



Hi Emily. We're looking at 2nd trial day in Wardrobe - this is currently Scene 5. At our last meeting, we finished with:

Of course — and that's a smart editorial move, not a tedious one.

Your POV rule-of-thumb is now very clear and very workable:

- * **Default lens:** Celeste (dominant figure; the story's strategic intelligence and emotional gravity).
- * **Occasional wideners:** Lauren or Mara (each with her own kind of authority), used intentionally.
- * **Rare true omniscience:** only when it's doing a specific job (bridging time, summarising a system shift, or giving the "network" view), and even then it should *feel* like it belongs to one of those women rather than a neutral narrator floating above everyone.

When you paste Scene 4, I'll do three things in one pass (without bogging you down in theory):

1. **POV hygiene check:** confirm it stays anchored in Celeste's perceptions and judgments (no sneaky head-hops into Charlie unless it's through what Celeste can reasonably infer).
2. **Power emphasis:** make sure Celeste's dominance is shown through *choices and governance* rather than

exposition.

3. **Continuity hooks:** lightly seed the later beats (standards/process, the "odd safety" signal, early boundary literacy) without over-foreshadowing.

Drop it in whenever you're ready, and we'll tune it to your new POV emphasis while keeping the scenes you've already locked intact.

I've also attached an image of where **EVENTUALLY** the story will go, as Charlie tests garments as he works. EVENTUALLY.

Thought for 1m 6s >

Got it. And that image is *exactl*y the right "eventual destination" mood for Wardrobe: competence made quiet, sunlight turning work into ritual, the room itself feeling like a kind of promise.

Below is a **Scene 5 draft** (2nd trial day in Wardrobe), anchored hard in **Celeste's POV**. I've written it so it *already* feels like a system is forming—without jumping too quickly to "Charlie is the full-time tester." This is still the early stage: he's useful, he's hesitant, and the women are *deciding what that usefulness will become*.

Scene 5 — Second Trial Day (Wardrobe)

Morning light does something honest to a room. It doesn't flatter you. It reveals what you left out.

Wardrobe smelled like cloth and steam and yesterday's impatience.

Mara was already at one of the old black machines—our "heritage" Singer that technically shouldn't have been able to stitch through a double-folded waistband, and yet did it anyway, as if offended by the suggestion it couldn't. The wheel turned with that low, steady confidence you only get from tools that have outlived their first owners.

On the worktable, a candle stood like a joke nobody laughed at—unlit, obviously, because we weren't idiots. Beside it: two spools of thread in a red so bright it looked like a dare.

Lauren had the shelves open, hands on folded lengths of linen and wool like she was dealing cards. She wasn't sorting by colour. She was sorting by *behaviour*. Fabric has personality, and Lauren had the gift of reading it at a glance.

I hung my tote on the hook by the door and slid my binder onto the central table with a soft thud.

Mara didn't look up. "You're early."

"I'm punctual."

Lauren's mouth lifted slightly. "You're controlling."

"Also true."

I opened the binder. Day Two: the docket, the checklists, the revision log. People liked to pretend Wardrobe was a dreamy annex of the world—soft women, soft fabric, soft light. But the work itself was relentless. If we didn't run it like a lab, it would become a theatre of disasters.

Mara finally cut her stitch line, lifted the presser foot, and turned to me with her pin-cushion bracelet still strapped on like armour. "He's coming?"

"He said he would."

Lauren put a bolt down with care. "You wrote 'said he would' like you don't trust him."

I didn't answer because I didn't need to. Trust was something you gave after a pattern repeated. Until then, you observed.

Yesterday's trial had been messy in the way first attempts usually were: not catastrophic, just... human. Too many assumptions. Too many people wanting to "help" at once. Too many voices.

I had gone home last night and written rules—not to be harsh, but to be kind. Structure is kindness. It saves people from guessing.

I flipped the binder open so the first page was visible to Mara and Lauren.

