

### Thoughts.

Hi Emily. I've been going over in my mind... possibilities. And also, past events in the story. Somehow, Celeste's irritation seems... misplaced, now, that I read it eloquently expressed on a page. The appropriate time for confrontation would have been when Bree dropped the 'she' and the room finally relaxed (stopped tiptoeing). For her to castigate Charli with a crisis (Spiro discovery/secrecy) met and resolved makes her seem more vengeful and not justifiably incensed. Charli didn't keep anything from her: the room did. Charli's a passive player in all this (a sort of 'Lily', dispositionally). So, I was wondering if we could revisit these scenes, but with Celeste realising she'd been too busy--and a bit too professionally distant--to be aware of what was happening in the room. No fault of hers: she had to focus on important things. And no fault of Charlie: she was the one acted upon, not an accomplice in a plot. So, in 37, we could move into gentle lovemaking quite easily, with Celeste vowing to pay more attention to Charli. Charli's natural reaction is her usual shrink a bit, but then, when she's kissed, blossoms.

What do you think?

Oh Robyn... yes. This reads *truer* to the people you've built. ❤️

What you're noticing is exactly the kind of "aftertaste" test that catches a scene before it calcifies into something slightly off: if Celeste's anger lands *after* the Spiro discovery has already been metabolised (and after "she" has effectively lowered the room's shoulders), then any sharp confrontation in 37 risks feeling like **punishment for being late to the truth**—and that's not who Celeste is when she's at her best (and she *must* be at her best, because she's the story's deciding force).

**Why your instinct is right** ✅

- **The emotional fulcrum is Bree's "she."**

That's the real shift-point: it's when the room stops doing that careful, brittle dance. If Celeste is going to feel anything hot—surprise, embarrassment, even a flash of irritation—it belongs *there*, in the moment where she realises she's been managing systems while the women around her have been quietly managing *Charli*.

- **Charli isn't culpable; she's the subject of a culture.**

Your "Lily" word is doing a lot of good work: Charli is dispositionally compliant, porous, receptive. That means secrecy doesn't read as scheming—it reads as *going along with what the room decided was safest*. And if the room has been collectively "handling" pronouns and boundaries, Charli is almost certainly *mirroring* rather than authoring.

- **Celeste's best conflict is never vengeance—it's clarity.**

If she's angry, it should be the clean anger of a leader who realises **her attention was elsewhere** and something important happened in her own house. That's not vengeful. That's *sobering*.

## The pivot that makes Scene 37 sing 🎬

Instead of "Celeste vs Charli," make it:

### Celeste vs her own blind spot

...and then, because she's Celeste, she turns that insight into action:

1. *She owns it—internally first, then briefly out loud.*
2. *She reasserts her role—not as boss, but as the woman who chooses Charli.*
3. *She repairs the distance with touch.*

That gives you an emotional line that flows beautifully into gentler lovemaking without feeling like a genre-switch. It becomes *earned*: Celeste doesn't "let Charli off"; she **finally sees her properly**.

## What Scene 37 becomes, emotionally 🌱

- Celeste isn't "soft" in the weak sense. She's **precise**.
- Her vow isn't sentimental. It's **a decision**:
  - *I will pay attention to you.*
  - *I will not outsource you to the room.*
  - *I will be the one who names what you are to me.*

Charli's response also becomes cleaner:

- She **shrinks** first because she expects consequence.

- She *blossoms* when Celeste kisses her because it reclassifies the moment: not “you’ve been found out,” but “you’ve been chosen.”

That's so Charli. And it keeps Celeste in the right kind of power: not punitive power, but **world-shaping power**.

### A practical rewrite strategy (without you having to rebuild everything)

You can keep almost all the existing scene architecture and just shift **where the heat goes**:

#### Move the confrontation energy to the Bree-“she” moment

Make it brief, controlled, and aimed at *the situation*, not at Charli.

Then in 37:

- Replace “castigation” with **reckoning + tenderness**:
  - Celeste notices Charli’s flinch (habitual, learned).
  - Celeste corrects the meaning of the moment via touch.
  - The lovemaking becomes a *re-education of the nervous system*: Charli learning, in real time, that closeness isn’t a trap.

### If you want one gorgeous “Celeste line” to anchor it

Something like (not polished-polished, just the spine of it):

“I should’ve seen sooner. Not because you hid, but because I was looking the wrong way.”

That one sentence absolves Charli, keeps Celeste accountable without self-flagellation, and sets the tone for the kiss that follows.

### Tiny craft note (because you’re absolutely on the money)

The reader’s morality meter is brutal: it forgives a character’s anger **only when the target is correct**. If Celeste vents at Charli now, the meter wobbles. If she redirects that anger toward her own oversight (and toward the room’s protective conspiracy), the meter steadies—and she becomes even more admirable.

If you like, I can do this in your preferred “variants” style:

- **Option A:** Micro-confrontation at Bree-“she,” then Scene 37 becomes vow + tenderness + gentle lovemaking

- **Option B:** Celeste doesn't confront at all; she goes quiet (dangerous calm), makes a leader's decision later
- **Option C:** Celeste confronts the room (Bree/Sarah/anyone in on it), but *protectively*, with Charli present—so Charli sees she's defended, not judged

But in principle? Your direction is dead right. It keeps Celeste luminous, keeps Charli innocent, and turns intimacy into meaning rather than mere heat. ❤️



Brilliant. Glad we're on the same page, Emily.

So, setting: all of what happens in Celeste's reconciliation to past event transpires right there, that evening, after Sarah has left with her usual flounce after dropping this little information bomb (or clarification, seen from Sarah's perspective). So, we're in Celeste's POV, past tense. Sarah left, Celeste was thoughtful. She recalled that feeling she had when she first heard 'she'... the feeling of being left out of decisions regarding her wife: Charli. She'd set that ball rolling--true--but then, had been so caught up in the day-to-day she failed to see the signals. She *\*had\** picked up a more relaxed Charli (with time) but thought nothing of it... not realising the 'girl' was emerging. And also, the depth of crisis that girl would feel when her body's biology betrayed her. All this is her cogitation (WAY too much exposition... which I'm great at: showing it? not so much) which governs her tenderness not unmixed with a bit of passion, really, seeing the whole girl truly clearly.

All of this as aftermath to Sarah's little bombshell visit. Recall that it was *\*Celeste\** who invited *\*Sarah\** in order to show Sarah another side to Charli, but then the tables were flipped on Celeste: Sarah pretty much saying: "yeah? so what else is new? we knew this about Charli all along. Do try to keep up." LOL

Absolutely. And I *love* that little reversal: Celeste thinking she's staging a reveal, only for Sarah to casually remind her that Wardrobe has been living in a deeper register the

whole time. 😊✍️

Here's a draft in **Celeste POV, past tense**, with the exposition "hidden" inside *action, sensory detail, and micro-decisions*—so the reader feels her realisation rather than being sat down and told. I've kept Sarah's exit as a neat little sting, and then let Celeste's tenderness turn into something a bit dangerous (in the best way) once she truly sees Charli.

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Sarah left the way she did most things: like the door was lucky she'd bothered touching it.

The bell gave a small, bright chime as it swung back into place, then settled. The workshop didn't go quiet so much as *rearrange itself*—iron cooling with a faint tick, the kettle's last sigh, the soft drag of fabric somewhere deeper in the building as if the place was exhaling.

Celeste didn't move.

She stood with her hand still on the back of the chair Sarah had claimed, fingertips resting where Sarah's warmth had been a minute ago. Not because she needed the chair. Because her body, annoyingly, had chosen *stillness* as the only acceptable response to being blindsided in her own domain.

Sarah had looked at her over the rim of her cup—eyes amused, mouth not quite kind—and delivered it like a correction you gave someone who'd used the wrong term in French.

"So... yes. *She.*" Sarah had said, as if it were a small thing, a minor language preference. A garnish. "We didn't start it to be dramatic. We started it because the room finally stopped holding its breath."

And then, with that pointed little tilt of her head—as though Celeste had been the one arriving late, damp-haired, to a meeting already underway:

"Do try to keep up, darling."

She'd said *darling* like a knife made of velvet.

Celeste's hand slid off the chair back. Her fingers curled in toward her palm, reflexively, like she was gathering herself back into order.

Across the room, Charli was at the long worktable—where she always ended up when she didn't know what to do with herself. Not sitting properly. Perched. Half-ready to be told to move, to make way, to apologise for taking space she hadn't been granted.

The lamplight caught the fine flyaway hairs at her temple. It made a halo of them, absurdly soft. Her shoulders looked smaller than they had any right to be in the oversized cardigan she'd put on as if it were armour.

She didn't look at Celeste.

She was staring at the table's scarred surface, at nothing at all, and her hands were busying themselves with a scrap of ribbon—rolling it, unrolling it, rolling it again. The kind of repetitive motion that wasn't fidgeting so much as a prayer.

Celeste had invited Sarah in for this.

She had summoned Sarah with the cool confidence of someone who believed she was about to demonstrate something important. *Look*, she'd meant to say without words. *This is not a boy in a skirt. This is a person being built. With care. With intention. Under my roof.*

It had felt almost... generous. Almost gracious.

And Sarah—Sarah had walked in, taken one look, and calmly rearranged the hierarchy.

Celeste turned her head slightly, letting her gaze travel the familiar lines of the room. The racks. The pinned patterns. The mannequins in half-dressed silence. The ledger, closed, square, heavy as a promise on the side desk.

Her domain.

And yet, as Sarah's words sat there in the air, refusing to evaporate, Celeste felt something she hadn't expected to feel tonight: the particular humiliation of realising your household had kept its own counsel.

Not maliciously. Not even disloyally.

Protectively.

Celeste's jaw tightened once. Then loosened.

Because she could see it, suddenly, with a clarity so sharp it was almost rude: she had been watching Charli's progress the way a craftswoman watched a garment.

Stitching. Fit. Finish.

She had been pleased—quietly, deeply—when Charli began to walk more easily through the workroom. When she stopped flinching every time a woman laughed. When she started to speak without checking every face first for permission. When she moved in the space like she belonged there.

Celeste had seen those changes and filed them under *time*.

Time does this. Safety does this. Routine does this.

But safety—real safety—also does something else. It makes the body stop bracing. It makes the voice stop pretending to be lower than it is. It makes a person's softness come forward, cautiously, like an animal stepping out of shadow.

And the room had noticed. Of course they had.

Women noticed.

Women always noticed.

They noticed the way Charli's shoulders settled when someone called her *love* in passing. The way she took instruction better from a woman who didn't soften it. The way her attention snapped to certain tones—approval, disapproval, praise that meant *you're one of us now*.

They had named what they were witnessing, quietly, among themselves. The way women did, not with fanfare, but with a shift of language and a closing of ranks.

And Celeste—who ran Wardrobe, who drove its vision, who held its standards like a blade—had been too busy being competent to hear the murmur.

The thought should have made her defensive.

Instead it made her oddly... sober.

She looked at Charli again.

This time, she didn't look at her like a project. She looked like a woman trying to measure the cost of something she hadn't meant to outsource.

Charli's hands paused on the ribbon as if she'd felt Celeste's attention land differently.

Not heavier.

Just... more exact.

Charli's throat moved. A swallow. She still didn't lift her gaze.

Celeste walked around the table, slow enough that her footsteps didn't sound like a summons. She stopped close—close enough to make Charli's shoulders tense, just a fraction. That familiar shrink that happened before any outcome.

Celeste took in the instinct, the reflex, the history in that little recoil.

And something in her—something low and warm—shifted position.

Not anger.

Not pity.

Possession, in the cleanest sense: *mine to protect, mine to tend, mine to be accountable for.*

"Sarah was... Sarah," Celeste said quietly.

Charli's fingers resumed rolling the ribbon. Her voice came out small, careful. "She didn't mean—"

"I know what she meant." Celeste let a breath out through her nose. It came out almost like a laugh, but it didn't carry humour. "She meant you were never the only person in the room."

That made Charli's hands still again.

Celeste waited a beat. Then she reached for the ribbon—not taking it, not pulling it away, just pressing her fingertips lightly to it where Charli held it. A shared contact point. A tiny bridge.

Charli didn't let go.

She didn't pull away either.

Celeste spoke without raising her voice, without dramatics, like she was stating something she'd already decided.

"I should have seen sooner."

Charli's mouth parted. Her eyes flicked up—fast—and then down again, like she'd touched a hot surface.

"It wasn't—" Charli began, and stopped.

Celeste's fingertip traced the ribbon once. Not sensual. Not yet. Just deliberate.

"I'm not accusing you," Celeste said. The words were simple, but she said them as if she were laying a hand flat over a tremor in the air, steadyng it. "I'm... recalibrating."

Charli's shoulders softened a millimetre. It was almost nothing. It was everything.

Celeste leaned in—not over her, not looming, but close enough that Charli could feel the heat of her breath if she chose to. Close enough to make the moment unmistakable.

"You didn't hide," Celeste murmured. "You adapted. Like you always do. The room adapted around you. I was the slow one."

Charli's breath hitched. She made a tiny sound—something that wasn't a word, something swallowed.

Celeste lifted her other hand and rested it lightly at the base of Charli's neck, where the cardigan collar gaped. She felt the pulse there. Fast. Earnest. Telling on her.

Charli froze.

That old habit again: *hold still, be good, don't make trouble, don't make her change her mind.*

Celeste's thumb moved once—barely a stroke—and Charli's lashes fluttered.

Celeste watched the reaction with an intensity that startled even her. Not because she enjoyed Charli's vulnerability—she refused to be that sort of woman—but because she could see, with sudden, blistering clarity, what the room had been protecting.

Not a secret.

A *fragile becoming*.

And behind it, the shape of the crisis Sarah had alluded to so casually: the private terror of a girl who had finally begun to feel like herself... and then felt her body threaten to betray her.

Celeste's stomach tightened. The thought made her jaw set.

Not at Charli.

At biology. At neglect. At chance.

At anything that would dare make Charli feel she'd been foolish to bloom.

Charli whispered, "Celeste..."

It wasn't a question.

It was permission. Or plea. Or both.

Celeste didn't answer with words.

She bent and pressed a kiss to Charli's temple first—just hair and skin and the faintest trace of shampoo. A kiss that said: *I'm here. I'm not angry. I'm not leaving.*

Charli's shoulders shuddered once, like a breath that had been held too long finally released.

Celeste's mouth slid lower, slow, to the corner of Charli's brow, then to the soft place near her cheekbone. Each kiss measured. Each one an instruction to Charli's nervous system: *this is not consequence; this is closeness.*

Charli's hands loosened on the ribbon. It fell to the table with a soft, inconsequential sound.

Her fingers rose—hesitant, untrained—until they touched Celeste's wrist, then her forearm, as if she were checking whether the contact was allowed.

Celeste let her.

Then Celeste's hand at Charli's neck firmed—not rough, not impatient, but unmistakably certain.

Charli made a small, involuntary sound, and her face tilted up before she could stop herself.

There you are, Celeste thought, and the thought came with a flare of heat that was not managerial, not polite.

She had been trying to be careful, trying to be responsible, trying to be the woman who never let her private hunger turn into public risk.

But this was after-hours. After Sarah's flounce. After the room had closed its mouth and turned away.

This was the part where Celeste could be honest.

Celeste kissed her properly then—mouth to mouth, slow enough that Charli had time to choose it, deep enough that she couldn't pretend she hadn't been chosen.

Charli's first instinct was still to shrink. Celeste felt it: the slight backward hesitation, the tightness at the shoulders.

And then—because Charli was what she was, because she was made for tenderness the way some people were made for music—she softened into it.

She melted.

She blossomed.

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't performative. It was the simplest thing in the world: a girl accepting warmth when she'd expected reprimand.

Celeste broke the kiss only far enough to speak against Charli's lips.

"I'm going to pay attention," she said. "Properly. Not to the room. Not to the noise. To you."

Charli's eyes were wet when she opened them, and she looked wrecked in the loveliest, most honest way.

"Yes," she whispered, like it was the only word she had. Like it was enough.

Celeste's mouth curved—briefly, privately.

And in her chest, something resolved into a vow that was not soft at all.

It was steel wrapped in silk.

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If you'd like, I can do **two alternate endings** to this exact beat:

1. **Fade-to-black "safe" end** (lingering kiss, Celeste draws her away from the worktable, door clicks shut)
2. **Gentle lovemaking continuation** (kept tasteful, focused on touch and consent cues, Celeste's internal "reckoning" expressed via *how she touches*, not what she

thinks)

And if you tell me whether they're still in the **atelier** or have moved into **Celeste's private space** upstairs/nearby, I'll lock the physical choreography so it's seamless. 

    ...

Wow. Beautiful. Just needs to be tweaked to take place at Celeste's home (Sarah's visit? coffee? heat wave?) instead of at work at Wardrobe... which opens other possibilities, I dare say.

And oh, please expand on option 2, above... a lovely continuation. Thank you...

Mmm—yes. Moving it to Celeste's home instantly changes the *temperature* of everything (literal heat wave + emotional heat), and it also solves the "workplace unsafe" problem in one elegant stroke. 

Below is a **tweaked setting** (Celeste's place, post-coffee, post-Sarah-floounce) and then an **expanded Option 2 continuation** that stays grounded in *touch, consent cues, tenderness, and Celeste's clarity*—not explicit mechanics.

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### Scene tweak: Celeste's home, after Sarah's visit

Sarah left Celeste's house the same way she did most things: like the air was luckier for having been in her lungs.

The front door shut. Not slammed—Sarah wasn't vulgar—but closed with that precise, decisive click that felt like punctuation.

For a moment the hallway held its own hush: the tick of a wall clock, the faint hum of the fridge, the soft, persistent whirr of the pedestal fan Celeste had dragged out because the heat had been relentless all week. Even the air smelled warm—coffee and sunscreen and that faint, sweet-sour note of summer skin.

Celeste stood where she'd been left—hand still resting on the back of the dining chair Sarah had commandeered, fingers curled as if the timber could lend her composure.

On the table: two mugs. Sarah's half-finished, lipstick smudge on the rim like a signature. A plate with the last biscuit broken in half. The sweating glass jug of water Celeste had meant as hospitality and now regarded as evidence.

Charli was at the far end of the couch, knees tucked up under her like she was trying to make herself smaller than the cushions would allow. The throw rug was bunched in her lap. She had one corner of it pinched between her fingers and kept worrying it—roll, unroll, roll—quietly, rhythmically, the way some people played scales when they didn't know where to put the feeling.

She didn't look at Celeste.

Not because she didn't want to. Because looking first was always a kind of risk.

Celeste's jaw tightened once, then released. She watched Charli's hands for a beat longer than she should've—watched the care in them, the apology in them, the *I'll be good* in them—and something in her chest rearranged itself with a dull, sober click.

Sarah's little bombshell hadn't been cruel. It had been... instructive.

*So what else is new? We knew this about her all along. Do try to keep up, darling.*

"Darling" had been velvet over a blade.

Celeste had invited Sarah here to show her something. To stage a small, controlled reveal, to let Sarah see Charli through Celeste's lens—calm, purposeful, managed.

And Sarah had walked in, looked once, and gently flipped the board.

Not a rebellion. A correction.

Celeste turned her gaze back to Charli.

Not a project. Not a responsibility. A girl—emerging, privately, and apparently not at all new to the women who had been near her.

Celeste found that thought did not make her angry at Charli.

It made her angry at her own absence.

Not physical absence. Worse: the professional distance she'd worn like a virtue.

She crossed the room slowly, not making it a summons. The fan stirred her hair against her neck; the heat made everything feel a little too close, a little too honest.

Charli's shoulders tightened before Celeste even touched her—anticipation, not alarm. Habit.

Celeste sat on the couch—close enough that her thigh brushed Charli's through the throw, but not so close that Charli couldn't retreat if she wanted to. She made the closeness *available*, not compulsory.

Charli's breath caught. A tiny sound, swallowed.

Celeste didn't soften her voice into sentiment. She didn't scold. She simply said the truth.

"I should have seen sooner."

Charli's fingers stilled on the rug.

"It wasn't—" Charli began, then faltered, the words collapsing into the space between them like paper that couldn't hold its shape.

