pressures)
2. **Public room test** for Charlotte (not "passing," just holding presence; could dovetail with MBA/networking event)
3. **Couples becoming known** without performance (Lauren/Sarah, Celeste/Charlotte)
4. **Mara's health tightening the screws** (and the team refusing to let her martyr herself)

Sleep well, Robyn. When you're ready tomorrow, just tell me which of those you want first, and I'll draft the next scene in the POV that best serves it.