WARDROBE TRIAL PROTOCOL (DRAFT v0.2)

1. Only one voice gives instructions during fit. (Lead: Celeste.)
2. Only Mara pins. Only Lauren records.

3. Tester does not apologise. Tester reports sensations plainly.
4. Any discomfort above "mild" stops the trial immediately. No debate.
5. Language stays technical. If someone makes it personal, they leave.

Lauren read it, then looked at me as if I'd just adopted a stray dog and named it "Boundaries."

Mara's expression stayed flat, but her eyes softened by half a millimetre. With Mara, that was a sonnet.

"Good," she said. "Now we can actually work."

We heard him before we saw him: the front bell, then the pause, as if he had to convince his own hand to open the door fully.

Charlie stepped into the threshold and froze for a beat, like he expected the room to judge him on sight.

Which—of course it did. That's what rooms do.

He'd dressed clean today. Not stylish. Not trying. Just... prepared. Dark jeans, plain shirt. Hair still damp at the edges. He held a small canvas bag—tools, maybe. Or talismans.

His gaze went straight to the central table with the binder, the pinned pieces, the half-assembled bodice that looked innocent until you remembered what bodices were designed to do: dictate the body's shape in public.

"Morning," he said.

Mara didn't do greetings. She did *results*.

Lauren, because she was nicer than she pretended, gave him a small nod. "Morning, Charlie."

I watched him clock the room: the machine, the thread, the shelves, the measuring tape draped like a ribbon over a chair. He looked like someone entering a workshop where all the tools were familiar but the purpose had changed.

He still hadn't moved his feet.

I said, gently, "Come in. Door can close."

He did, and the click of the latch sounded final in a way it shouldn't have.

He set his bag down by his shoes as if he didn't want it on the worktable. Respectful.

Good sign.

Mara wiped her hands on her apron. "You're on time."

He seemed relieved by the simplicity of that statement. "Yeah. I—um. I didn't want to be late."

Lauren leaned an elbow onto the shelf edge. "You don't want to be late, or you don't want to be a problem?"

His mouth opened, then shut again.

I stepped in before Lauren could press, because Lauren always pressed. "Today is simpler. We trial one piece. We log what happens. We adjust. No performance."

He glanced at me like he was checking whether "no performance" was a promise or a trap.

I tapped the binder. "And we have a protocol now."

He looked at the list, and his shoulders dropped slightly—like rules were a relief, not a restriction.

"Okay," he said. "What do you need me to do?"

That was the first real sentence he'd offered since I met him: direct, useful, unembellished.

Mara walked to the mannequin and lifted the half-finished outer garment we'd pinned yesterday. It was an eighteenth-century-inspired over-gown in a stormy blue—beautiful in that calm, serious way that made silly people call it "plain." It wasn't plain. It was disciplined.

She held it up, assessed the seams, then looked at him.

"You understand this is fit-testing," she said.

"Yes."

"And you understand this will feel... different."

He swallowed. I watched the swallow like it was data.

"Yes."

He didn't add the usual male disclaimer—*I'm not like that*—because he wasn't stupid. Or because he was. I couldn't tell yet.

Mara gestured to the curtained area. "Undershirt stays. Jeans off. You'll put these on."

Lauren handed him a folded bundle without ceremony: simple trial petticoat and a light wrap, cut for speed rather than elegance.

He took it like it weighed more than it did.

His eyes flicked to me again.

Here it was: the moment he'd been rehearsing in his head, the small edge of humiliation he expected the world to demand.

I didn't give it to him.

I said, matter-of-fact, "You're here as an engineer. Engineers don't blush at prototypes."

He made a sound that might have been a laugh if he'd trusted his own mouth.

He disappeared behind the curtain.

We didn't speak while he changed. Not because it was taboo. Because we were professionals, and because silence is one of the women's oldest forms of power. Silence says: *This is normal. You're the only one making it dramatic.*

Lauren, quietly, slid her notebook open. Mara adjusted the pins on her wrist like she was settling into a fight.

I turned a page in the binder and waited.

After a minute, the curtain shifted again.

Charlie stepped out.

He looked... wrong, in the way any person looks wrong when their clothing has been swapped for something they haven't learned to inhabit. The petticoat was plain and functional, but it still changed the geometry of him. His hips read differently. His legs moved with a fraction more caution, as if space had new rules.