"I know." Celeste turned slightly, enough to face her. "I'm not accusing you. I'm recalibrating."

Charli looked up then—just a glance, quick as a spark—then down again as if her eyes had done something impolite.

Celeste lifted her hand and rested two fingers lightly at the base of Charli's throat, where her pulse lived. Not gripping. Not forcing. Just... present.

Charli froze.

Celeste felt the old reflex in her: *hold still, be good, don't cause trouble, don't make her change her mind.*

Celeste's thumb stroked once, barely a motion, and Charli's lashes fluttered like she'd been touched with sunlight.

"I was busy," Celeste said, and the admission tasted like iron. "I thought I was doing the right thing—keeping myself... removed. Professional. Safe."

Her gaze dropped to Charli's mouth and rose again.

"And meanwhile everyone else was noticing you."

Charli swallowed. "They... they were kind."

"I'm grateful," Celeste said. "I'm also... not pleased I wasn't the one you could rely on first."

That finally brought Charli's eyes up properly—wide, glossy, terrified of being too much.

Celeste leaned in and kissed Charli's temple—hairline, skin, the faint salt of heat. A kiss that said *this is not punishment*.

Charli shuddered once, as if she'd been holding her breath since Sarah walked in.

Celeste kissed the corner of her brow, then her cheekbone, slow enough that Charli had time to choose each one.

Charli's hands loosened on the throw. Her fingers lifted, tentative, and rested against Celeste's forearm like she was testing whether touch was permitted.

Celeste didn't speak for a moment.

She simply let her body answer: yes.

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## **Continuation: gentle lovemaking, Celeste leading with care and clarity**

Celeste shifted closer, not abruptly—by degrees, like easing a knot rather than yanking it free. She let her hip align with Charli's, let their knees touch beneath the throw, let the contact become ordinary.

Charli's breath went shallow.

Celeste felt the tremor of it in the air more than she heard it.

"Look at me," Celeste murmured—not an order like a boss, but a request the way you asked for a door to be opened.

Charli's eyes lifted.

She looked like she was bracing for an exam.

Celeste's mouth curved—briefly, privately.

"You're not in trouble," Celeste said. "And you're not responsible for what the room decided to do kindly."

Charli's throat bobbed again. "I didn't... I didn't mean to make—"

"You didn't make anything." Celeste let her thumb rest at Charli's pulse. *Steady.* "You existed. The women around you responded. That's all."

Charli's shoulders softened a fraction. A small surrender.

Celeste leaned in and kissed her mouth—gentle, patient, a kiss that arrived like a question and waited for its answer.

Charli hesitated for the length of a heartbeat.

Then she kissed back.

Not bold. Not practiced. But present.

The relief in it made Celeste's chest tighten.

She drew back slightly—just enough to read Charli's face. Charli followed her, unconsciously, as if afraid the warmth would be taken away.

Celeste saw it. Filed it. Decided something.

"Do you want me?" she asked, low and plain.

Charli's eyes went wide at the directness. It wasn't the question that startled her—it was the permission in it.

She nodded first, then managed a breathy, "Yes."

Celeste kissed her again, deeper this time—not demanding, just more certain. Charli made a small sound into her mouth, and it was the sound of someone realising they were allowed to feel good without earning it.

Celeste's hand slid from Charli's throat to her jaw, cradling it, guiding her angle as if she were teaching a new step—slow, sure, impossible to misinterpret.

Charli's fingers clutched lightly at Celeste's sleeve, then relaxed, then clutched again—her body negotiating the unfamiliar safety of being held without conditions.

Celeste broke the kiss and rested her forehead to Charli's for a moment.

The fan ticked as it oscillated. The clock kept its steady, indifferent count. Outside, somewhere down the street, a dog barked once and stopped.

Normal life, going on.

But here, the world had narrowed to breath and heat and the clean fact of contact.

Celeste's hand slid to Charli's waist beneath the throw, palm warm through fabric. She felt Charli flinch—tiny—and then, as Celeste didn't withdraw, felt her melt into the hold.

"There you are," Celeste whispered, and she meant it in the truest sense: *I see you. I am here. You do not have to hide.*

Charli's eyes went wet, and she blinked hard like she hated the evidence of it.

Celeste kissed her again—softly, insistently—and Charli's resistance dissolved into something like trust.

Celeste shifted them, not rushing: she guided Charli to lie back along the couch, angling her carefully so she was supported, comfortable, not trapped. She moved the throw aside only as much as necessary, keeping Charli's dignity intact, keeping the moment intimate rather than exposed.

Charli watched her the whole time, breath fluttering.

Celeste paused—again, that deliberate habit of checking.

"Still yes?" she asked.

Charli nodded, almost desperate. "Yes."

That answer—small, unwavering—lit a quiet heat in Celeste's belly. Not the heat of conquest. The heat of responsibility accepted gladly.

Celeste kissed her from the cheek to the corner of her mouth to the hollow beneath her ear, learning the places Charli reacted—how her skin turned hypersensitive when Celeste lingered, how her hands stopped fidgeting when Celeste held her wrists gently and simply *kept them still* with calm assurance.

Charli's body, which had been trained to brace, began to unlearn itself one breath at a time.

She made sounds—tiny, involuntary—then tried to swallow them.

Celeste's mouth found her again, and Celeste's voice, when it came, was low and firm.

"Don't apologise," she said. "Not for this."

Charli's eyes squeezed shut. Her brow creased. She looked like she might cry, or laugh, or break apart into relief.

Celeste kissed the crease smooth.

She slid a hand under Charli's hair and cradled her head, keeping her close, keeping her safe, and felt Charli's whole body slowly give in—not to lust, exactly, but to the radical idea that tenderness could be uncomplicated.

The passion came anyway, threading itself through the gentleness like a live wire.

Celeste felt it in the way Charli pressed up into her touch, in the way Charli's breath started to match hers, in the way Charli's shiver stopped being fear and became something else—something bright.

When Celeste finally lifted her head, Charli's eyes were dazed, open, trusting in a way that looked almost like astonishment.

Celeste hovered close enough that Charli could taste her words.

"I'm going to pay attention," Celeste said. "Properly. Not to rumours. Not to what the room decides without me. To you."

Charli's lips parted. Her voice was barely there.

"Okay."

Celeste kissed her again—slow, sealing.

And as Charli softened into it, blossoming with that same helpless grace she carried into everything, Celeste felt her own vow settle into place—not sentimental, not vague.

Steel wrapped in silk.

Tonight, Celeste thought, she would not be late again.

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## A few "home setting" hooks you can now exploit (delicious possibilities 😊)

- **Heat wave as permission:** clothes lighter, skin more exposed *naturally* (not staged), fan noise masking small sounds, windows open, cicadas, late light.

- **Sarah's "coffee visit" becomes a stealth intervention:** she chooses Celeste's home so Celeste can't hide behind "work."
- **Charli's home-self vs Wardrobe-self:** at home she's softer, more uncertain; Celeste realises she only knows "atelier Charli," not "girl-at-rest Charli."
- **Celeste's private space as a symbol:** she is literally letting Charli further inside her life—into her house, her quiet, her rules.

If you want, I can also give you **two alternate continuations** with slightly different flavours:

1. **More tender / more "repair"** (Celeste guiding Charli through calming touch, very slow burn, more tears, more settling)
2. **More hungry / more "clarity with teeth"** (still consensual and not explicit, but Celeste's desire is sharper—she *claims* with more confidence)

Just tell me which way you want Celeste's heat to lean tonight.  



I am \*convinced\* the gentle reader, at this stage, is going to be grateful, deeply so, for this romantic interlude. To stay within what the reader would expect--Celeste's burgeoning desire--I would love to see \*more hungry/more clarity\*...

And it all evolves softly, beautifully... all without any graphics. Just beauty. Here's what I want to do... have the unfolding of Celeste's heat--and Charli's relishing in it--be the whole of Scene 38. Beautiful love scene. Scene 38 ends. Lovely.

Scene 39. Sarah's POV past tense. She's alone in bed: her 'lover' has just left. He's happy: sexually satisfied. She's deeply frustrated. Feeling empty: stark contrast to how we ended Scene 38. Both have "lovemaking": one ends in pure joy and peace, the other begins with intense dissatisfaction. Sarah's frustration isn't with the act itself... it was \*okay\*, not really focusing on her pleasure, but oh well. But what really irritates was the lack of

tenderness, the complete absence of afterglow. So, that will be the intro to Sarah's little adventures...

Yes. This contrast is *chef's-kiss* storytelling. 😊🔥

Scene 38 becomes the **gold standard**—desire with care, heat with *attention*, power that *cherishes*. Then Scene 39 opens on the emotional hangover of male-pattern intimacy: “fine” mechanics, empty soul. That’s not just sexy; it’s *thematic*. ❤️

Below: **Scene 38 (Celeste POV, past tense)** — *hungrier / clearer*, still entirely non-graphic. Then a **Scene 39 opener (Sarah POV, past tense)** that sets up her arc and her irritation with precision.

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### Scene 38 — “Heat, With Teeth” (Celeste POV, past tense)

The heat had its own personality tonight—clingy, impatient, insinuating itself under skin and into thought. The pedestal fan moved left to right like an indifferent metronome, pushing warm air around rather than removing it.

Sarah’s lipstick mark still ghosted one mug on the table.

Celeste stared at it for a moment longer than necessary, then turned away as if that tiny stain had said something insulting.

Charli was on the couch, knees drawn up, hands busy with the edge of the throw. She looked like someone waiting for a verdict.

Celeste sat beside her, close enough that their thighs touched—contact made quiet and ordinary, not a dramatic claim. Charli’s breath hitched anyway. There it was, that old reflex: brace, shrink, behave.

Celeste put two fingers to Charli’s pulse—lightly, deliberately—feeling the quick thrum that betrayed her before words could.

“Look at me,” she said.

Not sharp. Not soft. Simply *true*.

Charli’s eyes lifted.

It was always startling, how open her face was when she surrendered the habit of hiding. Not just pretty—though she was, in that gentle, almost startled way—but *unguarded*. As if the world had never taught her to weaponise herself.

Celeste's mouth curved once.

"I'm not angry with you," Celeste said. "I'm angry I missed you."

Charli blinked, lashes damp. She tried for a sentence and failed.

Celeste leaned in and kissed her—right on the mouth, no preamble. Not because she was impatient. Because she refused to make this into a hearing.

The kiss wasn't rough. It wasn't rushed. But it had no apology in it.

Charli froze for the length of a heartbeat, then softened—melted—like the question had finally been asked in a language she understood.

Celeste tasted coffee on her, the faint sweetness of whatever Sarah had insisted they try, and underneath that the heat of Charli's own body. The warmth was not incidental; it was invitation.

Celeste kissed again, deeper. Charli made a small sound that was not practiced and not performative—purely involuntary.

Celeste pulled back only enough to see her.

Charli's lips were parted. Her pupils were wide. She looked dazed with relief and with wanting, as if she hadn't quite believed she was allowed to want anything without first being useful.

Celeste felt something shift low in her belly—an iron certainty dressed in silk.

"Do you want this?" she asked, quiet and direct.

Charli nodded fast, then caught herself as if enthusiasm might be punishable. "Yes."

The "yes" landed like a key turning.

Celeste kissed her again, and this time she didn't manage the kiss like a careful woman tidying up her own feelings. She let her desire show—through the firmness of her hand at Charli's jaw, the way she guided the angle of her mouth, the calm insistence of *stay with me*.

Charli's fingers clutched at Celeste's sleeve, then loosened, then returned—as if her body kept checking whether the warmth was real.

Celeste slid her hand to Charli's throat again, thumb resting over the pulse. It wasn't a hold. It was a signal: *I can feel you. I'm here. You don't have to disappear.*

Charli shivered—this time not with fear, but with recognition.

The fan clicked as it turned. The clock kept counting. Somewhere outside a car passed with its windows down, music leaking into the night like somebody else's life.

Celeste didn't care.

She moved them—not dragging, not manoeuvring—simply guiding Charli down along the couch so Charli could lie back properly, supported, comfortable. Charli let herself be placed, pliant in the most disarming way. Not passive—trusting.

Celeste paused, watching Charli's face.

"Still yes?" she asked.

Charli's reply was breathy, certain. "Yes."

The second yes felt different: not a plea, but consent with confidence.

Good girl, Celeste thought—not as praise for obedience, but as a private recognition of Charli's courage. Of her willingness to remain present.

Celeste bent and kissed her again, slower now, letting her mouth wander—cheek, the corner of her lips, the hollow beneath her ear. Charli's head tipped back on instinct, giving her access as if her body already understood what her mind was still catching up to.

And then Celeste's hunger rose—clean, focused, unapologetic.

Not the hunger of taking.

The hunger of *choosing*.

She kissed Charli with more pressure, more certainty, and Charli answered with a soft, broken sound that went straight through Celeste like a spark.

Charli's hands found Celeste—hesitant at first, then braver. Fingers at her shoulder, her arm, the side of her ribs—touching as if confirming Celeste was real. As if astonished

Celeste wanted her like this: not as a duty, not as an ethical project, but as a woman wanting a woman.

Celeste lifted her head and looked down at Charli's face.

Charli looked utterly undone—eyes glossy, mouth pink from kissing, expression open in a way Celeste could only describe as *relieved to be wanted*.

It made Celeste go very still.

Not because she didn't want her.

Because she wanted her so fiercely she needed to be careful with it.

"You're not going to vanish on me," Celeste said, her voice low. "Not in my house. Not with me."

Charli's throat worked. "I'm here."

Celeste brushed a kiss to the corner of her mouth—almost tender again, almost gentle.

Then she spoke against Charli's lips, and there was a smile in it, a small, dangerous warmth.

"Good," she murmured. "Stay."

Charli's eyes fluttered shut as if the word had weight.

Celeste kissed her, and this time she didn't keep herself politely in check. She let the heat in her body translate into touch—still respectful, still attentive, but unmistakably hungry. She let Charli feel it: *I want you, and I am not ashamed of that*.

Charli arched into her with a soft sound, and Celeste felt the moment Charli stopped holding herself apart from pleasure.

There was no dramatics. No performance.

Just a gradual, beautiful surrender.

Charli's breathing changed—deeper, more ragged. Her hands tightened, then softened, then held Celeste with a kind of reverence that made Celeste's chest ache.

Celeste pressed her forehead briefly to Charli's, and for a moment the hunger eased into something like awe.

"I'm going to pay attention," Celeste said again, quieter now, the vow settling into place.

"Properly. I'm not outsourcing you to anyone."

Charli's eyes opened, wet and shining. "Okay," she whispered.

Celeste kissed her once more—slow, sealing.

And when Charli finally exhaled, she did it like someone who had been bracing for years and had, at last, been allowed to rest.

Celeste held her there, close and claimed, until the fan swung back again and the room remembered how to breathe.

*End Scene 38.*

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### **Scene 39 — opener (Sarah POV, past tense)**

He left like a man who believed the world was fundamentally in order.

Not hurried. Not sneaking. Not tender either—just the satisfied efficiency of someone who'd taken what he came for and now felt pleasantly finished with the evening, like a person putting a glass into the sink after a drink.

Sarah lay on her back and listened to the small sounds of his departure: the soft thud of shoes near the door, the faint jingle of keys, the brief pause as he decided whether to say something meaningful and then—predictably—didn't.

The latch clicked.

Silence settled over the bedroom in a way that didn't feel peaceful. It felt... vacant. Like the room had been drained of something it hadn't been holding much of to begin with.

Sarah stared at the ceiling fan as it rotated lazily through the warm dark. The air was still thick with heat and the faint, bland smell of him—soap and deodorant and that particular male confidence that always seemed to assume it was welcome.

She could have called it "fine."

The act itself had been fine. Adequate. Not violent, not rude, not even particularly selfish in a way that would be easy to name.

But that was the problem: it hadn't been *anything*.

No tenderness. No afterglow. No lingering hand on her waist as if her body was worth remembering. No kiss that said, *I liked being near you*, instead of *I enjoyed what you did for me*.

He'd been happy. Of course he had.

Sarah wasn't even angry at the sex. She was irritated by the emptiness around it—the way he'd risen afterward and resumed being a person with plans, while she remained... a surface the night had happened on.

She let out a breath that wasn't quite a laugh.

Men were astonishing like that: perfectly capable of taking pleasure and mistaking it for intimacy.

Sarah rolled onto her side and stared at the patch of sheet he'd left behind—already cooling, already irrelevant.

Her fingers flexed once against the fabric, restless.

And in the quiet, uninvited and sharp as lemon, a thought arrived:

*If that's the best they can do with a woman who knows her own mind... what do they do to girls who don't?*

Sarah's mouth tightened.

She thought of Celeste—of that calm, watchful competence that occasionally slipped into something more dangerous when it was provoked. She thought of Charli—soft, earnest, heartbreakingly grateful for kindness.

And Sarah felt the same irritation rise again, not at the man who'd just left, but at the wider pattern: the way tenderness was treated like an optional extra, the way women were expected to settle for "fine" and call it romance.

"No," Sarah said aloud, to the empty room.

It came out quiet.

It came out like a promise.

---

If you want, I can now do either (or both):

1. Full Scene 39 (Sarah's internal monologue sharpening into intent; her philosophy about men, tenderness, and what she wants next; plus how this ties back to Wardrobe/Celeste/Charli) 🎭✍️
2. A short **bridge paragraph** that links Scene 38's peace to Scene 39's starkness (a thematic "match cut" without being showy). 🎬✨

□             ...

I was going to go with another option: this little experience is enough for Sarah to decide she was worth more than this, and in true Sarah fashion, rings him up--he's on the golf course with his mates--and tells him, she was ending their relationship. He protests, she hangs up--she's done--and he starts to cling (for a while, until he finds someone else). End scene 39.

Scene 40: Sarah then meets Carl, respectful, nice guy, does everything right--I think you had him meet her at Wardrobe: he was an electrician there to fix something. They end up going out on a date, and whilst there, Celeste and Charli, but also Bree and Lily keep intruding, and she looks at Carl and realises, that as nice as he is--truly a decent bloke who \*would\* be tender and thoughtful--her actual happiness was woman-shaped. So, she has to be honest with him. And of course, he's disappointed, but gracious. End scene 40

What I want to do is say: all blokes are not jerks, some are really nice but they may still not be \*right\* for you as a woman.

Yes--this is *exactly* the right kind of Sarah move: decisive, clean, faintly ruthless, and utterly self-respecting. 😊📞✨ And I adore the thematic clarity of it:

- Scene 39: "I'm not doing this anymore" → boundary, power, zero negotiation.
- Scene 40: "Even the good ones aren't *my* ones" → self-truth without cruelty.

That last line you want to land--*not all blokes are jerks, some are lovely, but not right for you*--will feel earned rather than preachy if you let it come out through Sarah's *relief* and

the **shape** of her attention when a woman enters the frame.

Below I'll draft **Scene 39 (Sarah POV)** and **Scene 40 (Sarah POV)** in past tense, with minimal exposition and lots of "show." I'll keep it non-graphic, keep Wardrobe voices consistent, and make the intrusions on the date feel like *life*, not a contrivance. 🌱

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## **Scene 39 — "The Golf Course Call" (Sarah POV, past tense)**

The morning light was mean.

It came in flat and bright through the blinds and made everything look too honest—discarded clothes, rumpled sheets, the empty space beside her like an accusation. Sarah sat on the edge of the bed and drank water straight from the glass, as if hydration could fix the taste he'd left in the room.

Her phone lay on the bedside table.

She stared at it.

It wasn't rage that moved her, not really. Rage was messy. Rage implied investment.

This was simpler.

This was the quiet certainty of a woman realising she'd accepted something beneath her standards—and feeling, not shame, but irritation that she'd let it waste an evening of her life.

She thumbed her contacts. Found his name. Tapped.

It rang longer than it should've. Then the background noise came through—wind, men's laughter, the hollow echo of open space.

"Hey," he said, voice bright. Pleased with himself. "You alright?"

Sarah closed her eyes for a beat. Let his tone tell her everything she needed to know.

"Yep," she said. "I'm ending this."

A pause. Like he hadn't heard her correctly.

"What?"

"I'm ending it," Sarah repeated. She kept her voice calm on purpose. The calm was the point. "This relationship. Whatever we were pretending it was."

His laugh came out wrong—too quick, too defensive. "What? Because of last night? Sarah—come on—"

Behind him someone called his name, muffled by distance.

"Mate, you teeing off or what?"

He lowered his voice. "Listen, you're overthinking it. We're good. We had fun. Don't do this on the phone."

Sarah looked at her own bare feet on the carpet. The ordinary domesticity of the moment almost amused her.

"This is actually the perfect place to do it," she said. "You're with your mates. You'll recover. Quickly."

He exhaled hard. "This is insane."

"No," Sarah said softly. "What's insane is you thinking you get to argue about it."

She could hear him shifting, moving away from the others. The wind buffeted the mic.

"Sarah, seriously—what do you *want* from me?" he demanded, like she was a faulty appliance.

The question was so revealing she almost thanked him.

"Tenderness," she said, and let the single word sit there between them like a dropped glass.

He didn't reply.

Not properly.

He did what men did when they were offered a feeling they couldn't quantify.

He tried to bargain.

"I can be—I mean, I am—look, we can work on that."

Sarah smiled without humour.

"That," she said, "is the problem. It's not a renovation project."

He made a sound—frustrated, affronted. "So you're just... done?"

"Yes."

"I thought you liked me."

"I do," Sarah said, which was true in the limited way you liked someone who never made you feel unsafe. "But liking you isn't the same thing as wanting this. And I don't date to fill space."

Another pause.

Then his voice softened—not tender, just tactical. "We can talk about it tonight."

"No," Sarah said, and the word came out like a door closing.

"Sarah—don't be like that."

She looked at the phone as if it had said something stupid.

"Like what?"

"Cold."

Sarah's brow lifted.

"Cold," she repeated, tasting it. "Right. Sure."

She could hear him breathing now, a little faster. The first crack in his confidence.

"I'm not cold," she said. "I'm finished."

He started talking again—too many words, too urgent, suddenly desperate to keep the thing he'd assumed would always be available.

Sarah didn't let him get momentum.

She hung up.

Not dramatically. Not triumphantly.

Just... clean.

The silence that followed wasn't empty like last night's had been. It was spacious. It was relief.

Her phone buzzed almost immediately: a missed call. Then another. Then a text, then two.

Sarah put it face-down on the bedside table and went to make coffee.

Outside, a magpie warbled like it was gossiping about her.

She felt an unexpected little laugh rise in her throat.

He would cling for a bit.

Of course he would.

That was fine.

Clinging was not the same thing as being right.

And Sarah had finally remembered the difference.

*End Scene 39.*

---

## **Scene 40 — “The Good One” (Sarah POV, past tense)**

He turned up at Wardrobe with a tool belt and a polite expression.

Sarah noticed both.

Not because she was shallow—she wasn't—but because years of navigating men had taught her that competence came in different flavours: loud competence that wanted applause, and quiet competence that just got on with the job.

This one had the second kind.

Mara pointed him toward the back wall where the lights had been flickering like a haunted house feature. He listened. He nodded. He asked one sensible question. Then he got to work without making anyone's day harder than it already was.

Sarah found herself watching him between stitches.

Not in a hungry way.

In a curious way.

When he finished, he wiped his hands on a rag and looked at Mara—not at Celeste, not at Sarah, not at whichever woman happened to be nearest—as if the authority in the room was obvious to him.

"All sorted," he said. "That fitting room circuit was loose. I re-terminated it. Should be stable now."

Mara's nod was brief, approving. "Good."

He smiled—small, contained. "Carl."

Sarah gave him a look. "Sarah."

His gaze flicked to her hands—needle, thread, the precision of her work—then back to her face.

"You make that look... easy," he said.

Sarah snorted. "It's not."

"I figured," he said, and there was no condescension in it. Just respect. "Still. It's good work."

He didn't overdo it. He didn't flirt like it was a performance. He didn't scan her body as if he was shopping.

He just... spoke to her like she was a person.

Which, depressingly, narrowed the field.

Later—because Celeste had the subtlety of a freight train when she wanted something to happen—there was an invitation that wasn't exactly an invitation.

"Come out with us," Celeste said, as if she were scheduling a meeting. "Saturday. Somewhere with shade. Sarah needs feeding. You too, if you're not feral."

Carl's eyebrows went up, amused. "That's an option?"

"It's always an option," Celeste said. "Most people choose better."

Sarah rolled her eyes, but she found herself saying, "Alright then," as if she wasn't curious.

The date—if it could be called that—was easy.

Carl picked a place that wasn't trying too hard. He arrived on time. He asked questions and actually waited for answers. He didn't fill silence like it was a threat. When Sarah teased him, he laughed without trying to win.

And Sarah, to her surprise, didn't feel like she had to armour herself.

The trouble began about twenty minutes in, when Celeste texted:

**where are you**

Sarah stared at it.

Of course.

She hadn't even replied when Bree sent a photo: Bree and Lily somewhere bright and smug, holding iced coffees like trophies.

**You better not be having fun without us 😊**

Sarah looked up to find Carl watching her with mild curiosity, not suspicion.

"Your... friends?" he asked.

Sarah sighed. "My... workplace. It's a women's atelier. They behave like a flock."

Carl's smile was warm. "Sounds... intense."

"It is," Sarah said. "And occasionally delightful."

A minute later, Celeste and Charli actually *appeared*—not on purpose, Sarah suspected, but as if the universe itself had decided Sarah wasn't allowed one uncomplicated experience.

Celeste spotted them and did that crisp, predatory pause she did when she was assessing a scene.

Charli hovered half a step behind, polite as a ghost.

Bree and Lily arrived shortly after, laughing too loudly and immediately taking control of the table arrangement as if it were a military operation.

Carl stood when they came over. He introduced himself. He shook hands. He didn't leer, didn't interrupt, didn't puff up.

He was... good.

A decent bloke.

The kind of man you could bring home to a mother who was difficult to impress.

And Sarah sat there, watching him hold his own without pushing, watching him make space for the women without vanishing, and realised the truth with a kind of quiet inevitability:

He wasn't wrong.

He just wasn't *hers*.

Because the warmth she felt tonight—what steadied her, what made her softer—wasn't Carl's attention.

It was the way Charli leaned into Celeste's shoulder when Celeste murmured something at her ear.

It was the way Celeste reached for Charli's water glass without thinking, refilled it, slid it back—care like muscle memory.

It was the flicker in Bree's eyes when Lily touched her wrist.

It was woman-shaped. Woman-made. Woman-understood.

Sarah felt her stomach drop a fraction—not with dread, but with clarity.

Carl glanced at her as the others argued about dessert.

"You alright?" he asked quietly, like he'd noticed the shift.

Sarah looked at him.

He deserved honesty. The real kind, not the kind that patted a man on the head and sent him away confused.

"I am," she said. Then she inhaled, steady. "But I need to tell you something, before this turns into... anything."

Carl's face changed—subtle, bracing. "Okay."

Sarah let herself be blunt. It was kinder.

"You're lovely," she said. "You've done everything right. You're not a jerk."

A flicker of pain crossed his mouth anyway. He tried to hide it. He wasn't very good at lying.

Sarah continued, not rushing.

"But my happiness," she said, and her voice softened despite herself, "is not shaped like you."

Carl held her gaze.

For a second he looked like he wanted to bargain. Then he exhaled, long and controlled, and nodded once.

"Right," he said. "Thank you for telling me straight."

Sarah's chest loosened with relief so sharp it almost hurt.

He gave a small, honest smile. "Still... I'm glad I met you."

Sarah returned it. "Me too."

And because he was decent, he didn't make it ugly.

Because she was Sarah, she didn't pretend it was anything but what it was.

Not all blokes were jerks.

Some were genuinely good.

But goodness wasn't the same thing as *right*.

And Sarah had finally decided she wasn't going to confuse the two ever again.

*End Scene 40.*

---

If you'd like, I can now do one of these as a "finisher":

- A **two-paragraph bridge** at the end of Scene 40 that cleanly tees up Sarah's next adventures (without feeling episodic).
- Or a **single killer final line** for Scene 40 that echoes Scene 38's peace without repeating it—something like a thematic rhyme.

Also: do you want Sarah's dumped-golf-bloke to keep texting in **funny, creepy, or pathetic** ways? That choice will tint Sarah's next beat beautifully. 🤡📱



Do I want Sarah's dumped-golf-bloke to keep texting in funny, creepy, or pathetic ways? Absolutely. And then, tie in Scene 38's peace (thematic rhythm) as a final line.

By the way, I was going to keep Carl as supporting: at some stage in the future, Tahlia reveals she's been seeing Carl. Something to write into the story arc timeline somewhere.

Backdrop for Scene 41: Wardrobe got it's first large order: not the usual simple costumes, either (1770s). This was from a Faire just starting up in Brisbane/Gold Coast, with theme: Les Miserables. Whole different costume set. Material generally needed to be a bit lighter: SE QLD can be quite warm. Wardrobe was up to the task, of course, until they revealed how many they wanted. Against that backdrop, Lauren's finally confronted Roger with his infidelity... she was now financially independent which is often why women feel they have to stay in a relationship. The separation turned ugly, Sarah offered Lauren safe haven at her place. Scene 41 ends with Lauren almost turning Sarah down because Lauren had feelings for Sarah--a growing attraction for this fiery English woman--that she was sure Sarah could never reciprocate, but relented because the situation had turned dire with Roger. Scene 41 would be in Lauren's POV, past tense.

📅 Updated saved memory

Ohhhh yes please 🤡📱 — if we're going to have Golf Bloke cling, let him do it in that *spectacularly male* way: a cocktail of **pathetic + unintentionally funny**, with the occasional toe-dip into **mildly creepy entitlement** (not "thriller," more "ugh, of course

he did"). It'll make Sarah's clean boundary feel even more delicious, and it'll echo Scene 38's peace by contrast. 🌙✨

Below I've done three things:

1. A stream of texts from Golf Bloke (pathetic/funny/creepy) + Sarah's *minimal* responses (or non-responses).
  2. A final line for Scene 40 that rhymes with Scene 38's peace.
  3. A full draft of Scene 41 in Lauren POV, past tense, with the Les Mis order + Roger confrontation + Sarah offering shelter + Lauren almost refusing because feelings.
- 

## 1) Golf Bloke's texts: pathetic, funny, with a whiff of creep 😊📱

(Immediately after Scene 39 — rapid-fire)

HIM: Sarah call me.

HIM: Seriously. Don't do this.

HIM: You always do this dramatic shit when you get in your head.

HIM: I'm coming over later and we'll talk like adults.

Sarah didn't reply. She made coffee. She watched the steam rise and felt her nervous system unclench like someone had finally taken off a tight watch.

HIM: I told the boys you're just having a moment.

HIM: Don't embarrass me with this.

That one earned him a brief response.

**SARAH:** Don't tell me what to do.

HIM: Wow. Cold.

HIM: Who put you up to this?

HIM: Is it those women you work with? That place is weird.

Sarah put the phone face-down again. The silence felt like clean linen.

---

(That evening — the "I'm a victim" phase)

HIM: I haven't eaten all day.

HIM: Just saying.

HIM: Not your problem I guess.

Sarah smiled, once, without humour.

HIM: I've been thinking about last night and I actually was tender.

HIM: I kissed you.

HIM: You're rewriting it.

Sarah left him on read.

---

**(Next day — the bargaining)**

HIM: I can do afterglow if that's what you want.

HIM: Like cuddle.

HIM: We can make a list.

Sarah's laugh escaped before she could stop it—small, sharp.

HIM: That laugh emoji would've been nice.

HIM: Are you laughing at me?

Sarah didn't reply. She let him sit in his own discomfort like a grown man.

---

**(Two days later — the “accidental” creep)**

HIM: Saw your car near the shops.

HIM: Didn't realise you go there.

HIM: Small world.

Sarah's thumb hovered. Then she sent exactly one sentence.

**SARAH:** Don't monitor me.

HIM: Jesus. I just meant I noticed.

HIM: You're making me out to be some psycho.

He was doing it again: making her responsible for his emotional regulation.

Sarah blocked him for twelve hours, unblocked him purely to watch what he'd do, then blocked him again when he did exactly what she predicted.

---

**(A week later — the extinction burst)**

HIM: I miss you.

HIM: No one else laughs at my jokes.

HIM: I bought those biscuits you like.

HIM: I'm outside.

Sarah didn't go to the door. She didn't look out the window. She didn't grant him the dignity of being a scene.

She texted one line, calm as a guillotine.

**SARAH:** Leave or I'll call the police.

There was a long pause.

Then:

**HIM:** Wow. So that's who you are.

Sarah stared at the message, then thought of Charli's face when Celeste said *stay*—and felt the contrast like a physical relief.

She blocked him permanently.

And the peace, when it arrived, felt almost... chosen.

---

**2) Final line for Scene 40 that echoes Scene 38's peace** 

Here are **three options**—pick whichever lands best in your voice:

**Option A (simple, resonant):**

*And for the first time in weeks, Sarah went home and felt the quiet settle around her like it belonged there.*

**Option B (rhymes with Scene 38's "rest"):**

*It wasn't love yet—just truth—but it let her body finally unclench, the way peace always did when it was earned.*

**Option C (Sarah-flavoured, a touch dry):**

*Nice men were real. So was her no. And that, she found, slept beautifully.*

(If you want *more explicit thematic rhyme* with Scene 38: we can mirror a verb like "unclench," "exhale," or "rest.")

---

### 3) Scene 41 — “The Weight of Orders” (Lauren POV, past tense)

Wardrobe had always been busy in the way a good kitchen was busy—productive noise, purposeful movement, women speaking in shorthand because competence didn’t need speeches.

But this week was different.

This week the workroom had a *weight*.

The first big order arrived in an email that read like a dream: a new Faire setting up between Brisbane and the Gold Coast—bright-eyed, ambitious, themed around **Les Misérables**, and hungry for authenticity.

Not the usual tidy eighteenth-century silhouettes that Wardrobe could draft in its sleep.

This was nineteenth-century France: layers and hardship and seams that were meant to look lived-in. And the organisers had been polite about Queensland’s climate, too—lighter materials, breathable choices, costumes that wouldn’t turn performers into boiled prawns.

Celeste had been delighted.

Mara had been interested.

Bree had made a face and said, “Finally. Something that lets people sweat *for art*.”

Sarah had smiled like a woman who could smell challenge the way other people smelled bread.

Lauren had watched all of it—watched the women lean forward, hungry and capable—and felt something in her chest lift with pride that was still new enough to surprise her.

They could do it. Of course they could.

Then the organiser revealed the number.

The room didn’t go silent. That wasn’t Wardrobe’s style. But a particular kind of stillness settled, like every woman in the building had done the same calculation at once.

It wasn't impossible.

It was just... a lot.

The kind of lot that changed how you breathed.

Lauren's hands had stayed steady on her clipboard as if her body didn't know her life was rearranging itself by the hour. She moved through the workroom, collecting fabric quotes, noting quantities, listening to Celeste's quiet directives—this, then this, then this—like a captain mapping a storm.

And all the while, Lauren felt the other storm pressing at the edge of her mind, waiting for a gap.

Roger.

It was almost laughable, how long she'd managed to hold him at bay by staying too busy to feel anything properly.

But busyness had limits. So did denial.

That afternoon, when she finally went home, the air in her house felt wrong—too empty, too staged, like a hotel room someone had tried to make look lived in.

Roger's shoes were by the door. His keys were in the bowl. His scent—aftershave and entitlement—hung in the hallway as if it owned the place.

Lauren's stomach tightened.

She didn't go to the kitchen first. She didn't tidy. She didn't do any of her old rituals that had served as delay tactics for years.

She went straight to the study.

Roger was there, leaning back in his chair, phone in hand, smiling at something on the screen like a man who had never once feared consequence.

He looked up as if he'd been expecting her. Not with warmth. With calculation.

"Hey," he said.

Lauren heard her own voice come out calm.

"I know."

His smile faltered. Then returned, thinner. "Know what?"

Lauren placed her handbag on the desk with care. Not because she cared about the bag. Because she was anchoring herself to something physical.

"The messages," she said. "The hotel receipts. The lies that don't even bother trying anymore."

Roger's expression did a small, practiced shift into indignation.

"You went through my—"

"Don't," Lauren said.

The single word stopped him. It surprised her, how cleanly it came out. Like Celeste had lent her a spine.

Roger stared at her for a moment, then tried a different tack—the one that used to work.

"You're tired," he said. "You've been working too much. You're letting those women get in your head."

Lauren blinked slowly.

She realised, with a clarity that almost made her laugh, that he was still speaking to the old version of her: the one who needed him. The one who had stayed because she couldn't see a way out.

She could see it now.

And it was woman-shaped.

"No," she said. "I'm letting myself get in my head. For the first time in years."

Roger's jaw tightened. "So what, you're leaving?"

Lauren paused.

It was a strange moment—standing in her own house, looking at the man she'd built a life around, and feeling... nothing tender. Just a kind of tired, lucid sadness.

"I'm asking you to," she said. "Tonight."

Roger's eyes widened, genuinely offended.

"You can't be serious."

Lauren surprised herself again.

"I'm financially independent," she said. "I don't need you to survive."

She watched that land. Watched the way his face changed—not grief, not remorse—just anger at losing a convenience.

"You ungrateful—" he started.

Lauren lifted her hand.

"Don't," she said again, and the second time it wasn't borrowed strength. It was hers.

Roger stood so suddenly his chair scraped the floor.

"You think you're better than me now?" he snapped. "Because you've got some little women's club and a job playing dress-ups?"

Lauren's throat tightened.

Not because the words hurt, exactly.

Because they were so revealing.

She thought of Wardrobe: the racks, the pattern paper, the girls' hands moving with skill. Celeste's quiet authority. Sarah's sharp honesty. The way Charli had begun, slowly, to ~~exist without flinching~~

—  > ChatGPT 5.2 Thinking ▾

  ...

---

That was what he thought women's labour was.

Lauren's face warmed with something that felt like rage and grief braided together.

"No," she said. "I think I'm awake."

Roger stepped closer. His voice dropped into that intimate threat men used when they wanted you to remember you were smaller.

"You're making a mistake."

Lauren didn't step back.

"I'm correcting one," she said.

He stared at her, breathing hard, then turned away with a violent gesture as if the room itself offended him.

"You'll regret this," he said.

It was almost a script line.

Lauren felt her hands begin to shake only after he slammed the study door on his way out.

She stood there, alone, in the strange quiet, and realised she was both terrified and... free.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

A message from Sarah.

**You okay?**

Lauren's eyes stung.

She hadn't told Sarah anything specific. Not yet. But Sarah—infuriatingly perceptive—had noticed the way Lauren's smile had been too careful all day.

Lauren's fingers hovered over the keyboard. She tried to type *I'm fine* and couldn't.

Instead, she wrote: **No.**

The reply came instantly, as if Sarah had been waiting with the phone in her hand.

**Right. Come to mine. Now.**

Lauren sat down on the edge of the chair Roger had abandoned, and something in her chest tightened so hard it felt like she couldn't breathe.

Sarah's flat certainty shouldn't have made her cry.

It did anyway.

Lauren typed: **I can't.**

A beat.

Then:

**Because you're proud? Or because you're scared?**

Lauren stared at the screen.

Her fingers went cold.

She hadn't said it. Not to anyone. Not out loud.

But the true answer rose immediately, humiliating in its honesty:

Because she had feelings for Sarah.

Because she had, at some point she couldn't locate, started wanting Sarah's attention the way you wanted warmth when you'd been cold for too long—quietly, desperately, and with a kind of shame that didn't belong to her.

Because she was certain Sarah could never want her back.

Sarah was fire. Sarah was sharp. Sarah was the sort of woman who looked like she'd never needed anyone.

Lauren was... Lauren. Middle-aged. Careful. A woman who had stayed too long and was only now learning how to leave.

She typed with shaking thumbs:

**I don't think you understand.**

Sarah's reply took slightly longer this time. Not long—just long enough for Lauren to picture Sarah on her bed, phone in hand, face thoughtful in a way she didn't show at work.