He kept his hands at his sides like he'd been told not to touch anything expensive.

He wasn't laughing. He wasn't making a joke. He was doing the one thing that made me take him seriously:

He was trying.

Mara didn't comment on his body. Mara commented on fabric.

She stepped forward, lifted the over-gown, and draped it over him with a brisk competence that made "gender" feel like an irrelevant distraction.

"Arms," she said.

He lifted them.

The sleeves hung slightly long. The shoulder seam pulled. The neckline sat too high, as if the garment was suspicious of the throat.

Mara circled him, pinning fast. "Stand like you're standing."

"I am standing."

"No," she said, and there was no cruelty in it—just accuracy. "You're standing like you're waiting to be corrected."

His cheeks went pink.

I watched his eyes—how they kept darting to my face for verdict.

I gave him none. Not yet.

I said, "Describe sensations. Don't apologise."

He nodded. "Okay."

Mara tugged the bodice line at his ribs. "How's that?"

He hesitated, then chose honesty. "Tight."

"How tight," I prompted. "Mild. Medium. Stop."

He considered. "Medium."

Mara's hands paused. "Breathable medium, or 'I can't think' medium?"

He breathed in, slowly, testing. "Breathable."

"Good." Mara adjusted the pin line anyway, because Mara didn't accept "good enough" when "better" was available.

Lauren recorded every word, not looking up. "Neckline: too high. Rib pressure: medium breathable. Sleeve length: long."

I watched Charlie's posture shift, imperceptibly, as he realised this wasn't an audition for dignity. This was an audit of engineering.

His breathing slowed.

His eyes steadied.

He began to inhabit the room instead of merely surviving it.

Mara stepped back. "Walk."

He blinked. "Just... walk?"

"Don't overthink it," Lauren said without looking up. "That's my job."

He took a careful step, then another. The over-gown swayed, the skirt weight moving like a bell. He nearly tripped on the hem, caught himself, and froze—expecting laughter.

None came.

I said, "Again. Slower. Notice what catches."

He did.

On the second pass, he moved with more authority—still awkward, but less apologetic. The hem snagged at his shin. The bodice tugged at the shoulder seam on the forward swing of his arms.

He stopped and looked at Mara as if she'd asked him to translate a language he only half knew.

"It... pulls here," he said, and indicated his shoulder with two fingers, careful not to paw at the garment.

Mara's eyes sharpened. "Good. That's useful."

You could almost see his brain light up at the word *useful*.

Lauren looked up at last, gaze sliding over him the way you'd assess a chair you were about to buy—no romance, no cruelty, just evaluation. "You're not collapsing into yourself today."

His face went blank. "Was I... yesterday?"

"Yes," she said cheerfully. "Like an overcooked noodle."

He didn't know how to respond to that.

I rescued him—not because he needed rescuing, but because I needed momentum.

"Lauren," I said, "be kind in a way he can use."

Lauren gave me an exaggerated innocent look. "I am being kind. I'm telling him the truth."

"I know." I kept my tone soft, but it was still an instruction. "Try it in sentences that don't make him imagine soup."

Mara made a short sound that might've been amusement.

Charlie's mouth twitched. There: a tiny fissure in his tension.

I moved closer, stopping just within his peripheral vision. "You're doing fine," I told him, because it was true. "But don't look to me for permission. You're here to report. We'll decide."

He inhaled like he'd been holding his breath for a week.

"Okay," he said again. But this time it didn't sound like surrender.

It sounded like acceptance of a process.

Mara pinned the shoulder seam, then stepped back and tilted her head. "This line can be cleaner."

Lauren scribbled. "Shoulder seam: revise angle. Hem: lift a centimetre, maybe two."

I turned a page in the binder. "Charlie. Any itching? Any heat? Any sharpness?"

He shook his head. "No. Just... different."

"That's not a category," Lauren said, and I heard the smile in her voice.

He tried again. "It's... heavier than what I'm used to. And I can feel it when it moves. Like it wants me to move a certain way."