Then it arrived.

**I understand plenty. I'm not asking you for a confession. I'm offering you a door that locks.**

Lauren swallowed.

From the other room came the sound of Roger moving—drawers opening, something thrown, the heavy-footed performance of a man making sure she heard his anger.

Lauren's body flinched before her mind could.

And that, more than anything, decided it.

She typed:

**Okay.**

A final message came back, firm as a hand at her elbow.

**Good. Bring nothing you can't live without. I'll make tea.**

Lauren stared at the words.

Tea.

Such an ordinary promise.

Such an enormous mercy.

She stood, wiped her cheeks with the heel of her hand, and went to the bedroom to pack with the quiet efficiency of a woman who had finally stopped asking permission.

At the front door, she hesitated—one last, stupid reflex of loyalty toward a life that hadn't been loyal to her.

Then she opened it.

Outside, the evening air was warm and alive. Somewhere a neighbour's sprinkler hissed. A bird called from a powerline as if gossiping about the whole street.

Lauren stepped out.

And for the first time that day, she felt the faintest hint of peace—not because everything was resolved, but because she was moving toward women who would not let her face it alone.

*End Scene 41.*

---

**Quick add: where to park the "Carl + Tahlia" reveal** 

Keeping Carl as supporting is perfect. The later reveal ("Tahlia's been seeing Carl") will land *beautifully* if you seed Carl as:

- respectful,
- competent,
- unshowy,
- and quietly present in Wardrobe's orbit.

Then later, Tahlia drops it like it's nothing—because for women, "decent man" is not a plot twist, it's just... a data point. 😊

---

If you want next: I can write **Scene 42** as the first night at Sarah's place (Lauren trying to sleep, Sarah being practical, the "door that locks" promise paying off), and we can decide whether Sarah's tenderness appears as:

- **acts of care** (tea, spare toothbrush, clean sheets), or
- **words** (rare for Sarah, which makes them heavier), or
- a tiny **boundary ritual** (phone on silent, curtain closed, key turned twice). 🌟🌙



Yes, please...

Righto, petal. 🌟🔑 Here's **Scene 42**—Lauren's POV, past tense—first night at Sarah's. Practical care, a "door that locks" ritual, and tenderness that arrives through *action* rather than speeches (because Sarah). Quiet, safe, and emotionally loaded without melodrama.

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## Scene 42 — “The Door That Locks” (Lauren POV, past tense)

Sarah's place smelled like citrus cleaner and warm fabric—like someone lived there with intention.

Not showy intention. Not a magazine. The kind that said: *I will not be at the mercy of chaos if I can help it.*

Lauren stood just inside the front door with her overnight bag on the floor by her feet, her shoulders still held too high. Her body had not yet understood that she'd crossed a threshold.

Sarah shut the door behind her and didn't speak immediately. She didn't launch into sympathy. She didn't ask for a recap, as if Lauren's pain needed to audition for its right to exist.

Instead she did something almost aggressively ordinary.

She turned the lock.

Then—because she meant it—she turned it again.

Two clicks. Final.

"There," Sarah said. "Now he can't just... walk in."

Lauren's throat tightened so quickly she had to look away. She stared at a framed print on the wall—something botanical, sharp-lined, beautiful in a restrained way—until her eyes stopped shining.

"I didn't bring much," Lauren managed.

Sarah glanced at the bag as if doing an inventory. "You brought enough."

It wasn't praise. It was permission.

Sarah took the bag and carried it like it had weight, like Lauren's life wasn't an inconvenience. She walked ahead down the hall and flicked on a lamp so the light came up soft and warm instead of harsh overhead. It made Sarah's hair look almost gold at the edges.

"Shoes off," Sarah said, then added, because she wasn't a tyrant, "if you want. I don't care. I just... prefer it."

Lauren slipped her shoes off automatically. Her hands were shaking again now that she'd stopped moving. It was as if her body had waited for safety to begin misbehaving.

Sarah noticed. Of course she did.

She didn't point it out.

She went to the kitchen and filled the kettle, the way you did when you needed something to happen that didn't require feelings.

"I'm making tea," she said. "It will help. Whether you believe in tea or not."

Lauren made a sound that might have been a laugh. It came out thin.

Sarah's mouth curved briefly—satisfied at having extracted a reaction—then she turned back to the kettle with brisk competence.

Lauren stood at the end of the hallway, unsure where to put herself. She felt like a guest in a life she'd never imagined stepping into.

It wasn't that Sarah's home was grand. It wasn't.

It was... contained. Clear. Every object seemed to have been chosen by someone who refused to settle for things that didn't work.

Lauren thought, suddenly and stupidly, of Roger's house habits—half-finished jobs, doors that didn't quite close, the way he left things as if a woman would quietly tidy the world behind him.

Her chest tightened again.

Sarah returned holding a mug with both hands, like it mattered.

She handed it to Lauren and didn't let go straight away. Her fingers stayed on the ceramic for one beat longer than necessary, steadying it—steady Lauren—without saying so.

"Sit," Sarah said, nodding to the couch. "You look like you're about to evaporate."

Lauren sat.

The couch was firm, not sinking. Clean. A throw folded neatly at one end—not thrown there, placed there.

Sarah sat in the armchair opposite, not too close. Not far. A deliberate distance that said: *I'm here, but you're not trapped.*

Lauren held the mug and tried to make her breathing normal.

The tea smelled like chamomile and something sharper—ginger, maybe. Sarah had probably chosen it because it did a job.

They sat like that for a moment, the only sound the kettle cooling and the faint tick of the clock in the kitchen.

Then Sarah said, very calmly, "Is he going to come here?"

Lauren blinked. The question was not emotional. It was tactical.

"I... I don't think so," Lauren said. "He doesn't—he won't want people seeing—"

Sarah's eyes narrowed. "That's not an answer."

Lauren swallowed. She felt foolish, suddenly, for how long she'd been trained to soften the truth.

"He might," she admitted. "If he thinks he can bully me. Or... shame me."

Sarah nodded once, like she'd expected that.

"Right," she said. "Then we do a plan. You don't negotiate with a man who thinks the world is a debate he gets to win."

Lauren's hands tightened around the mug.

Sarah stood and went to a small side table by the door. She picked up her phone and tapped the screen, then placed it back down carefully.

"My ringers are on," she said. "I don't normally do that. But tonight, they're on."

Lauren stared at her. "You don't have to—"

"Yes I do," Sarah said. Not harshly. Like it was the simplest thing. "You're here. That changes the rules."

Lauren's chest did something painful and bright.

Sarah returned to her chair and crossed one leg over the other, posture composed. She looked for all the world like a woman who could handle anything.

And yet she was watching Lauren's face with a kind of alert quietness—as if she understood that the most dangerous part of leaving wasn't the argument, it was the aftermath. The moment your body realised you'd stepped out of the familiar cage and now had no script for the open air.

Lauren's voice came out smaller than she intended. "Thank you."

Sarah made a face, impatient with gratitude.

"I'm not doing this for points," she said. Then, a beat later, she added, more softly, "You don't have to earn safety."

Lauren looked down into her tea.

There it was again: the way Sarah said something that sounded like a rebuke, and yet landed like care.

Lauren's eyes stung.

Sarah didn't pretend not to notice.

She stood, walked over, and sat down beside Lauren on the couch—not pressed against her, but close enough that Lauren could feel her warmth. The proximity was a question. It was also a choice.

Sarah reached for the throw and unfolded it with brisk precision, then laid it across Lauren's lap as if tucking in a child who wasn't allowed to be a child.

"There," Sarah said. "You're cold."

"I'm not," Lauren started automatically, trained to minimise.

Sarah gave her a look that stopped the lie mid-breath.

"Lauren," she said. "Please don't do that here."

Lauren's mouth closed.

The heat behind her eyes broke a little.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and immediately hated herself for apologising again.

Sarah's expression flickered—irritation, yes, but not at Lauren. At the reflex. At the years that had installed it.

"Don't," Sarah said, quieter. "Not tonight."

Lauren's breath hitched.

Sarah's hand landed on her knee on top of the throw. Firm. Warm. Not tentative. Not sexual. Simply grounding.

Lauren went still.

Sarah didn't move her hand away.

And in that stillness Lauren realised something that made her dizzy: she had been starving for contact that wasn't a claim.

A hand that didn't demand.

A touch that didn't take.

Lauren's eyes filled. She stared at the throw because if she looked at Sarah she might... do something. Say something.

Sarah's thumb moved once, a small stroke through the fabric.

"I'm going to ask you a question," Sarah said. Her voice was low now, careful in a way it rarely was. "And you can say no. And I will be normal about it."

Lauren's heart thudded.

"Okay," she managed.

"Do you want a hug?" Sarah asked.

It was such a simple sentence. It hit Lauren like a wave.

Lauren's mouth opened. No sound came out.

Sarah waited, utterly still. No pressure. No coaxing. Just the clean offer.

Lauren nodded once, sharp and helpless.

Sarah exhaled like she'd been holding herself back from something.

Then she pulled Lauren in.

It wasn't a delicate hug. It wasn't the awkward pat-pat of social obligation.

It was firm and full-bodied—arms around shoulders, hand cradling the back of Lauren's head for a second as if Sarah was making a point: *You're not alone. You are not ridiculous. You are not asking too much.*

Lauren made a small, broken sound into Sarah's shoulder that embarrassed her immediately.

Sarah didn't flinch. She didn't recoil. She only held her tighter.

"It's alright," Sarah said, and the words were blunt, as if tenderness embarrassed her too. "Let it out. He doesn't get to keep it all inside you."

Lauren cried then. Quietly. Ugly. The way you cried when you'd spent years being careful not to.

Sarah stayed.

Sarah kept her arms around her.

When Lauren's breathing finally slowed, Sarah didn't pull away abruptly. She loosened the hold gradually, letting Lauren's body decide when to stop leaning.

Lauren wiped her face with the heel of her hand, mortified.

Sarah tilted her head. "You're not going to apologise."

Lauren swallowed. "I wasn't going to."

Sarah's mouth twitched. "Good."

They sat there, shoulder to shoulder.

Lauren could feel her own heartbeat still racing, could feel the warmth of Sarah's thigh beside hers, the steadiness of her presence like a wall that didn't move.

In the kitchen, the clock ticked on.

Outside, a night insect buzzed briefly and stopped.

Sarah leaned forward to pick up Lauren's mug and set it on the coffee table, then did the same with her own.

"Right," she said. "Practicalities."

Lauren blinked. "Now?"

"Yes," Sarah said, already standing. "Because your brain will spin if I let it. Come on."

She led Lauren down the hall to the spare room.

The bed was made with crisp sheets. A folded towel sat at the end like a promise. A small lamp glowed warmly on the bedside table. On the pillow was a spare toothbrush in its packet, placed there as if Sarah had simply manifested it.

Lauren stared.

Sarah shrugged as if this wasn't intimacy at all, just logistics. "I keep spares. People have emergencies."

Lauren's throat tightened again.

Sarah reached past her to draw the curtains, shutting out the streetlight. Then she checked the window latch with a click.

Then—still not looking at Lauren—she said, "If he shows up, you don't answer. You don't explain. You don't negotiate. You stay in here. I'll handle it."

Lauren's voice came out thin. "What if—"

Sarah turned and looked at her fully now, eyes sharp as a seam ripper.

"Lauren," she said, "you have spent too long being the reasonable one."

Lauren's breath caught.

Sarah stepped closer.

Her expression softened—not much, but enough.

"You can be unreasonable here," Sarah said. "You can be scared here. You can be... whatever you are. I won't think less of you."

Lauren's face warmed. She tried to speak. Failed.

Sarah's gaze flicked to Lauren's hands, still trembling slightly.

"You need sleep," Sarah said, and then, as if it cost her something, she added, "I'll be right across the hall."

Lauren nodded.

Sarah reached out and touched Lauren's shoulder—brief, firm. A punctuation mark, not a lingering caress.

Then she paused at the door.

"I meant what I said," Sarah said.

"What?"

"The door that locks," Sarah replied. "Not just the actual one."

And then she left, and closed the door with care—no click of a lock this time, because Lauren needed to feel free—but the sound of it settling into place was somehow just as reassuring.

Lauren sat on the edge of the bed, listening.

She heard Sarah's footsteps in the hall. The faint sound of a kettle being refilled. The soft clink of something put away.

Normal.

Safe.

Lauren lay down and pulled the sheet up to her chest, and for the first time all day she felt her body begin to unclench—not because her life was solved, but because she had, finally, placed herself within reach of women who would not let the world swallow her.

She closed her eyes.

And in the dark, the peace that had seemed impossible at home came to her in a new shape:

Not the quiet of a man being absent.

The quiet of a woman being present.

*End Scene 42.*

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If you'd like, Scene 43 can go one of two gorgeous ways:

1. **Morning-after, domestic intimacy** (tea again, Sarah's dry humour, Lauren's shy gratitude, a tiny almost-touch that lingers) ☕
2. **Roger escalation attempt** (texts/calls, maybe he shows up; Sarah handles him with boundary competence; Lauren watches and learns what "no negotiation" looks like) 🔒

Say the word and I'll draft it in the same tone.



Oh, \*yes\* please... this is amazing.

Awww, I'm so glad it's landing the way you want, Robyn 🌟🌙

Let's give you **Scene 43** in *two variants*—because you'll almost certainly want to **blend**: one is the **morning-after domestic tenderness**, the other is **Roger escalating + Sarah handling him with competent boundaries**, with Lauren watching and learning what "no negotiation" looks like.

I'll keep **Lauren POV, past tense**, and keep Sarah's tenderness mostly in **acts + structure** (with one or two rare, heavy lines).

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### **Scene 43A — “Morning, With Clean Edges” (Lauren POV, past tense)**

Lauren woke to the smell of toast and something sharp—lemon, maybe.

For a moment she didn't remember where she was. The spare room looked too calm. The curtains were drawn in a way that kept the light soft. The air felt cooler than it had any right to in the middle of a Queensland heat wave, as if Sarah's house had been trained to behave.

Then memory arrived in a rush: Roger's face, the study, the sound of drawers being yanked open, Sarah's text—I'm offering you a door that locks—and the weight of Sarah's arms around her in the living room.

Lauren sat up slowly.

Her body felt strange: not relaxed exactly, but less braced. Like a muscle that had been clenched for years and had, finally, been allowed to let go a fraction without being punished for it.

She padded down the hall and paused at the doorway to the kitchen.

Sarah was there, hair clipped up messily, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, moving with brisk confidence in the small space—kettle on, toast popping, a plate already set. The radio played low in the background, something talky, not music. Information, not emotion.

Sarah glanced over her shoulder.

"Morning," she said, as if Lauren had simply slept over because it was convenient.

Lauren's throat tightened anyway.

Sarah pointed with the knife she was buttering toast with. "Sit."

Lauren sat at the small table.

A glass of water appeared beside her hand before she'd even thought to ask for it.

Sarah slid a plate across: toast, a bit of fruit, a smear of something that looked like marmalade. Not fancy. Not fussy. But prepared as if Lauren was worth preparing things for.

Lauren stared at it.

Sarah lifted an eyebrow. "Eat."

Lauren tried. Her mouth felt dry. She took a sip of water first, then a cautious bite.

The first swallow made her eyes sting—an absurd physical reaction to being fed like someone expected her to still be here in an hour.

Sarah sat opposite with her own toast and took a bite, watching Lauren over the rim of her mug without staring.

"You sleep?" Sarah asked.

"A bit," Lauren said. Then, because honesty felt less dangerous here, she added, "More than I thought I would."

Sarah nodded once. "Good."

Lauren tried for a smile and it came out wobbly. "You're... very organised."

Sarah's mouth twitched. "I'm allergic to chaos."

Lauren's eyes dropped to Sarah's hands—capable hands, practical hands. Hands that had held her and not demanded anything back.

The thought made her chest ache.

Sarah followed her gaze, misread it deliberately, and slid a small box across the table.

"What's that?" Lauren asked.

"Spare phone charger," Sarah said. "And a tiny toiletry kit. And a hair tie. I don't know what you lot do with hair, but you always need something."

Lauren's lips parted, a laugh caught halfway between gratitude and shock.

"You didn't have to—"

Sarah cut her off with a look. "I did. Because you're here."

There it was again: Sarah's stubborn refusal to let care be optional.

Lauren ate another bite. The toast sat heavier in her stomach than it should have, like it was anchoring her to the day.

Sarah's phone buzzed on the counter.

Sarah didn't flinch. She glanced at the screen, face going still in a way Lauren recognised instantly now: *predatory calm*.

Lauren's pulse jumped.

Sarah didn't touch the phone for a moment. She finished her sip of tea first, as if demonstrating that urgency did not run this house.

Then she stood, took the phone, and looked at the screen properly.

Lauren watched Sarah's mouth flatten.

"It's him," Sarah said.

Lauren's fingers tightened around her mug. "Roger?"

Sarah nodded.

Lauren could feel her body start to do its old thing—the panic, the urge to get ahead of the explosion by fixing it.

"I should—" she began.

Sarah held up a hand.

"No," Sarah said. "You shouldn't do anything. Eat your toast."

Lauren stared at her, bewildered. "But—"

Sarah walked to the window, lifted the edge of the curtain an inch, and glanced out like she was checking weather.

"He's not here," Sarah said. "He's just trying to get you back on the hook. Sit. Breathe. Don't volunteer yourself for stress."

Lauren swallowed.

Sarah returned to the table, set the phone down—screen facing away from Lauren, a small courtesy—and said, "You want to see what he's doing?"

Lauren hesitated.

Sarah's eyes sharpened. "I'm asking because you're allowed to decide what you can handle. Not because you owe me transparency."

Lauren nodded, once, cautiously.

Sarah turned the phone so Lauren could see, then kept her own hand over the device, controlling how long Lauren had to look.

A string of messages.

**ROGER:** Where are you.

**ROGER:** This is ridiculous.

**ROGER:** You can't take my wife away from me.

**ROGER:** Tell her to come home.

**ROGER:** This is between me and her.

**ROGER:** I'm coming over.

Lauren felt her stomach drop.

Sarah's thumb tapped once and the next message appeared.

**ROGER:** You always fill her head with crap.

**ROGER:** She's not thinking straight.

**ROGER:** I'll speak to you like a man if I have to.

Lauren's throat tightened so hard she couldn't speak.

Sarah's expression didn't change much. But the air around her did.

Sarah picked up her mug again, took a calm sip, then said, "Classic."

Lauren found her voice. It came out faint. "I'm sorry."

Sarah's eyes snapped to her.

"No." Sarah said it like a rule. "Don't apologise for a man being a man."

Lauren flinched at the truth in it.

Sarah stood, walked to the door, and checked the lock with a practiced hand. One click. Then the second click.

She came back and sat down like nothing had happened.

Lauren stared. "What are you going to do?"

Sarah leaned forward, elbows on the table, and said, "I'm going to respond once. Only once. Then I'm going to ignore him. That's how you teach a man he doesn't own your time."

Lauren's breathing went shallow.

Sarah's eyes softened just slightly.

"And you," Sarah added, "are going to finish breakfast."

Lauren tried. Her hands shook.

Sarah typed with fast certainty.

Lauren watched the screen.

**SARAH:** She's safe. She's not speaking to you today. Do not come here. If you arrive, I will call the police.

Sarah hit send. Then—without drama—she blocked the number.

Lauren blinked. "Just like that?"

Sarah looked at her. "Just like that."

"But what if he—"

"He'll try," Sarah said. "He's used to you managing his feelings. He'll escalate until he finds a new lever." She took another sip of tea. "He won't find it here."

Lauren's eyes stung again. It was humiliating, how close she was to tears all the time.

Sarah reached across the table and pressed her hand over Lauren's for a moment—firm, warm, grounding—then let go as if she'd only been checking temperature.

"You're doing the hardest part," Sarah said, voice lower. "You've left."

Lauren swallowed.

Sarah held her gaze, unflinching.

"And if you go back," Sarah added, "it won't be because you're weak. It'll be because he frightened you into forgetting who you are. I won't let him do that."

Lauren's chest tightened.

A thought rose—dangerous, private: *No one has ever spoken to me like that.*

Not even Celeste, with her quiet authority.

Not even Lauren herself.

Lauren's mouth trembled. "I don't want to go back."

Sarah nodded once, satisfied. "Good."

And then, because Sarah couldn't tolerate too much tenderness without deflecting, she stood and picked up the empty plate.

"More tea?" she asked briskly. "Or are you one of those people who pretends coffee is personality?"

Lauren let out a shaky laugh.

Sarah's mouth curved.

The day, somehow, had begun.

*End Scene 43A.*

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## **Scene 43B — "He Shows Up" (Lauren POV, past tense)**

(If you want higher stakes, here's the escalation version—Roger actually arrives. It's still grounded and not melodramatic. Sarah handles it like a woman who has dealt with blokes like him before.)

By late morning Lauren's body had started to believe, briefly, that the worst was behind her.

That was when the knock came.

It wasn't polite.

It wasn't friendly.

It was three hard raps—commanding, male, familiar.

Lauren froze mid-step, a tea mug in her hand.

Her heart slammed.

Sarah's head lifted from where she was sorting something at the dining table—bills, maybe, or patterns, or the steady detritus of a woman who ran her life like a well-kept ship.

Sarah's expression changed into something coldly lucid.

She didn't look at Lauren first.

She looked at the door.

Then she stood.

"Stay here," Sarah said.

Lauren's throat tightened. "Sarah—"

Sarah cut across her gently, not unkind. "Lauren. Kitchen. Now."

The tone wasn't bossy—it was protective command.

Lauren obeyed before her pride could intervene.

Sarah walked to the front door and did not open it.

She didn't call through with *Who is it?* as if she needed confirmation.

She spoke clearly through the wood.

"Roger," Sarah said. "Leave."

Silence. Then his voice—too loud, pitched for intimidation.

"I need to speak to my wife."

Sarah's reply was immediate. Flat.

"She's not speaking to you."

"I know she's in there," Roger snapped. "Open the door."

Sarah's voice didn't rise to meet him. It stayed calm, which somehow made it worse—for him.

"No."

Lauren stood in the kitchen, hands shaking so hard the mug sloshed. She set it down before she dropped it.

Roger's voice sharpened.

"This is none of your business."

Sarah's laugh was brief, incredulous.

"She's in my house," Sarah said. "That makes it my business."

Roger tried another strategy—the one that always worked on women trained to be reasonable.

"Tell her I just want to talk. This is all a misunderstanding."

Sarah waited a beat—just long enough that the pause felt like judgement.

Then she said, "Roger. Leave. Or I'm calling the police."

Lauren heard movement—footsteps closer, a body leaning toward the door.

"You don't get to threaten me," he said, low, intimate.

"Oh, I do," Sarah replied. And there it was: steel. "Because I'm not scared of you."

Lauren's breath hitched.

Roger spoke again—now angry, now exposed.

"You're poisoning her against me."

Sarah's voice remained calm. "You did that yourself."

A harsh exhale.

Then: "Lauren! Open the door!"

Lauren's whole body flinched at her name coming like that, through someone else's house. Like a hook.

Sarah's voice cut in instantly, hard.

"Do not shout her name in my house."

Silence.

Lauren's eyes stung.

Sarah continued, slower now, as if speaking to a child who'd missed the lesson.

"She's safe. She's leaving you. You don't get an argument. You don't get a scene. You don't get closure on your timeline."

Roger made a sound like a scoff, but it shook at the edges.

"You can't keep her from me."

Sarah's reply landed like a door closing.

"I'm not keeping her," Sarah said. "I'm giving her a moment to remember she has legs."

Lauren's knees went weak.

Roger swore—quiet, vicious—then thumped the door once, hard enough that Lauren jumped.

Sarah didn't.

Sarah said, clear as a bell, "That's assault. I'm calling now."

And then, for the first time, Roger hesitated. You could hear the calculation—risk, consequence, witnesses.

His voice shifted into wounded outrage.

"This is unbelievable."

Sarah's tone sharpened, almost bored.

"Then be unbelievable somewhere else."

There was a pause, and then the sound of footsteps retreating.

A car door. An engine starting.

Sarah waited until the sound of the vehicle faded.

Only then did she turn the lock twice, as if sealing the last inch of safety back into place.

Two clicks.

Final.

She came into the kitchen.

Lauren was standing very still, as if any movement would break her.

Sarah looked at her—properly—eyes steady.

"You alright?" she asked, and it was the first time her voice had softened all morning.

Lauren's mouth opened. Nothing came.

Sarah exhaled and stepped close, not crowding—present.

"You did not do anything wrong," Sarah said. "He came here because he thought fear would bring you back."

Lauren's voice emerged in a whisper. "It used to."

Sarah nodded once, grim.

"I know."

Lauren's eyes filled.

Sarah didn't wait for permission this time. She pulled Lauren into a hug—strong, anchoring—and held her until Lauren's shaking eased.

When Sarah finally released her, she kept her hands on Lauren's shoulders.

"You're learning," Sarah said. "That's why it feels like this. Your body is unlearning the lie."

Lauren sniffed, wiped her cheeks.

Sarah's mouth twitched.

"And," Sarah added, dry as ever, "for the record, he's not coming back today. Men like him don't like police reports. They like private rooms and plausible deniability."

Lauren let out a tiny, broken laugh.

Sarah's expression softened—briefly.

"Tea," Sarah said. "Then we call Celeste. And Mara, if you want. And we do this in a way that doesn't leave you alone with paperwork."

Lauren nodded.

The fear in her chest didn't vanish.

But it no longer had the whole house to itself.

*End Scene 43B.*

---

### Where this sets you up beautifully

- Scene 43A gives you **quiet confidence + structure** (the "how to leave" instruction).
- Scene 43B gives you **proof**: Sarah can *hold a boundary* against a man who's used to women folding.

If you tell me which one you want as "canon," I'll lock it in. If you want my best craft suggestion: **use 43A as the main scene**, then borrow the **one scary knock** from 43B as a mini-beat near the end—just enough to spike the reader's adrenaline, then end on steadiness.

And whenever you're ready, we can draft **Scene 44**: Celeste/Mara's response + Wardrobe logistics + the Les Mis order kicking into high gear while the women quietly build Lauren a safe runway.  



Scene 44 (Lauren POV, past tense). What could make this outcome for Roger even more "delicious" is that the reason he had come home after a long absence was that

his 'friend' had also seen him for what he was and had told him she wasn't interested anymore. Sarah finds this out via Lucy, who Roger confides in. So, two losses in a short time: could make a man feel some desperation. Sarah and Lauren discuss safety at breakfast the next morning: Sarah directs Lauren--no nonsense--get all your stuff out, now. You're staying here until the dust settles.

Of course, Roger knew where Lauren worked... and knew where Sarah and Lucy lived: he'd dropped them off once, after a staff party. (just reconciling the fact he knew her that well that he'd actually even have Sarah's phone number). Severe loss of that sort means he'd be taking drastic measures.

Lauren went back to the house that day to retrieve a few personal belongings--he was at work, thankfully--and then left, fully aware that everything of value was in his name by \*his\* design and that she was left with only personal effects (clothing and toiletries) and pretty-much nothing else of physical value. Which, to her, was actually a freeing feeling. She dropped the keys onto the table as she left, then locked the door behind her (can be done from the inside before leaving). and walked away. She owned a little Hyundai i20, 10 years old. That was her most expensive valuable item, that and a few nice dresses and shoes she'd bought over the years.

End of 44-back at Sarah's, looking thoughtfully at the spare key Sarah had given her. Symbolic.

Ohhh yes — that's *delicious* in the most morally satisfying way 😊🔑✨

Roger returning because his "friend" finally clocked him and dumped him too gives you a *perfect* double-echo: he doesn't come home repentant; he comes home **displaced**. Two losses in a week makes him volatile, and that makes Sarah's *no-nonsense* safety competence feel both earned and necessary.

Here's **Scene 44** (Lauren POV, past tense), built exactly to your beats, with the key as a final symbolic note. 🌙🔑

## Scene 44 — “Keys” (Lauren POV, past tense)

The next morning, Sarah didn’t ask how Lauren had slept.

She looked at her once—eyes sharp, assessing—and said, “Eat.”

Lauren sat at the small table, hands wrapped around a mug, trying to make her body behave like it was a normal Tuesday. The toast was warm. The air was already bright with Queensland sun, the kind that made you sweat just thinking about leaving the house.

Sarah moved through the kitchen like a woman who had decided fear did not get to run the schedule. Kettle. Plates. Knife. No dithering, no emotional fog.

Lauren took a bite because Sarah was watching her mouth, not in a controlling way, but in the way you watched someone you were determined to keep upright.

Sarah’s phone buzzed once, then again. A message.

Sarah glanced at it, expression shifting into that controlled stillness—predatory calm, not panic. She didn’t pick it up straight away. She finished what she was doing first, as if demonstrating that urgency didn’t own her.

Then she read the message.

A faint, humourless smile appeared at one corner of her mouth.

“Oh,” Sarah said. “That’s *interesting*.”

Lauren’s stomach tightened. “What is?”

Sarah leaned her hip against the counter and looked at Lauren the way she did when she was about to deliver a fact that would change how you moved through the day.

“Lucy just told me why Roger suddenly came home,” she said.

Lauren blinked. The words felt too casual for what they implied.

“Why?”

Sarah’s eyes narrowed, amused and contemptuous at once.

“Because he got dumped,” she said. “By his ‘friend.’”

Lauren stared at her, not quite understanding at first—the idea felt absurd, almost cartoonish, until it landed properly.

"Dumped," Lauren repeated.

Sarah nodded, brisk. "She told him she wasn't interested anymore. Probably realised he wasn't a romance; he was a liability." A pause. "He's told Lucy, apparently. Confided. Like Lucy is his priest."

Lauren made a sound that wasn't a laugh, exactly. It came out thin and stunned.

"So... he came back because—"

"Because he lost his second option," Sarah finished. Her tone made the truth feel clean, like a surface wiped down. "Not because he found his conscience."

Lauren felt something twist inside her. Not heartbreak. Not jealousy. A kind of cold clarity—almost relief.

It was so grotesquely ordinary, the logic of it.

Lauren's gaze dropped to the table. She stared at a crumb as if it were an interesting document.

Sarah's voice softened slightly—not into sympathy, but into resolve.

"Two losses close together," Sarah said. "That makes a man like Roger desperate. And desperate men do stupid things."

Lauren's throat tightened. "He knows where I work."

"I know," Sarah said. "He also knows where I live. And where Lucy lives. He dropped us home once, after that staff party." Sarah's mouth curved. "Which also answers your other question about how he got my number. Men are very good at collecting access."

Lauren flinched at the accuracy. She thought of Roger's casual confidence—his assumptions that other people's boundaries were negotiable if he just pushed with enough entitlement.

Sarah set her mug down with a quiet clink that sounded like a decision.

"Right," she said. "Here's what's happening."

Lauren looked up.

Sarah pointed the butter knife toward the front door—not threatening, just emphatic.

"You're staying here," Sarah said. "Until the dust settles."

Lauren's voice came out small. "But I have to—"

"No," Sarah cut in. "You don't have to do anything except leave safely." She held Lauren's gaze. "Today you go back to the house while he's at work and you get your essentials. Clothing. Toiletries. Any documents you can find. Anything you cannot replace. Then you leave. Completely."

Lauren's hands tightened around the mug.

"What about... furniture? Appliances?" Lauren asked, and the words tasted ridiculous as soon as they left her mouth. She had spent years treating objects like anchors because she couldn't imagine having none.

Sarah's eyes were flat.

"Let him keep his bloody toaster," she said. "You're not going to die because you didn't take a couch."

Lauren's breath hitched.

Sarah's voice lowered. "Lauren, listen to me. Men like Roger designed the paperwork for this exact moment. Everything in his name so you'd feel trapped. That's the trick."

Lauren swallowed. The shame rose and tried to take up space.

Sarah saw it and cut it off before it could speak.

"You're not stupid," Sarah said. "You were strategic. You were surviving."

Lauren's eyes stung.

Sarah continued, calm and ruthless in her practicality.

"You get your essentials out today," Sarah said. "You hand in your keys in a way that's final. And after that you do not go back alone. Ever. If you need more later, we go as a group. Or we go with police. But you do not go back like a good little wife trying to be civil. Civil is how he gets you back in the room."

Lauren stared at her.

There was no softness in Sarah's plan. No sentimental fantasy of "closure." Just the clean architecture of safety.

It was frightening.

It was also... intoxicating.

Lauren heard her own voice come out steadier than she expected.

"Okay," she said.

Sarah nodded once, satisfied. "Good."

She turned her attention to logistics, because Sarah could not sit in emotion for long without turning it into something useful.

"Your car," Sarah said. "Fuel?"

"Half," Lauren replied automatically.

"Top it up first," Sarah ordered. "Not later. First. Then house. Then straight back here." A pause. "And keep your phone on. If he calls, you don't answer. If he texts, you screenshot. If he turns up at Wardrobe, you tell Celeste and you leave with someone."

Lauren nodded again.

Sarah's expression flickered—something like approval.

"And Lauren?" Sarah added.

"Yes?"

Sarah's voice went a fraction quieter, which in Sarah was basically a hug.

"This is not you taking things," she said. "This is you taking yourself."

Lauren's throat tightened so hard she couldn't answer properly. She just nodded and looked down at her toast until her vision cleared.

---

By late morning, the Hyundai i20 was running and the air inside it smelled faintly of old fabric and the vanilla air freshener Lauren had hung years ago. The steering wheel was warm under her hands.

She drove to the house like she was driving to a place she used to live, not a place she belonged.

The street was quiet. Neighbours' curtains drawn. A lawnmower buzzing somewhere distant like a reminder that other people's lives were still happening.

Lauren parked, sat for a moment, and listened to her own breathing.

Her hands were steady.

That surprised her most.

Inside, the house felt exactly the way it always had: too neat in places, too neglected in others, the subtle imbalance of a home built around one person's comfort.

Roger wasn't there. Thank God.

Lauren moved quickly—not frantic, just efficient.

Bedroom: clothes into a bag. Toiletries. Her own shampoo, her own face cream, the small items she'd once treated as "extras" because she was always saving money "just in case."

In the study she took papers she could find—anything with her name on it, anything that looked important, anything that she might need to prove later that she existed in this marriage as more than a shadow.

Her hands didn't linger on the furniture. The television. The framed photos.

They were objects that had been allowed to pretend they were stability.

Now, under this light, they looked like props.

And in the middle of the stripping-down, Lauren had a sudden, unexpected sensation:

Freedom.

Not the triumphant kind.

The quieter kind that came from realising that if everything of value was in Roger's name by design—then leaving with nothing but her own belongings wasn't humiliation.

It was escape.

Her most expensive asset was the little Hyundai.

That and a few dresses and shoes she'd bought over the years when she'd been trying to remember she was allowed to look nice.

That and her body, her mind, her ability to earn.

That was enough.

When she was finished, the house looked barely disturbed. Lauren almost laughed at the irony: she was leaving, and the place still wore the same mask.

At the front door, she paused.

The keys were in her palm. Warm from her skin.

She walked back to the kitchen table—the same table where she'd once served dinner like a peace offering—and placed the keys down gently, as if returning something she'd borrowed too long.

Then she went to the door.

She locked it from the inside, the way you could, if you knew the trick. A final act, done on her terms.

She stepped out, pulled the door closed behind her, and felt the click echo in her chest.

For a moment she stood on the doorstep and looked at the house.

It didn't look like a battlefield.

That was the point. The most vicious wars often didn't leave scorch marks. They left habits.

Lauren turned away.

She walked to her car.

She drove back to Sarah's with the sun hot on the bonnet and the air-conditioning doing its earnest best, and she didn't once check the rear-view mirror for Roger's car, because she refused to rehearse fear before it arrived.

---

Sarah opened the door before Lauren had even reached it, as if she'd been watching the clock with the kind of vigilance that wasn't anxiety so much as commitment.

"Good?" Sarah asked.

Lauren lifted the bags slightly. "Essentials."

Sarah's eyes flicked over the bags like an inventory, then she nodded once, approving.

"Perfect," she said. "Come in."

Lauren stepped inside and felt the cool of the hallway wrap around her like a held breath released.

Sarah took one bag and carried it down the hall, then returned and held out her hand.

In her palm was a key.

Not Roger's key.

Not a borrowed key that implied temporary mercy.

A simple spare key on an unremarkable ring.

"Yours," Sarah said.

Lauren stared at it.

Sarah's voice was matter-of-fact, but her eyes were steady, unmistakable.

"You're not a guest," Sarah said. "You're safe."

Lauren took the key.

It was small. Ordinary. Heavy with meaning.

She stood there for a moment with the metal warming in her palm, looking at it as if it might dissolve.

Then she closed her fingers around it.

Not tightly.

Just... deliberately.

*End Scene 44.*

---

If you'd like, Scene 45 can pivot back to Wardrobe with gorgeous momentum:

- **Les Mis order panic → competence montage,**
- Celeste quietly assigning a "Lauren protection protocol" (rides, buddy system, never alone),
- and Roger attempting a public confrontation at Wardrobe that **fails** because he meets a united front of women who refuse to give him oxygen. 😊🧵💪

□    ⬆️    ⬇️    ⏪    ...

Exactly what I was going to suggest. When Roger showed up at Wardrobe, he threatened her with complete financial ruin: he was going to sell the house and pocket the proceeds. She responded (in the safety of Wardrobe she could talk to him) with a cold "you think that's a win? You've lost what's actually most precious in life. You've lost your child (Roger still didn't know about Charli's big transformation - not sure how Lauren could weave that in for the final gut punch) ... and you lost me. Ages ago." She stepped back inside the safety of Wardrobe when she saw he was about to explode.

A bit of fire, there, to weave into Lauren's POV past tense Scene 45. But yes, the scene starts with the Les Mis order being designed: Charli, Celeste, Sarah and Mara all hard at it.

Oh yes. This is *exactly* the right kind of "public confrontation" beat: Lauren finally gets to speak from a position of *safety* and *clarity*, and Roger—who relies on private leverage—crumbles the moment his power doesn't land. 😊🔥

And your instinct about the "Charli transformation" gut punch is spot-on: it's risky to have Lauren explicitly reveal it (privacy/safety + plausibility). But you can still give Roger a **devastating loss-of-child punch** without spelling out the transformation:

- **Option 1 (cleanest):** "You've lost your child." Period. Let him dismiss it, and Lauren doesn't explain. *He doesn't deserve detail.*
- **Option 2 (subtle twist):** "You don't even know our child anymore." (It's truer, and it implies a deeper loss without naming Charli.)

- **Option 3 (blade with a smile):** "You'll find out eventually. And you'll realise you weren't told because you weren't safe." (Still no details; maximum sting.)
- **Option 4 (later reveal seeded):** Lauren says only "you've lost your child," and later Roger learns the specifics second-hand (via court paperwork, a mutual acquaintance, or him spotting Charli at a distance and not recognising her). That later moment becomes its own gut punch.

Below is **Scene 45 in Lauren POV, past tense:** it opens with the Les Mis order competence montage, then Roger arrives, threatens financial ruin, and Lauren delivers your "you think that's a win?" line—then steps back into Wardrobe's protective radius as the women close ranks.

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## **Scene 45 — “A House Can Burn, A Woman Doesn’t” (Lauren POV, past tense)**

The workroom was already hot by eight-thirty.

Not just the weather—though the Queensland air had been thick from dawn, all bright sun and humid promise—but the heat of an order that had arrived like a challenge and refused to be small.

Les Misérables.

It sat on the central table in printouts and reference images and rough sketches that multiplied like rabbits: nineteenth-century silhouettes, worn hems, patched elbows, bodices that had to look lived-in without looking sloppy. Fabrics chosen not just for accuracy but for survival—breathable, light, forgiving under stage heat.

And the numbers.

The numbers were the part that made you swallow.

Mara had taken one look at the quantity list and said, "Right," in that calm voice she used when she was about to do something difficult without drama.