Mara's eyes flicked to mine: *He's observant.*

I nodded once. Yes. *He is.*

"Good," I said. "That's exactly the kind of note that matters."

He looked down at the skirt like it might suddenly explain itself.

Then, so quietly it almost didn't count, he said, "Is it... weird that it doesn't feel... awful?"

It wasn't a confession. It was a question asked by someone who'd been told his whole life what he was supposed to find disgusting.

Lauren's pen stopped.

Mara's hands stilled.

I answered carefully, because this was the first moment of real psychological material—and I wasn't going to handle it like a bully or a priest.

"It's not weird," I said. "It's information."

He looked up at me, startled by how neutral I was being.

I held his gaze. "Your job here isn't to prove anything about yourself. Your job is to tell us what the garment does. That's it."

He nodded, almost grateful.

Mara stepped in and began unpinning with quick, deft fingers. "Back behind the curtain. Change out."

He obeyed without argument.

When he was gone, Lauren exhaled and leaned her hip against the table. "He's not a clown."

"No," I said. "He's not."

Mara gathered the garment in her arms like it was a patient. "He's a good instrument. He tells the truth."

Lauren raised an eyebrow. "And you like that."

I didn't bother denying it. "I like anything that behaves predictably."

Mara set the garment on the table and began marking chalk lines. "We keep him."

Lauren's grin sharpened. "Already decided, have you?"

Mara didn't look up. "He's useful. And he's teachable."

I closed the binder gently. "We don't 'keep' people," I said, because words mattered.

Mara's chalk paused.

I added, softer, "But yes. We build a process around him. If he keeps showing up like this."

Lauren's eyes went bright with mischief. "Look at you, building a little system."

I gave her a look. "Look at you, pretending you're not pleased."

The curtain shifted again. Charlie stepped out, changed back, hair more rumpled than before.

He looked at us like he expected a verdict.

I gave him one—but not the one he anticipated.

"You did your job," I said. "Come back tomorrow at the same time. Eat beforehand. Bring water."

He blinked. "That's... it?"

"That's it," I said. "And Charlie?"

"Yes?"

"Don't narrate this to anyone who wants it to be a joke. If someone asks, you say: 'Wardrobe trial. Technical.' And you stop talking."

He nodded quickly, as if relieved to have a script.

Lauren waved her pen at him like a wand. "And if you ever catch yourself apologising, swallow it. We don't need apologies. We need data."

He actually smiled then—small, startled, but real.

"Okay," he said.

And for the first time, it sounded like he meant: *I can do this.*

He picked up his bag, paused at the door, and glanced back once—at the shelves, the machine, the light.

As if the room had changed shape.

As if he already knew he'd be returning.

When the door shut, Mara returned to the machine. The wheel turned again, steady as a heartbeat.

Lauren's gaze drifted to me. "So," she said lightly. "Second trial day. And no disasters."

I looked down at the binder, at the checklist, at the chalk lines Mara had already begun to revise.

"No disasters," I agreed.

Then, because I am me, and because I didn't trust easy wins, I added, "Yet."

What this scene quietly sets up (without forcing it)

- **Process over spectacle:** everyone treats "trial wear" like engineering, not humiliation. That's the seed of the later "Charlie becomes the reliable tester" evolution.
- **Your "women's competence network" shows through action:** Mara = craft authority; Lauren = social/linguistic authority; Celeste = governance.
- **Early boundary literacy:** the protocol plus "don't narrate it to jokers" is Celeste teaching him how to survive the social fallout *without her rescuing him*.
- **A tiny hinge moment:** "it doesn't feel awful" is introduced as *information*, not identity. That keeps it tasteful and believable.

If you want, next we can do **one of two directions** for Scene 6 (without you having to decide right now):

1. **A complication:** someone outside Wardrobe tries to turn the trial into gossip, and Celeste shuts it down with surgical calm.
2. **A deepening:** Charlie begins offering surprisingly sharp sensory notes, and Mara starts relying on him—not emotionally, *professionally*—which is how the "tester role"

becomes inevitable.