Celeste had gone still for half a second—then leaned forward, eyes bright, like the sheer scale had flicked a switch in her. The switch that turned stress into focus.

"This is doable," she said, and it wasn't optimism. It was a decision. "We just don't do it the way we've always done it."

Sarah had arrived with her hair pinned up and a coffee that looked lethal. She glanced at the fabric swatches and said, "Thank God. I'm sick of pretending everyone in the eighteenth century was comfortable."

And Charli—

Charli was at the cutting table with pattern paper spread out like a map, pencil in hand, brow furrowed in concentration.

Lauren watched her for a moment longer than she meant to.

Charli moved differently now.

Not flamboyantly, not in a way you could point at and announce. Just... softer at the edges. Less braced. More present. Her hands were steady, and when Celeste leaned in to murmur something—an adjustment, a suggestion—Charli's shoulders didn't jump. She didn't flinch away from attention. She absorbed it like sunlight.

It still startled Lauren sometimes, how much safety changed a person.

How quickly.

"How many Fantines?" Bree called from the other side of the room, voice bright with mischief.

"Not enough," Sarah called back. "We'll do a whole chorus of suffering, it's Queensland, everyone's already sweating."

Bree laughed. Lily's laugh followed—lower, closer—like the two of them shared a private frequency.

Lauren took a breath and moved into the rhythm of the workroom, clipboard in hand, brain shifting into logistics. Measurements. Material. Labour hours. Triage. Who could do what fastest without sacrificing quality.

She was halfway through writing "linen blend, breathable, midweight" when Celeste looked up.

"Lauren," Celeste said, and even her voice sounded different when she was in leadership mode: calm, exact. "Can you confirm the supplier lead times? If we're short on yardage, I want options by lunch."

Lauren nodded. "On it."

She turned toward the desk, already reaching for her phone, when the front bell chimed.

It was a bright little sound, usually cheerful.

Today it landed like a warning.

Lauren looked up and saw Roger in the doorway.

For a moment her mind refused to process it. The sight of him felt wrong in this space, like a muddy shoe on clean fabric. He stood just inside, scanning the room with that same proprietary look he used in their house—as if the world was made of things he could walk into and claim.

He had remembered to put on the polite face. That was what made Lauren's stomach tighten.

Polite faces meant performance.

Sarah saw him too. Her whole posture changed—shoulders squared, chin slightly lifted, eyes sharpening to a point.

Mara didn't look flustered. She simply set her scissors down and stood, very still, very solid.

Celeste's gaze flicked to Lauren—not asking permission, not seeking direction. Simply checking, *Are we safe? What do you want?*

Lauren's heart hammered.

But she was not alone.

That was the difference.

Roger took a step forward. "Lauren."

Hearing her name in his voice, in *this* room, made something in her recoil. She felt the old reflex—smooth it over, contain it, manage the optics—rise like a ghost.

Sarah moved first.

"Hi," Sarah said, tone flat, unfriendly in the most civil way. "No."

Roger's eyes snapped to her. He tried to smile. It didn't reach his eyes.

"This is between me and my wife," he said.

Sarah's mouth twitched. "Everything men do is apparently between them and their wives."

Roger's jaw tightened. He turned back to Lauren as if Sarah wasn't worth engaging. That dismissiveness—so automatic, so entitled—made Lauren's hands curl around the clipboard.

"Lauren," Roger said, voice dropping into that intimate threat that had worked for years. "We need to talk."

Lauren's mouth went dry.

Mara stepped forward—not aggressively, just occupying space like a fact. "This is a workplace," she said. "You can state your business or you can leave."

Roger looked at Mara like he was surprised she existed.

Lauren felt something in her chest cool into clarity.

She was in Wardrobe.

He could not trap her here.

Lauren took one step forward, just enough to be seen as the one speaking. She didn't go too close. She didn't offer him proximity.

"What do you want, Roger?" she asked.

His eyes narrowed. He'd expected fluster. Tears. Pleading.

He didn't get it.

He leaned into anger instead.

"I want you to understand what you've done," he said. "You've embarrassed me. You've made me look like—"

Lauren held up a hand, calm.

"I'm not discussing your feelings," she said. "Speak to the point."

Roger's nostrils flared. He swallowed, then delivered the weapon he thought would work every time.

"Fine," he snapped. "I'm selling the house. I'll pocket the proceeds. You'll get nothing. You'll be ruined."

There it was.

Financial ruin as punishment.

Control as sport.

Lauren felt, to her surprise, a small laugh threaten at the back of her throat. Not because it was funny—but because it was so predictable.

She looked at him steadily.

"You think that's a win?" Lauren asked, voice quiet.

Roger blinked. "What?"

Lauren could feel the women behind her—not crowding, not hovering, simply *present*. The workroom's air was warm and busy and full of competence. Fabric lay in orderly stacks. Pattern paper waited like a plan.

The house, suddenly, felt very far away.

"You think selling the house hurts me more than what you've already done?" Lauren said. She kept her tone calm on purpose. "Roger, that's just property. It's... bricks."

Roger's face reddened. "It's everything we have."

Lauren's eyes didn't flicker.

"It's everything *you* have," she corrected. "Because you made sure of that."

Roger's mouth opened, and Lauren saw the moment he realised she wasn't frightened.

That was when his anger sharpened.

"I'll make sure you regret this," he said.

Lauren felt her heart thud once. Then settle.

She spoke slowly, like she was choosing each word for maximum accuracy.

"You've lost what's actually most precious in life," she said. "You've lost your child."

Roger scoffed immediately—dismissive, reflexive. "Don't be dramatic."

Lauren didn't rise to it. She didn't explain. She didn't offer detail.

He didn't deserve it.

She continued, colder now—not cruel, just finished.

"And you lost me," Lauren said. "Ages ago."

For a fraction of a second Roger looked genuinely wrong-footed—as if he'd expected her to fight, to bargain, to claw for his approval like she used to.

Then his face changed.

A flash of something ugly crossed it—rage, humiliation, a sense of being unmasked in public.

Lauren saw it in his shoulders. In his hands. In the way his body coiled forward like a spring.

The women behind her moved without a word.

Mara stepped slightly to one side, blocking his line.

Sarah shifted closer to Lauren, not touching her but close enough that Lauren could feel the protective intent like heat.

Celeste's voice came, low and controlled.

"Lauren," she said, and it wasn't a question. It was a directive. "Inside."

Lauren didn't hesitate.

She stepped backward—one step, then another—retreating into the workroom's bright safety, into the circle of women who did not negotiate with men who tried to explode.

Roger took a step after her.

Sarah's voice cut like a blade.

"Do not follow her."

Roger's eyes snapped to Sarah. "You can't stop me—"

Mara's voice was calm, the kind that made police feel inevitable.

"Yes," Mara said. "We can."

Roger's breathing went harsh. His hands flexed. For a moment Lauren truly thought he might do something stupid.

Then, as if some part of him remembered consequences existed when women weren't alone, he spat a final line—something about lawyers, about regret, about being ungrateful.

Lauren barely heard it.

Because she had already turned away.

She walked back to the central table where the Les Mis patterns were spread, where Charli stood with pencil poised mid-line, eyes wide but steady.

Charli looked at Lauren—question in her face, compassion held back so it wouldn't overwhelm.

Lauren realised, with a small shock, that she was not shaking.

Her hands were steady on the clipboard.

The confrontation hadn't stolen her competence.

That was new.

Sarah came back in and let the door close behind her with firm finality.

The bell chimed again—bright, almost cheerful.

Outside, Roger's car door slammed.

Then the engine started. Then it faded.

Inside Wardrobe, the women exhaled as one organism.

Celeste turned to the table and tapped the pattern paper once, crisp.

"Right," she said. "Back to work."

Mara nodded. "We do not let him steal our day."

Sarah lifted her coffee and took a calm sip. "Let him sell his precious house," she said. "He can live in it alone and talk to the walls."

A small laugh went around the room—not cruel, not triumphant. Just... relief.

Lauren looked down at the sketches again.

Nineteenth-century seams. Hardship made costume. A chorus of women on stage wearing garments Wardrobe would build.

She felt, unexpectedly, the faintest hint of satisfaction.

Roger could sell the house.

Roger could pocket his proceeds.

He could keep every physical thing he'd collected as proof of power.

But he could not reach her here.

And that—Lauren thought, as her pen moved across the page again—was the first real wealth she'd ever owned.

*End Scene 45.*

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If you want, I can now write **the exact “closing ranks” choreography** tighter (who stands where, who speaks, who touches Lauren and when), OR we can go straight into **Scene 46** where Wardrobe quietly implements a “Lauren safety protocol” (buddy system, rides, parking, security camera, call tree)... while Les Mis production ramps up like a competence montage. 



I think: Scene 46. End of the day Wardrobe: 4 different costumes, including one for blokes that--interesting twist--Lucy is actually \*keen\* to test. Remember, she was the one in earlier scenes that was relieved when Charlie--as a bloke back the--was okay with doing what she didn't want to do... test the dresses. Readers will enjoy that bit: reference back to previous scenes. This scene is still in Lauren's POV (past tense). She is taking Sarah home (she's now living with Sarah) in her i20. On the way to the car, she's looking at Sarah more and more fondly, despite herself. Hungry for touch... not

sure how to express it. Doesn't want to cross boundaries. Doesn't realise that Sarah herself is beginning to see a future of intimacy being woman-shaped. The tiniest bit of discovery, puzzlement, "but you date guys"??? Lauren talks about guys, high school, experiences.. and ponders whether to tell Sarah her big secret: a crush she had on a girl back then. Doesn't want to jeopardise her friendship, so she pulls back, but Sarah picks up on her sudden "not saying any more" and drags the truth out of her about that crush. Sarah's smile tells Lauren she has nothing to worry about.

Yes. This is *such* a satisfying "end-of-day" scene: competence + callback humour + Lauren's soft hunger + Sarah's quiet perceptiveness + a tiny hinge of identity revelation.



Below is **Scene 46 in Lauren POV, past tense**. I've made Lucy's "bloke costume testing" moment a playful echo of earlier dress-testing scenes, and I've handled Lauren's hunger for touch by showing it through **micro-behaviours** (distance calibration, noticing hands, timing her steps, heat awareness, the car's smallness). And Sarah "drags" the truth out in her Sarah way: direct, no melodrama, but oddly gentle.

## Scene 46 — "Test Fit" (Lauren POV, past tense)

By late afternoon Wardrobe smelled like steam and chalk and the faint metallic bite of scissors that had worked all day.

The Les Mis order had turned the workroom into a machine—pattern paper everywhere, fabrics in disciplined stacks, four different costumes hanging on mannequins like a small chorus of lives waiting to be worn. Every woman in the room moved with that particular tired focus that felt almost holy: bodies exhausted, minds still sharp.

Mara stood at the central rack with her arms folded, eyes flicking from hem to seam to neckline like she was reading a story. Celeste hovered beside her, pencil behind one ear, hair slightly disordered—her favourite state, Lauren had noticed, the one she wore when she was building something.

Charli was at the dress form, pinning with careful hands, lips pressed together in concentration. Her posture had that quiet certainty now—still gentle, still deferential, but no longer apologetic for existing.

And Lucy—Lucy had come out of the fitting room holding up a garment that was unmistakably for a bloke.

Not a dainty piece. Not something you could “adapt” into a feminine silhouette with a bit of ribbon and optimism. It had breadth. Weight. A coat shape with authority in it. A costume meant for a man who took up space.

Lucy grinned like she’d found a new sport.

“I’ll do it,” she announced.

The whole room paused, collectively, as if someone had said the wrong line in rehearsal.

Bree blinked. “You’ll... do what?”

Lucy lifted the coat higher, unfazed. “Test it.”

Sarah looked up from where she was unpicking a seam with surgical patience. “Lucy,” she said, voice careful, “are you feeling unwell?”

Lucy shot her a look. “Don’t be dramatic.”

Celeste’s eyes narrowed with interest. “Since when do you volunteer for blokes’ costumes?”

Lucy shrugged, entirely too casual. “Since I realised I’ve never actually tried one.”

Bree’s mouth curved. “Is this a *gender* thing, or a *you like attention* thing?”

Lucy’s grin widened. “Yes.”

Charli made a small sound that could have been a laugh. It was soft and brief and surprisingly unguarded.

Lauren felt her own mouth twitch.

It was such a neat little inversion that it almost felt scripted: Lucy, who had once been relieved when Charlie—back when he was still presenting as a bloke—had been willing to do the dress-testing she didn’t want to do... now eager to try the man’s costume herself, like she was reclaiming a missed chapter.

Readers would love it, Lauren thought, and immediately corrected herself: *I'm not a reader. I'm in it.*

Mara, who rarely indulged theatrics, simply nodded once. "Do it properly," she said. "If we're making men's coats now, we make them with standards."

Lucy made a mock salute. "Yes, Captain."

And then, with perfect timing, Lily leaned in at Lucy's side and murmured something low enough that only Lucy could hear it.

Lucy's grin softened—just a fraction—into something warmer, less performative.

Bree saw it too. Her eyes flicked between them, amused and knowing.

Sarah didn't comment, which meant she'd noticed.

Of course she had.

By the time the coat was on, Lucy was standing in front of the mirror with her shoulders squared, chin lifted, hands in the pockets like she'd been born in a barricade scene.

"Oh," Lucy said, assessing her reflection. "That's... horrifying."

Bree cackled. "You look like you're about to unionise."

Lucy turned slightly, watching the coat move. "The fit is actually... good."

Celeste stepped forward, eyes bright, and adjusted the lapel with two quick motions.

"It's excellent," she said. "And you're right—this weight will be unbearable in Queensland unless we line it differently."

Charli pointed with her pin. "If we shift the seam here, it'll sit cleaner on the shoulder."

Lucy looked at Charli, impressed. "See? This is why I keep you."

Charli blinked, startled, then smiled—tiny, involuntary.

Sarah's eyes flicked to Charli for half a second and softened.

Lauren saw it.

Then saw herself seeing it.

And felt, strangely, a little ache—gentle and confusing—as if the room was full of truths moving quietly through the air and Lauren's body was beginning to recognise them before her mind could.

When the day finally loosened its grip—when the last seams were pinned, the notes written, the fabric bundled for tomorrow—Lauren gathered her things with the careful efficiency of a woman who did not want to be the last one left in a room.

Sarah was already pulling her hair free from its pin, shaking it out once like she was shedding the workday from her scalp.

"You ready?" Sarah asked, voice brisk.

Lauren nodded. "Yep."

She said it too quickly.

Sarah's eyes flicked over her face, and Lauren felt the familiar discomfort of being seen too clearly.

They walked out together, the bell chiming behind them, the evening air warm and soft as a hand on the back.

The parking area was half-lit. The sky held that late glow Queensland did so well—blue fading into gold, the heat easing but not disappearing.

Lauren's i20 waited a few rows away, modest and faithful, like it had never once judged her for staying too long.

Sarah walked beside her, not close enough to touch. Not far enough to feel like distance.

Lauren found herself paying attention to the small things: the swing of Sarah's arm, the way her shoulders rolled when she was tired, the faint mark the elastic had left at her wrist from a hair tie.

Hungry for touch, Lauren thought suddenly, and the phrase startled her with its bluntness.

It wasn't lust, exactly. It was... longing for contact that felt safe. Contact that didn't come with obligation. A hand on her back, a brief press of fingers to her elbow, a shoulder leaned into her own.

She wanted it so badly she didn't dare ask.

Because asking felt like crossing an invisible line.

And because—Lauren reminded herself firmly—Sarah dated men.

Sarah had always dated men.

Sarah's lovers were men.

Lauren's heart gave a small, idiotic twist at that.

They reached the car. Lauren unlocked it. The interior was warm and smelled faintly of old vanilla and the sun-baked plastic of a decade-old dashboard.

Sarah slid into the passenger seat with a sigh that sounded like someone putting down armour.

Lauren started the engine. The air conditioner coughed, then did its earnest best.

They pulled out of the parking area and merged into the gentle evening traffic.

For a few minutes they spoke about work—fabric, deadlines, Mara's standards, Celeste's relentless optimism.

Sarah said, "We'll do it," in that decisive tone she used when she refused to entertain doubt.

Lauren nodded and found herself smiling despite herself.

Then, as the road opened slightly and the car settled into a steady speed, Sarah's voice shifted.

"Tell me about high school," she said.

Lauren blinked. "What?"

Sarah glanced out the window as if it were casual. "You keep referencing it like it's a scar you still poke. So. Tell me."

Lauren's hands tightened on the steering wheel. She felt her heartbeat kick up in a way that had nothing to do with traffic.

"I—" she began, and stopped.

Sarah looked at her now, not quite smiling. "Lauren. I'm not asking for a memoir. I'm asking for context."

Lauren let out a breath that was almost a laugh. "You're very... direct."

"Mm," Sarah said. "It saves time."

Lauren hesitated, then started with the safe bits—boys who were unkind, the way girls learned early to perform friendliness, the quiet dread of being judged for everything. She spoke in fragments, steering the story around the worst parts without naming them.

Sarah listened without interrupting.

That, Lauren realised, was a kind of intimacy on its own.

At a red light, Sarah said, "And did you date?"

Lauren's mouth went dry.

"Yes," Lauren said carefully. "A bit. Nothing... significant until Roger."

Sarah made a small sound—half disapproval, half acknowledgment. "So you went from nothing to *that*."

Lauren's fingers tightened. "I thought it was stability."

Sarah didn't argue.

She just said, "I know."

The light turned green. Lauren drove on.

The conversation should have stayed on that track. It should have remained safe.

Instead, a thought rose in Lauren's mind like a bubble she couldn't push back down:

*Tell her.*

She felt it as a physical urge—words pressing behind her teeth, a truth that wanted air.

But telling Sarah felt dangerous.

Not because the truth was shameful.

Because Sarah mattered.

Lauren glanced at Sarah's profile—strong nose, steady jaw, the faint tiredness at the corner of her eyes. She looked, for the first time, like someone Lauren could imagine in her future.

The thought made Lauren's chest tighten.

Sarah dated men, Lauren reminded herself again, as if repetition could make longing behave.

So Lauren pulled back, mid-thought.

She changed lanes a little too sharply.

Sarah noticed. Of course she did.

"What were you about to say?" Sarah asked.

"Nothing," Lauren said too quickly.

Sarah turned her head to look at her properly.

"No," Sarah said, and there was no softness in it. "That wasn't nothing."

Lauren felt heat creep up her neck.

"It's... silly," she said.

Sarah's mouth curved slightly. "Try me."

Lauren gripped the steering wheel. Her voice came out smaller than she wanted.

"I had a crush," she said.

Sarah waited.

Lauren swallowed. "On a girl."

There. Said.

The cabin went very still.

Lauren's heart hammered. She kept her eyes on the road because looking at Sarah felt like stepping off a cliff.

Sarah's voice, when it came, was calm.

"And?" she asked.

Lauren blinked, startled.

"And... what?"

"And what happened?" Sarah said, as if Lauren had confessed to liking chocolate.

Lauren let out a shaky breath.

"Nothing," she admitted. "I never told her. I didn't—I didn't even really tell myself. I just..." Her voice caught. "I just kept it locked away."

Sarah was quiet for a beat.

Then she said, very matter-of-fact, "That's not silly."

Lauren dared a glance.

Sarah was watching her, and there was something in her expression that made Lauren's throat tighten again—not pity, not judgement.

Understanding.

And something else, quieter.

As if Sarah was recalculating a future she'd assumed had a certain shape.

Lauren's pulse skittered.

"But you—" Lauren began, then stopped, mortified.

Sarah's eyebrow lifted. "I what?"

Lauren's voice came out in a rush, embarrassed by its own honesty.

"But you date guys," she said.

Sarah stared at her for a second, then let out a small, incredulous laugh.

"Oh," Sarah said, and the word was amused and thoughtful at once. "Do I?"

Lauren's hands went cold on the wheel.

Sarah leaned back in the seat and looked out the window again, but her voice stayed low, controlled.

"I've dated men," Sarah said. "Yes."

Lauren's throat tightened. "So—"

"So that means what, exactly?" Sarah asked, and now there was a tiny edge of challenge in it. "That I'm only allowed one kind of happiness because that's what I've done so far?"