And yes: that image you attached? The "sunbeams + machine + folded linen + blue seriousness" vibe is now baked into Wardrobe as an identity.



SRPO-No_ttp.json
File

Quick SRPO question. I've attached an image I'd like to keep pretty much intact except change the face. Face only. My LoRA seems to work better if I DON'T use the masking method. What parameters can I set to enable the LoRA byt minimise changes to the rest of the image? Attaching image and workflow. I don't want the LoRAed girl to have a larger bust. And the dress changes, as well.

Thought for 1m 5s >

If you want "**face changes, everything else stays put**" *without masking*, your best control knobs are the ones that govern **how much the model is allowed to repaint** (denoise + guidance) and **how widely the LoRA is allowed to "bleed" into the whole frame** (LoRA model-vs-clip strengths + prompt anchoring).

From your workflow, the key current settings are: **denoise 0.21, steps 15, FluxGuidance 2.6, LoRA strength_model 1.0 / strength_clip 0.36**, and you're scaling the input to 1

MP before VAE encode. SRPO-No_ttp

Here's how I'd tune it for **face-only** while minimizing bust/dress drift.

1) Don't downscale so aggressively (this is a sleeper culprit)

You're doing `ImageScaleToTotalPixels` → 1 MP. If your source is larger (and it looks like it is), downscaling throws away the "locked" micro-details (bodice seams, neckline edge, bust contour cues), which makes the sampler more willing to improvise when the LoRA pushes identity.

Change: set **megapixels** to match the input more closely (or only lightly downscale).

- If your image is ~2–2.5 MP, try **2.0 MP** first.
- If it's ~1.5 MP, try **1.5 MP**.
- Keep `nearest-exact` (good choice for preservation).

This single change often reduces "why did the dress redesign itself?" more than any prompt tweak.

2) Split LoRA influence: lower MODEL, raise CLIP (identity without body morph)

Right now, you've got **strength_model = 1.0** which is *exactly* the kind of setting that can inflate bust / reshape neckline / change fabric behaviour, because it's pushing the network at the model level.

Try this starting pair:

- **LoRA strength_model:** 0.60 – 0.80
- **LoRA strength_clip:** 0.55 – 0.80

Rule of thumb:

- If the **face isn't "becoming her"** enough → increase **strength_clip** first.
- If the **dress/bust shifts** → decrease **strength_model** first.

A really practical "grid" to test:

- (model 0.70, clip 0.65)
- (model 0.65, clip 0.75)
- (model 0.60, clip 0.85)

Keep your seed fixed while you test so you're judging the *parameter effect*, not randomness.

3) Denoise: keep it low, but use steps to give the face time

You're already at **denoise 0.21** (which is in the right territory for "preserve"). If you go much higher, the gown will start getting "opinions."

Recommended band: 0.16 – 0.24

- Start: **denoise 0.18–0.20**
- If face isn't changing enough, nudge to **0.22** before you touch guidance.

Then compensate with steps:

- Move **steps from 15 → 20–24**

Low denoise + a few more steps can let the face settle into the LoRA without reinterpreting the whole silhouette.

4) Guidance: slightly lower reduces wardrobe "obedience"

Your **FluxGuidance 2.6** is already conservative (good). If you're getting dress/bust drift, try **2.2–2.4**.

- **Lower guidance = less "repaint to match prompt prose."**

This matters because your prompt is *very descriptive* (beautiful, but it encourages the model to "improve" details like neckline, bodice tension, and figure).

5) Prompt: shorten + add hard "unchanged" anchors

Long prompts can unintentionally invite re-rendering. For this job, you want the model to feel like it's doing **restoration**, not re-illustration.

I'd keep *just enough* to anchor the scene + add explicit "don't change" constraints.

Example (compact, practical):

"Same image, same lighting, same workshop, same dress and silhouette, same bust size, same neckline and bodice seams, same denim on the table. Only change the woman's face to moimeme4; keep hair, pose, hands, and clothing unchanged."

Yes, it's a bit "instruction-y" — but in low-denoise img2img, those anchors help.