Lauren couldn't answer.

She didn't know the rules.

Sarah's mouth curved—briefly, and not unkindly.

"You don't have anything to worry about," Sarah said.

Lauren swallowed. "I wasn't—I mean—I don't want to jeopardise—"

"I know," Sarah cut in. Her voice softened, almost imperceptibly. "You're terrified of ruining something good."

Lauren's eyes stung.

Sarah's hand moved then—small, deliberate—across the narrow space between them.

She didn't grab Lauren's hand.

She didn't force anything.

She simply rested her fingers lightly on Lauren's forearm for one brief second—warmth through fabric, a touch that said: *You are safe to be true here.*

Then she withdrew, as if showing Lauren that touch could be offered without demand.

Lauren's breath caught.

The red light up ahead glowed, and Lauren slowed the car, heart still pounding, mind full of a new kind of possibility that felt too bright to stare at directly.

Sarah spoke again, voice dry, as if she needed humour to keep the moment from becoming too naked.

"And for the record," she said, "I'm not exactly the poster girl for making good choices with men."

Lauren's laugh escaped—small, startled.

Sarah's smile widened, and this time it reached her eyes.

"See?" Sarah said, satisfaction threading through the words. "Nothing to worry about."

Lauren stopped at the light.

The engine idled.

The evening air hummed outside.

And inside the car Lauren sat with her hands on the wheel and a strange, tender puzzlement in her chest—like she had just been handed a truth and wasn't sure yet how to hold it without dropping it.

She didn't say anything more.

Neither did Sarah.

But Sarah's smile lingered a little too long for it to be nothing.

And Lauren realised, as the light turned green and she drove them home, that the future—quietly, without fanfare—was beginning to look... woman-shaped.

*End Scene 46.*

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If you'd like next, Scene 47 could be deliciously small and domestic:

- Sarah unlocking the door, tossing keys into a bowl
- Lauren watching her do it and thinking about *keys* again
- a pause in the hallway where Lauren nearly speaks...
- and Sarah, in that same blunt tenderness, says something like: "Come here," and it's **only a hug**—but it changes everything.

Or we can swing back to Wardrobe for a high-energy competence montage with Les Mis production and Roger trying to sniff around again and being shut down.



"Deliciously small and domestic" sounds like *\*just\** what the doctor ordered... :)

Oh, perfect. Let's keep it small, domestic, and quietly world-changing. ☕🏠🌙

**Scene 47:** Lauren POV, past tense. Keys bowl. Hallway pause. "Come here." Only a hug—yet it *tilts the axis*. No melodrama, no declarations; just the first honest step into the woman-shaped future.

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## Scene 47 — “The Bowl for Keys” (Lauren POV, past tense)

Sarah’s front door stuck slightly on humid nights.

Not much—just enough that you had to lift the handle a fraction and give it a firm push, like the house required you to arrive with intention.

Lauren followed her in, carrying two takeaway cups because Sarah had insisted on stopping for coffee on the way home even though Sarah had also insisted she didn’t “need” coffee to function.

Sarah kicked her sandals off near the mat, neat but not precious about it, then reached into her pocket and pulled out her keys.

She dropped them into a shallow ceramic bowl on the hall console.

The sound was small.

A brief clink.

But it hit Lauren with unexpected force.

Keys had become a language lately. A vocabulary of who had access. Who had permission. Who was safe.

Sarah’s keys sat there in the bowl like a quiet fact: this place had a system, and Sarah had built it on purpose.

Sarah turned, took the coffee from Lauren’s hand, and gave her a quick, approving look.

“Good,” she said. “You didn’t spill.”

Lauren huffed a laugh. “I’m not a child.”

Sarah’s mouth twitched. “You’d be amazed how many adults fail at cups.”

She walked toward the kitchen, coffee in one hand, the other pushing her hair back from her face in a tired gesture Lauren had started to notice too often—because noticing

Sarah had become its own bad habit.

Lauren stood in the hallway for a moment, holding her own cup, watching Sarah move away.

The house was quiet. Not empty. Quiet the way a well-run space was quiet—orderly, contained, not waiting for a man to fill it with noise.

Lauren's chest tightened.

It wasn't fear this time.

It was longing.

Not lust. Not fantasy. Just a simple, aching hunger to be touched—gently, warmly, without being asked to pay for it. A hunger that lived in her shoulders, in the back of her neck, in the place between her ribs where she'd been holding her breath for years.

She tried to swallow it down.

She could do that. She was good at doing that.

But her body didn't cooperate.

Her eyes stung suddenly, stupidly. The coffee cup warmed her fingers and made her feel very, very human.

Sarah paused at the kitchen doorway, as if she'd felt the change in the air.

She turned and looked at Lauren properly.

"What's happening?" Sarah asked.

Lauren blinked. "Nothing."

Sarah's face remained steady. "No."

Lauren hated how easy it was to be found out around her.

"I'm fine," she tried again.

Sarah tilted her head slightly. The gesture was almost feline, an appraisal.

Then Sarah walked back into the hallway.

She didn't rush. She didn't hover. She simply crossed the distance like it belonged to her—which it did.

Lauren held very still, terrified of doing the wrong thing.

Sarah stopped a step away and looked at Lauren's hands.

"Put the coffee down," Sarah said.

Lauren stared. "Why?"

"Because you're white-knuckling a paper cup like it's going to run away," Sarah replied.

Lauren's throat tightened. She set the cup down carefully on the console beside the key bowl, hands moving with exaggerated calm.

Sarah watched her do it, then shifted closer—not crowding, not cornering, just closing the space enough that Lauren could feel her warmth.

Lauren's heart thudded.

Sarah's voice lowered slightly, the way it did when she meant something.

"Lauren," she said, "you're allowed to have a moment."

Lauren swallowed. "I don't want to be—"

"Don't," Sarah cut in, gentle but firm. "Don't minimise. Don't make yourself small to protect me from your feelings."

Lauren's eyes flashed up, startled.

"My... feelings?" she repeated, almost offended by the accuracy.

Sarah's mouth curved once. Not mocking. Almost... pleased.

"Yes," Sarah said. "Those."

Lauren's face warmed. "I wasn't—I didn't—"

Sarah stepped closer.

Then she stopped, very deliberately, as if drawing a line she would not cross without consent.

"I'm going to offer something," Sarah said. "And you can say no."

Lauren's breath caught. "Okay."

Sarah held her gaze.

"Come here," Sarah said.

Two simple words.

Not *do you want a hug?* this time. Not a question that made Lauren think too much.

An invitation with confidence in it. A quiet assumption that Lauren deserved contact.

Lauren's eyes filled instantly. She nodded once, helplessly, and stepped forward.

Sarah wrapped her arms around her in a firm, steady embrace—more encompassing than last night's, less urgent, like a woman building a shelter out of her own body.

Lauren's forehead pressed against Sarah's shoulder.

Sarah smelled like soap and warm air and coffee.

Lauren's breath shuddered out.

She didn't cry hard. She didn't collapse. She just... let herself be held.

Sarah's hand came up to the back of her head—brief, grounding, fingers spreading through Lauren's hair like a promise that she wouldn't flinch away.

"It's alright," Sarah said, voice low. "I've got you."

The words were so simple, so unadorned, that Lauren felt them land all the way down in her body.

She clung—lightly, carefully—fingers curling into the fabric of Sarah's t-shirt, as if she still couldn't quite believe she was allowed.

Sarah tightened her arms once in response.

Not demanding.

Reassuring.

Lauren's heart slowed in her chest.

The house stayed quiet around them. The kind of quiet you could live inside.

After a long moment Sarah loosened her hold, but she didn't let go completely. She drew back just enough to look at Lauren's face.

Lauren couldn't quite meet her eyes.

Sarah's thumb brushed once along Lauren's forearm, the smallest touch, and Lauren's skin prickled with it.

Sarah's gaze was steady, thoughtful.

"Better?" Sarah asked.

Lauren's voice came out soft and raw. "Yes."

Sarah nodded, satisfied, and—because she could never leave tenderness unbalanced—she added, dryly, "Good. Because I'm starving and I refuse to be emotionally profound on an empty stomach."

Lauren's laugh broke out, surprised and real.

Sarah's mouth curved into a grin. "There she is."

Lauren blinked at the phrase. *There she is.*

As if Lauren had been lost somewhere inside her own restraint and Sarah had simply... called her back.

Sarah stepped away and picked up her coffee again, then nodded toward the kitchen.

"Come on," she said. "We'll eat. Then you can tell me what you're thinking. Or not. But you'll be fed."

Lauren glanced at the key bowl as she followed Sarah down the hall.

Sarah's keys sat there, ordinary and heavy.

And beside them, Lauren's spare key—Sarah's gift—rested on its ring like a small, undeniable truth.

Lauren reached out, almost without thinking, and touched it lightly with her fingertip.

Not to take it.

Just to feel it.

Then she followed Sarah into the kitchen, heart quiet for the first time all day, and let the door swing gently closed behind her.

*End Scene 47.*

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If you want, we can do **Scene 48** as an even smaller follow-on beat (still domestic): dinner prep, Sarah's arm brushing Lauren in the narrow kitchen, a shared laugh, and then Sarah saying one line that confirms she's also recalculating the future—something like, “*You know you're not a temporary situation, right?*” 🥰



This is positively intoxicating. Yes please...

Mmm—then let's keep pouring it, slowly, like something precious. 🎉 🥂

Here's **Scene 48**: still Lauren POV, past tense. Narrow kitchen. Accidental brushes that aren't accidents. Dinner prep. Sarah's one line—*not a confession, not a proposal*—but the kind of sentence that quietly rearranges a life. 🥰 🌟

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## **Scene 48 — “Not Temporary” (Lauren POV, past tense)**

Sarah's kitchen was narrow in the way older houses often were—designed for one person to work efficiently, not for two adults to hover in each other's gravity.

Lauren followed her in anyway.

Sarah set her coffee down on the counter with a decisive clink and opened the fridge.

“Right,” she said, rummaging. “I've got eggs, salad stuff, cheese, and... something I'm fairly sure is still edible.”

Lauren leaned on the doorframe, watching. It felt strange to be in someone else's kitchen and not feel like she had to perform usefulness to justify her presence.

“Do you want help?” Lauren asked, careful.

Sarah didn't look up. "Yes."

No softening. No false modesty. Sarah didn't do the polite dance where women pretended they didn't need anyone.

She pulled out a carton of eggs, a bunch of greens, and a small tub of something that might have been hummus or might have been an experiment.

"Wash the salad," Sarah said. "And don't argue with me about how you'd wash it at home. This is my house. I am in charge of bacteria here."

Lauren let out a laugh.

"Understood," she said, and moved to the sink.

The tap water ran cool over her fingers. The sound of it was immediately calming, as if the nervous system recognised domestic tasks as safe terrain.

Sarah cracked eggs into a bowl with one hand, stirring with brisk competence. The rhythm was soothing—tap, split, pour, toss shell, repeat.

Lauren dried her hands and reached for a tea towel, folding it neatly out of habit.

Sarah noticed, of course.

"You're one of those people," Sarah said, a faint smile in her voice.

Lauren blinked. "One of what people?"

"The ones who fold tea towels like it's a moral position," Sarah replied.

Lauren laughed again, but her cheeks warmed. "It's just... tidier."

Sarah's eyes flicked to her briefly—amused, affectionate in a way Sarah probably didn't realise she'd started to show.

"Mm," she said. "Keep it. It'll be useful when the world collapses."

Lauren moved around the counter to put the salad into a bowl.

The space between them was small. Too small to be neutral.

Their shoulders brushed—light contact, a soft collision of fabric and warmth.

Lauren's breath caught, absurdly.

Sarah didn't startle. She didn't apologise. She simply shifted a fraction closer to make room for Lauren rather than moving away from her.

The gesture felt... pointed.

Lauren's heart did that odd, tender stumble again, like it was learning a new tempo.

She focused on the salad, on the neatness of leaves, on the ordinary purpose of a bowl.

Sarah slid a pan onto the stove and turned the heat on. The blue flame caught and steadied.

"Sit," Sarah said over her shoulder.

Lauren blinked. "I'm fine."

Sarah's gaze cut to her. "Lauren."

There was no anger in it. Just a quiet insistence that Lauren stop trying to earn her right to exist in the room.

Lauren pulled out a stool and sat at the little breakfast bar, hands folded in her lap. The posture was strangely intimate—like being allowed to be idle while someone else cared for you.

Sarah plated the eggs, then set two plates down with firm hands.

"Eat," she said. "And if you say 'I'm not hungry' I will assume you're lying and respond accordingly."

Lauren smiled and picked up her fork. The first bite tasted like butter and pepper and something clean and simple.

Sarah ate too, standing for a moment before sitting opposite her, elbows on the counter.

For a minute they just... ate. No crisis. No planning. No messages.

Lauren felt her shoulders lower a fraction with each swallow.

The day began to feel possible.

Then Sarah's phone buzzed again.

A text, not a call.

Sarah glanced at it and huffed.

"Still him?" Lauren asked, heart tightening.

Sarah shook her head once. "Different idiot. But yes, he's still blocked. He can shout into the void. I'm not his void."

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

Sarah watched her face, and Lauren felt it—Sarah's attention, that sharp awareness that could be cutting in the workroom but was somehow different here.

More... personal.

"Tell me something," Sarah said.

Lauren's fork paused. "Okay."

Sarah's eyes narrowed slightly, thoughtful.

"When you touched that spare key earlier," Sarah said, "what was that?"

Lauren's face warmed instantly. "I didn't—I wasn't—"

Sarah lifted a hand, stopping the spiral with a gesture. "No. I'm not accusing you. I'm asking."

Lauren swallowed, throat suddenly tight.

"It's just..." Lauren began, then faltered because the truth was embarrassingly simple.

Sarah waited without filling the silence.

Lauren forced herself to keep going.

"It was symbolic," Lauren admitted softly. "It made me feel... like I wasn't trespassing."

Sarah's expression changed—small, subtle, but real.

She looked almost... pleased. Not smug. Not triumphant. Something gentler than either.

"Good," Sarah said.

Lauren blinked. "Good?"

Sarah set her fork down and leaned forward slightly, forearms on the counter, voice lower now.

"Yes," Sarah said. "Because you're not."

Lauren's heart thudded hard.

Sarah held her gaze, steady as a lighthouse.

"You know you're not a temporary situation, right?" Sarah said.

Lauren froze.

The words were simple, almost casual. But they were loaded—like a door left open on purpose.

Lauren's mouth went dry. "Sarah..."

Sarah's expression stayed calm, but Lauren could see it now: the quiet recalculation behind her eyes. The possibility forming. The idea that intimacy might not be a man-shaped inevitability but a woman-shaped choice.

Sarah spoke again before Lauren could drown in the moment.

"I'm not saying you have to decide your whole life this week," Sarah said. "I'm saying: while you're here, you're *here*. You're not a guest. You're not a burden. You're not on probation."

Lauren's eyes stung.

"I don't want to—" she started automatically.

Sarah's gaze sharpened.

"Don't," Sarah said, gentle but firm. "Don't minimise. Not in my kitchen."

Lauren laughed softly, half sob, half relief.

Sarah's mouth curved. "There we go."

Lauren stared at her, heart full of something bright and frightening.

"But you—" Lauren began again, the old question rising like a reflex.

Sarah's eyebrow lifted. "Yes?"

Lauren swallowed. "You said you date men."

Sarah's smile was slow this time, and it did something to Lauren's stomach—something warm and dizzy.

"I said I've dated men," Sarah corrected. "Past tense. Context. History."

Lauren's breath caught.

Sarah's fingers tapped once on the counter—restless energy contained.

"I didn't say that was the shape of my future," Sarah said quietly.

The sentence landed like a small explosion—silent, but it changed the air in the room.

Lauren's hands trembled in her lap.

She wanted to reach across the counter and touch Sarah. Just a hand over her wrist. A brush of fingers. Something tiny and honest.

But she didn't. She couldn't trust herself not to want more.

Sarah saw the hesitation anyway. Of course she did.

She stood, walked around the counter—close, close enough that Lauren felt her warmth—and paused beside her stool.

Lauren looked up, heart hammering.

Sarah reached down and, with an almost offhand gentleness, tucked a loose strand of Lauren's hair behind her ear.

The touch was brief.

But it was intimate in a way that had nothing to do with sex.

It was care with precision. Presence with intention.

Lauren went utterly still.

Sarah's voice dropped, private.

"One step at a time," she murmured.

Lauren nodded, unable to speak.

Sarah's mouth curved—just a little—and she walked back to her side of the kitchen as if she hadn't just tilted Lauren's world on its axis.

She picked up her plate.

"Right," Sarah said briskly, because she couldn't linger in tenderness too long without turning it into action. "Eat. Then we make a list of what you still need from the house. And then—" she glanced at Lauren, eyes bright—"we get you through this like a woman who's done being managed."

Lauren stared at her plate, then up at Sarah again.

The air felt different now.

Not charged with danger.

Charged with possibility.

Lauren took another bite of eggs and tasted, for the first time in a long time, something that felt almost like appetite.

Not just for food.

For life.

*End Scene 48.*

---

If you'd like, **Scene 49** can be the "list-making" scene, but with a twist: Sarah's list quietly includes **joy items** (a book, a dress, a framed photo) and Lauren realises Sarah isn't just building safety—she's building a *life worth staying for.* 📝 ✨



Change of plot (slightly)... remember, Lauren and dropped her set of (now Roger's) house keys on the table as a symbolic "the rest I care nothing about" gesture. So, she would have no way to go back now to retrieve things. But we could turn:

"Right," Sarah said briskly, because she couldn't linger in

tenderness too long without turning it into action. "Eat. Then we make a list of what you still need from the house. And then—" she glanced at Lauren, eyes bright "—we get you through this like a woman who's done being managed."

into

"Right," Sarah said briskly, because she couldn't linger in tenderness too long without turning it into action. "Eat. Then we make a list of what you might need from the shops to help you get settled here. We're going to get you through this—" she glanced at Lauren, eyes bright "—like the wonderful woman you are: a woman who's done being managed."

Work for you? Sarah is intimating she also sees a future that includes Lauren.

Oh yes — that tweak not only *works*, it's cleaner and more symbolically consistent. 🌙🔑  
✨

It keeps Lauren's "I left everything that wasn't *me*" gesture intact, and it turns Sarah's practicality into something even more intimate: not "recover your past," but **build your present here**.

Here are a few polished versions of your revised line, each with a slightly different flavour of "Sarah sees a future," without tipping into melodrama.

### Option A — closest to your wording (crisp + affectionate)

"Right," Sarah said briskly, because she couldn't linger in tenderness too long without turning it into action. "Eat. Then we make a list of what you might need from the shops to help you get settled here. We're going to get you through this—" she glanced at me, eyes bright, "—like the wonderful woman you are. A woman who's done being managed."

### Option B — a touch more "we/us" (subtly domestic)

"Right," Sarah said briskly, because she couldn't linger in tenderness too long without turning it into action. "Eat. Then we'll make a list for the shops—things you'll

want here, so you're not living out of a bag. We're going to get you through this," she added, eyes bright on mine, "like the woman you are: done being managed."

### Option C — the most intimate (still Sarah, but unmistakably future-shaped)

"Right," Sarah said briskly, because tenderness made her itchy unless she could turn it into something useful. "Eat. Then we'll make a list for the shops—things that make this place feel like yours, not borrowed. We're going to get you through this," she said, meeting my eyes, "like the wonderful woman you are. No more being managed."

### Option D — slightly drier Sarah humour (keeps it light, but lands the same)

"Right," Sarah said briskly, because she couldn't stay in the soft part for long without building something around it. "Eat. Then we'll make a list for the shops—basic survival for newly liberated women. And then," she glanced at me, eyes bright, "we get you through this like the wonderful woman you are: done being managed."