6) Bust + dress drift: what to do when it still happens

If you still get bust inflation or bodice redesign after the above:

Do this in order:

1. **Lower LoRA strength_model** (e.g., 0.70 → 0.55)
2. **Lower denoise** (e.g., 0.21 → 0.18)
3. **Lower guidance** (e.g., 2.6 → 2.3)
4. **Reduce prompt detail** (remove adjectives; keep only "same dress/same bust/only face change")

That sequence tends to preserve identity progress while squeezing out the collateral damage.

A solid "first test" recipe (based on your exact workflow)

Try this as your baseline:

- **Megapixels:** set closer to original (try **2.0 MP** first)
- **LoRA:** model **0.70**, clip **0.70**
- **Denoise:** **0.19**
- **Steps:** **22**
- **Guidance:** **2.3**
- **Seed:** fixed (as you already do)

Then iterate:

- Need more face? **clip → 0.80** (leave model alone)
 - Dress changing? **model → 0.60**, or **denoise → 0.17**
-

One frank note

If you truly need *surgical* "face only" with **zero** garment/bust change, masking (or a face-only inpaint) is still the most reliable physics of diffusion. But the tuning above is the best way to get *close* while keeping your "no mask" preference—and the **downscale-to-1MP** plus **model=1.0** combo is the biggest reason you're seeing wardrobe drift.

If you paste your LoRA trigger/tag and whether it's primarily an **identity LoRA vs style LoRA**, I can give you an even tighter set of numbers (because the "clip-heavy vs model-heavy" balance depends a lot on how it was trained).

Sources



Wow! That worked, Emily. The dress is right, the bust is right, the face is right. Brilliant!

Yesss — that's the sweet spot you were hunting. 🎉

If you want to make this *repeatable* (so the next image doesn't suddenly decide to redesign the bodice again), here's a tight little "lock it in" checklist:

- **Keep the seed fixed** while you iterate on face nuance (expression, age, softness).
- **Save those exact working values** as a preset (especially: MP scale, denoise, LoRA model/clip split, guidance).
- When you move to a *new* base image, only adjust in this order:
 1. **LoRA clip** (identity strength)
 2. **Denoise** (how much freedom it has)
 3. **LoRA model** (only if needed; this is the "body/dress drift" lever)
 4. **Guidance** (last; it changes obedience to the prompt)

And if you ever see *the bust or neckline start to "inflate" again*, the fastest fix is still: **drop LoRA model a notch before you touch anything else.**

If you want, paste your final working numbers (or just screenshot the node values) and I'll turn it into a neat "SRPO Face-Only Preset" block you can keep beside your workflow.



Done. Thankfully, Z-Image (where I set my scene and clothing and everything *besides* the face) creates

small-busted women. A blessing when seeking androgeny.

Perfect — and yes, that's genuinely a blessing for *this* specific aesthetic.

What you've basically engineered (without needing masks) is a **two-stage pipeline** that's *much* more stable than trying to do everything in one pass:

1. **Z-Image** = "world + wardrobe + silhouette" (your *canon frame*)
2. **SRPO** = "identity on the face" (your *signature*)

That separation is why it suddenly behaved.

A few little "keep it that way" guardrails (so the model doesn't ever decide to "help" again):

1) Keep a "body-lock mantra" in your SRPO prompt

Even if you don't love instruction-y prompting, having one short line you paste every time is worth it:

- **"Same body, same bust size, same dress pattern and seams, only face changes."**

That one sentence acts like a seatbelt when the LoRA gets enthusiastic.

2) Treat LoRA model as the "silhouette risk dial"

If you ever see drift (bust, neckline, waistline, sleeves):

- **Drop LoRA model first**
- Only raise LoRA clip if you need more "her"

That keeps androgyny intact while still letting identity land.

3) Don't downscale too hard before SRPO

You already saw this: if the base image loses seam detail and bodice structure, diffusion starts "inventing improvements." Keeping resolution closer to the original frame is basically you telling the model: *these details are non-negotiable*.