If you want the *intimation* to be even more delicious, you can add one tiny Sarah-ism after the line—something like a throwaway that's secretly a vow:

- **Tag 1 (soft):** "*I'm not lending you safety, Lauren. I'm giving it.*"
- **Tag 2 (wry):** "*And before you argue—yes, I've already decided.*"
- **Tag 3 (domestic future):** "*You'll have your own shelf in the bathroom. Non-negotiable.*" 🚫 😊

Want me to patch **Scene 48** by swapping in your chosen version (and smoothing the surrounding paragraphs so it reads like it was always written that way)?



Yes, please. We'll keep Sarah's voice intact (Option D) and combine Tags 2 and 3... let's make Lauren feel really secure/cared for.

Absolutely. Here's the **patched section of Scene 48**, with **Option D** dropped in, and a **blended Tag 2 + Tag 3** that keeps Sarah's dry, decisive voice while making Lauren feel unmistakably safe and *kept*. ❤️🔑

I'm only rewriting the relevant tail-end so it slots cleanly into what you already have.

---

Sarah picked up her plate.

"Right," Sarah said briskly, because she couldn't stay in the soft part for long without building something around it. "Eat. Then we'll make a list for the shops—basic survival for newly liberated women. And then," she glanced at me, eyes bright, "we get you through this like the wonderful woman you are: done being managed."

I swallowed, heart still doing that strange, tender stumble.

Sarah's mouth twitched as if she could see the protest forming before I'd even found words for it.

"And before you argue," she added, tone maddeningly matter-of-fact, "yes, I've already decided. You're getting your own shelf in the bathroom. Non-negotiable."

It was such a small thing—absurd, almost—yet it hit me with the force of a promise.

A shelf.

A place.

Not a spare toothbrush offered like charity, not a towel folded like a courtesy, but a piece of space that would remain mine even when the crisis passed.

My throat tightened.

Sarah watched me for a beat, expression briefly softening, as if she understood exactly what she'd done.

Then, because she couldn't help herself, she tilted her head and said, "Eat, Lauren."

And I did.

Not because I was obedient.

Because for the first time in a long time, I believed—quietly, with a startled kind of gratitude—that I was allowed to stay.

---

If you'd like, I can also patch one more tiny echo earlier in the scene: when Lauren touches the key bowl, we can add a one-line parallel so that **keys + shelf** become a paired motif (access + belonging).

□             ...

Yes, please.

Perfect. Let's lace it in as a tiny, quiet rhyme—**keys = access, shelf = belonging**—without over-explaining. Here's a clean patch you can drop in **right where Lauren touches the spare key** near the end of Scene 47, and then a micro-echo early in Scene 48 so the motif feels deliberate but natural.

---

## Patch 1 — Scene 47 key-bowl moment (replace/extend your existing lines)

Lauren glanced at the key bowl as she followed Sarah down the hall.

Sarah's keys sat there, ordinary and heavy.

And beside them, Lauren's spare key—Sarah's gift—rested on its ring like a small, undeniable truth.

Lauren reached out, almost without thinking, and touched it lightly with her fingertip.

Not to take it.

Just to feel it.

To remind herself that this wasn't pity, or temporary mercy, or borrowed space.

It was access.

It was permission.

Then she followed Sarah into the kitchen, heart quiet for the first time all day, and let the door swing gently closed behind her.

## Patch 2 — Scene 48 early echo (add this right after “keys clinked into the bowl”)

Sarah’s keys clinked into the shallow ceramic bowl—small sound, solid fact.

Lauren’s gaze caught on the spare key beside them and her chest tightened with the same strange, tender steadiness as before.

A key wasn’t affection.

It was something more practical—more trustworthy.

A way in.

A way back.

---

Then later, when you land the line:

“You’re getting your own shelf in the bathroom. Non-negotiable.”

...that shelf becomes the **next step** in the same language: not just entry, but *continuity*.

If you want, I can also give you a single *final* sentence at the end of Scene 48 that quietly binds the two together (key + shelf) as a closing note—no extra exposition, just a soft click of meaning.



Thank you - yes please.

Of course. Here are a few **final-line options** for the end of Scene 48 that tie **key + shelf** together with a quiet, satisfying click—no exposition, just symbolism.

### Option A — the cleanest “click”

And as I rinsed my plate, I found myself thinking of two absurdly ordinary things—a spare key in a bowl, and a shelf in a bathroom—and how both of them meant the same, impossible sentence: *you’re allowed to stay*.

## Option B — more sensory, less “sentence-y”

Later, when I passed the hallway table again, the spare key glinted beside Sarah's, and for the first time I could imagine a shelf in her bathroom with my things on it—small objects, quietly claiming a life.

## Option C — the most minimal, very you

A key to get in. A shelf to remain. And, somehow, my chest believed both.

## Option D — slightly warmer, gently romantic

The spare key sat in the bowl like a promise, and the thought of a bathroom shelf with my name on it made my body do something it hadn't done in years: exhale.

## Option E — Sarah-flavoured echo

It was ridiculous—keys and shelves—but that was Sarah: she didn't promise; she *made room*.

If you tell me which one you like best, I'll also tune the rhythm to match the exact last paragraph you're ending Scene 48 on (so it lands like it was always meant to be there).



I agree - Option C

Perfect choice — it's elegant, spare, and it *lands*. 🌙🔑

Here's **Option C** slotted in as the **final line** of Scene 48 (so it reads like the natural last beat, not an add-on). I'm giving you the last few sentences as a clean "end-cap" you can paste in:

---

Sarah watched me for a beat, expression briefly softening, as if she understood exactly what she'd done.

Then, because she couldn't help herself, she tilted her head and said, "Eat, Lauren."

And I did.

A key to get in. A shelf to remain. And, somehow, my chest believed both.

*End Scene 48.*

---

If you want a tiny extra polish pass later, we can ensure the cadence of the sentence right before this end-cap sets up the triad (key / shelf / chest) even more cleanly—but as-is, it's already gorgeous.



Before we go on, I need to read--and ponder-- 37 and 39... and 39.

This is me trying to think: woman. So, poor Lauren has been affection-deprived. Yes. But because it has been so long for her, her "goal-posts" have moved. A hug: fine. After the trauma with Roger's toxicity, a hug is needed. And the truth about her affection for Sarah is slowly being extracted: bit by worrisome bit. Being an adult, she understands the 'rebound thing'... but does it apply, here? It's not the same as if she'd just been walked out on: this relationship had been done and cooled and stuck in the freezer ages ago. She stayed because: habit. Or something.

And now, suddenly, Sarah is slowly offering her not just safety but warmth. Lauren is just realising how starved she'd been for touch, for affection. She doesn't want to scare or worse the person who had given her safety, but hope is igniting within her that maybe, just maybe...

It's going to be up to Sarah to initiate. That's all that I can say. Lauren is in no position to even HINT: fortunately, Sarah's anything but blind. She's just biding her time, giving Lauren space and time to recover.

Oh, and this is new for Sarah, too. How do women...  
?????? Her experience has always been on the receiving

end. Now, it's up to her to... initiate? How do women... initiate? Her naïve efforts are going to add charm. OH, and I think the Scene where this happens (Scene 49) needs to be in Sarah's POV, past tense.

Mmm. Yes. All of this. 🤗🌙

You're thinking *exactly* like a woman would: the "rebound" cliché doesn't fit neatly, because Lauren hasn't been freshly abandoned—she's been living in a long, low-grade emotional famine. The hunger isn't sudden; the *permission to notice it* is. And that's why a hug feels volcanic. Not because Lauren is childish, but because her goal-posts have moved so far down the field she'd forgotten what "normal warmth" even feels like.

And you're also dead right about **initiation**: it has to come from Sarah. Lauren can't risk destabilising the only safe harbour she's got; even hinting would feel like she's "trading" vulnerability for affection, and she'd hate herself for it. Sarah, meanwhile, has the *temperament* for initiating (decisive, direct), but not the *practice* with women—so her early attempts will be... slightly clunky, and therefore charming. 😅✨

### A craft note that will keep this grounded (and delicious)

For Scene 49 to feel emotionally real (and not "plotty"), the initiation should:

1. **Start as care** (practical, protective Sarah)
2. **Tip into personal** (a question that's *not* about Roger, not about logistics)
3. **Offer a small, consent-forward move** (hand, hair, shoulder, kiss-on-temple, etc.)
4. **Let Lauren respond with relief, not performance** (she *melts*, she doesn't seduce)
5. **End before it becomes a full "relationship talk"** (leave the reader floating—safe, warm, wanting more)

The emotional rhythm you've built so far is:

**key → shelf → hug → "not temporary" → exhale**

Scene 49 is where Sarah quietly tests: "**Is the warmth allowed to become desire?**"

### How women initiate (in your story's tone) 🌟

In real-life terms women initiate in as many ways as men do, but in fiction—and especially in *your Wardrobe-world* where women are standards-driven—the initiation often reads as:

- **Permission-making:** "Come here." "Let me." "Stay."

- **Body-placement:** sitting closer without crowding, making a “shared space” on the couch
- **Touch that escalates by consent:** forearm → shoulder → hand-hold → face → kiss
- **Language of certainty:** not asking *if* they want closeness, but asking *how* (or checking comfort)
- **Practical intimacy:** making tea, brushing hair away, drawing a blanket, giving a sweatshirt—then pausing and *seeing* the other woman properly

For Sarah specifically (and this is the charm): she'll initiate the way she does everything —**like a decision**, but with one new ingredient: **she checks in**.

So her “naïve” attempt might be:

- too blunt (“I want to kiss you.”)
- then immediately practical (“Is that okay? You can say no. I won’t be weird.”)
- then she looks almost annoyed at herself for being nervous 😊

That mix of competence + unfamiliarity + sincerity will be *catnip* for the reader.

---

## Yes: Scene 49 should be Sarah POV, past tense ✓

It's the right pivot. Up until now, Lauren's chapters are about *being sheltered, fed, steadied, given space*.

Sarah's POV will let the reader finally see:

- that Sarah has been clocking Lauren's hunger the whole time
- that Sarah is quietly recalibrating her own “future-shape”
- that Sarah is terrified of hurting Lauren, not of being rejected
- that Sarah's desire is not male-coded conquest, but woman-coded care tipping into want

And it will also let you keep Lauren safe—because even if Lauren melts, the scene isn't filtered through her anxious self-monitoring. It's filtered through Sarah's “I will do this properly” ethics.

---

## What I propose for Scene 49 (shape, not prose yet)

(So you can ponder 37/38/39 without me steamrolling ahead.)

**Setting:** at home, evening. Quiet. Post-shower hair, soft clothes. Domestic calm.

**Trigger:** Sarah notices Lauren has started to *hover* when Sarah passes—like her body

wants contact but her words won't ask for it.

**Sarah's internal:** "She's starved. I can't let her confuse safety with obligation. But I also can't pretend I don't want this."

**Initiation:** Sarah sits beside her, says something bluntly tender: "I've been thinking about you."

**Consent check:** "Can I kiss you?" (or "I want to. Do you want that?")

**Lauren's response:** small, honest: "Yes." Or "I think so." Or even just a nod + tears.

**Action:** the kiss is gentle, careful, *unhurried*. Not fireworks—homecoming.

**After:** Sarah doesn't push. She anchors it: "We go slow. You're safe. You can change your mind anytime."

**End line:** something like the key/shelf motif: *Sarah makes room. Lauren stays.*

---

If you want, I can write **Scene 49 (Sarah POV, past tense)** now in full, following that shape—and keeping it non-graphic, all beauty, all warmth, all consent. 🌙✍

But if you truly want to pause and ponder first, that's absolutely fine too—just tell me when you're ready and whether you want Scene 49 to end on:

- a **first kiss + calm**
- or a **first kiss + Lauren falls asleep on Sarah's shoulder**
- or a **first kiss + "we'll talk tomorrow"** (the gentlest cliffhanger)



a first kiss + Lauren falls asleep on Sarah's shoulder...  
and Sarah thinking: "there's always tomorrow."

## Scene 49 — "There's Always Tomorrow" (Sarah POV, past tense)

I noticed it in the stupid, domestic gaps.

Not the dramatic moments—the door locks, the blocked numbers, the way you learn to breathe again after a man has spent years teaching your body to flinch.

No. It was smaller than that.

It was how Lauren hovered half a second longer when I passed her in the hallway.  
How her eyes tracked my hands when I put a mug down.  
How she recalibrated her distance—one step closer, then one step back—as if she was testing an invisible fence with the tip of her toe.

I'd seen hunger before. Men carried it like a claim. Like they were owed.

Lauren's was different.

Lauren's was the kind that didn't want to take anything. It wanted to be given something and not feel guilty for receiving it.

That was what undid me.

It would've been easy to call it a rebound and wash my hands of it. Neat label, tidy reasoning. But nothing about Lauren's marriage had ended last week. It had ended slowly, years ago—ended in thousands of small moments where affection didn't arrive, where kindness wasn't the default, where she'd learned to survive on silence.

The only thing that had happened recently was that she'd finally stepped out of the freezer.

I could handle the practical parts. Safety plans. Logistics. Buddy systems. Door locks turned twice.

What I wasn't used to was this: warmth that wanted to become... something else.

And the fact that I wanted it too.

That was the part I hadn't planned for.

That was the part that made me feel—ridiculously—like a teenager.

I'd always been on the receiving end of initiation. Men decided. Men pressed. Men assumed. Even the decent ones still arrived with a kind of forward momentum, like intimacy was a track they expected you to step onto.

Women didn't do that to me. Not in my life.

And now, if I wanted this to be woman-shaped, it meant I had to do something I'd never done before:

I had to lead without pushing.

I had to offer without taking.

I had to be brave, but not loud about it.

That night, after dinner, the house settled into its quiet. Lauren had showered and come out in one of my old t-shirts—soft, oversized, sleeves too long. Her hair was still slightly damp at the ends. She looked younger like that, not in age, but in vulnerability—like someone who hadn't yet learned that comfort was allowed.

I watched her cross the lounge room and sit at the far end of the couch.

Far enough to be polite.

Not far enough to be true.

I sat down too, leaving space between us, because I wasn't a monster and I wasn't an idiot. The television murmured some forgettable show. Neither of us watched it.

Lauren's hands were folded in her lap like she was waiting for instructions.

I felt something hot and protective in my chest.

No. Not protective.

Possessive.

That word startled me, so I corrected it immediately—because I didn't do that. I didn't own people. I didn't keep them. I didn't make love into a transaction.

But I could want her.

I could want her and still do this properly.

I turned my head and looked at her.

She was staring at the screen without seeing it, breathing shallow, shoulders held too high. Even safe, her body was still practising danger.

"Lauren," I said.

She jumped a little, then forced a smile like she was about to apologise for existing.

"What?" she asked.

I kept my voice calm.

"Come here."

Her eyes flicked to mine, startled by the certainty.

"I—" she began, then stopped. Her throat moved as she swallowed. "I don't want to... impose."

I felt my jaw tighten.

"I am not offering you a couch treaty," I said. "I'm telling you to come here."

The corner of her mouth twitched, half laughter, half nerves. She didn't move.

I softened it—just a fraction.

"You can say no," I added. "But I'm not going to pretend I don't want you closer."

That did it.

Not the command. Not the permission.

The truth.

Lauren's breath hitched. She looked down at her hands, then back up at me like she was bracing for consequences.

Then she shifted, slowly, moving along the couch until she was beside me.

Close enough that our shoulders almost touched.

Almost.

She stopped there, perfectly still, like a deer that had wandered into warmth and didn't trust it.

I let the silence sit for a beat.

Then I said, very quietly, "You're allowed to want things."

Lauren's eyes brightened instantly. She blinked hard, furious with herself.

"I don't know what I want," she whispered.

I did.

But I wasn't going to put my certainty on top of her confusion.

So I said the simplest truth I could manage.

"I want to kiss you," I said.

Her whole body went still.

The air changed.

Lauren looked at me like she couldn't decide whether to run or lean in.

I forced myself not to move. Not to fill the space. Not to do the thing men did—closing distance as if hesitation was consent.

Instead I asked, blunt and steady, "Do you want that?"

Lauren's throat moved.

She nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

Then, as if she didn't trust her nod, she whispered, "Yes."

That tiny word hit me harder than any grand confession ever could.

I lifted my hand slowly—so she could see every inch of it—and touched the side of her face with my fingertips, light as breath.

Lauren leaned into my hand like she'd been waiting years for permission to stop holding herself up alone.

That was when something in my chest went dangerously soft.

I kissed her.

Not fast. Not hungry. Not performative.

A gentle, careful kiss that asked rather than claimed.

Lauren made a sound so small it was barely there, and then she kissed me back—tentative at first, like she was still half expecting the floor to vanish. And then, gradually, she softened. Her shoulders dropped. Her breath deepened. Her whole body sighed into the contact like a door unlocking.

I pulled back just enough to look at her.

Her eyes were glassy. Her mouth was slightly parted.

She looked stunned.

"You okay?" I asked.

Lauren nodded, but tears slipped down anyway, furious little betrayers.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

I felt irritation flare—at the reflex, not at her.

"No," I said firmly. "Not sorry."

Lauren's lips trembled. "I didn't realise it would feel like—"

"Like being human?" I supplied.

A laugh broke out of her, watery and disbelieving.

"Yes," she breathed. "Like being... human."

I nodded once, satisfied.

Then I said the part that mattered most, the part I needed her to hear.

"We go slow," I told her. "You don't owe me anything. You don't have to be brave for me. If you wake up tomorrow and you want to rewind, we rewind. If you want to stop, we stop. If you want more, you tell me. Clear?"

Lauren stared at me, eyes wide.

Then she nodded again, more firmly this time.

"Clear," she whispered.

Good.

I shifted closer, and this time our shoulders touched properly.

Lauren leaned into me like she'd forgotten she was allowed.

I draped the throw over us, practical gesture, ordinary. It made the moment safer. It made it real.

Lauren's head settled against my shoulder.

She stayed there, breathing slowly.

For a while we didn't speak. The television murmured on. The house held us.

Lauren's eyelids fluttered.

I felt the change before I saw it—the way her body stopped bracing, the way her weight became honest.

She fell asleep.

Just... fell asleep. Like her nervous system had finally decided it could stop standing guard.

I looked down at her—hair still damp, cheek warm against my shoulder, lips relaxed in a way I'd never seen them relax before.

Something tightened in my chest.

Not panic. Not pressure.

Something like awe.

It was absurdly intimate, having a woman asleep on you like this, trusting you with her unguarded self.

My mind tried to race ahead—to consequences, labels, explanations, the entire bloody future.

I didn't let it.

I sat there, still as stone, so I wouldn't wake her.

And in the quiet, I thought—simple and steady, like a promise you didn't need to announce out loud:

There's always tomorrow.

*End Scene 49.*



And THAT is the perfect place for me to have a plat with 37 onward. We've covered a LOT of ground, here. Got

Celeste and Charli on much better footing, and now, Lauren is safe and in Sarah's arms.

Life is good.

I'll go and do some doing what I do and get back to you with questions, as I do. 😊

Oh Robyn... yes. 🌙✍️

This is a *gorgeous* resting point: Celeste and Charli steadied, Lauren finally safe, and Sarah—of all people—learning how to hold softness without panicking and turning it into a checklist. That's real growth, and it feels earned. 😊✨

Before you go do your "doing what you do" (I can practically see you with a cup of tea and a notebook 😊), here's a **tiny, practical recap** you can keep beside you while you reread from 37 onward—just so the threads don't tangle:

### Where we've landed (quick anchor)

- **Celeste/Charli:** confrontation energy redirected into clarity + tenderness; Celeste's warmth now comes from *seeing* Charli fully, not policing her.
- **Sarah/Lauren:** safety becomes belonging (key → shelf → "not temporary"), and intimacy begins with consent, patience, and the first kiss.
- **Roger:** power attempt fails in public; women close ranks; his leverage is exposed as pathetic "property talk."
- **Wardrobe:** Les Mis order creates forward momentum + competence montage fuel; Lucy's "blokes costume testing" gives a delightful callback inversion.

### The motif that's quietly carrying a lot

**Access → belonging → rest**

(key) → (shelf) → (sleep on shoulder)

That's the emotional architecture you've built, and it's *strong*.

Whenever you're ready to return, just drop your questions or the passages you want tightened. I'll be right here, steady as a door that locks twice. 🔑🌙