4) Save two presets, not one

Make:

- **Preset A: "Face-only conservative" (your working one)**

- **Preset B: "Face-only assertive"** (same, but slightly higher clip / slightly higher steps)

Then you never "chase" identity by touching denoise/model and risking wardrobe.

If you'd like, tell me the **exact final values you landed on** (MP scale, denoise, steps, guidance, LoRA model/clip), and I'll give you a compact "recipe card" you can paste into your MkDocs help page — plus a micro-variant for when you want *slightly older/softer/sterner* face reads without waking the dress demons.



Back to Scene 5. I've done my little massage of it, and would like to run by you before I publish it:

Mara didn't test people the way teachers tested them.

Teachers announced the test, circled the date, watched you sweat, and then pretended your result said something noble about your soul. Mara tested you the way you tested a seam: under her fingers, quietly, looking for strain. Charlie had been back for a second morning. Same early arrival. Same clean hands. Same careful stillness, as if he didn't want the room to notice he'd come in.

Mara noticed everything. She didn't say hello. She pointed at a tin on the table.

"Pins," she said. "Sort them. Then you're on mending pile."

Charlie nodded once and moved, no dramatics. He poured the pins out onto a cloth and began arranging them by length with a kind of tidy focus that made the task look dignified. I was at the rail, tagging garment bags, listening to the hiss of the steamer and the small scrape of hangers sliding. Wardrobe had its own rhythm — calm on the surface, precise underneath — and Charlie had already started matching it without being told.

That was his first tell: he could join a system without trying to dominate it.

Mara's second tell came ten minutes later, when she "accidentally" left a pair of vintage shears too close to the edge of the table. Not a dramatic setup. Just a temptation: a valuable tool sitting in the wrong place. A careless person would grab it without asking. A nervous person would ignore it and let it fall. Charlie noticed. His eyes flicked to it, then to Mara. He didn't touch the shears. He nudged the cloth closer, stabilised the table edge with his palm, and slid the shears back with two fingers—careful, respectful—like he was returning a bird to its perch.

Mara didn't look up. But I saw the smallest change in her mouth: the line eased by a millimetre. Ten minutes after that, she called across the room, voice neutral.

"Rossignol. Bring me the blue tape."

Charlie paused, his gaze shifting to the shelves. There were three blue tapes, different widths. He didn't guess. He looked once at Mara, then asked — quietly:

"Which width?"

Mara's eyes lifted. She held his gaze for a beat. "Quarter-inch."

Charlie retrieved the roll and brought it to her.

"Good."

Just that. One syllable. It landed like a stamp. Charlie went faintly pink at the ears anyway, as if the word had surprised him. I kept my eyes on the tags, but my attention drifted. It wasn't romantic interest. It was... data. I watched people the way you watched fabric: how it fell, where it pulled, what it revealed when it thought nobody was looking.

Charlie's attention to Mara was respect. Charlie's

attention to the room was caution. Charlie's attention to me—

That was different.

It wasn't the obvious stare you got from boys who thought you existed to be noticed. It wasn't even the furtive kind. It was as if his eyes kept finding me on their own, the way a compass needle finds north, and each time he realised, he corrected himself like it was a breach of discipline. He was trying not to.

Which made it almost endearing. Almost.

Mara sent him to the mending pile: a basket of small catastrophes — popped seams, torn cuffs, fraying apron ties. She didn't give him the easiest ones. She gave him the ones where haste would show. Charlie sat, assessed each item the way he'd assessed the torn dress yesterday: calm, quiet. He chose thread that matched without holding it up to the light like a show. He measured seam allowance with his eye, then confirmed with a tape. He stitched with even tension, no puckering, no desperate pulling.

The room stayed stable around him. Half an hour later, Mara did another test. She handed Charlie a garment bag.

"Hang that."

It was heavier than it looked — wool, boning, metal closures. Charlie took it with both hands. He carried it the way you carried something that mattered, and when he reached the rail he stopped: didn't hang it immediately. He looked at the rail, checking spacing, weight distribution, the hook's position—like he was thinking not of this one garment but of the system as a whole. Then he hung it in a place that made sense, not in the first empty gap.

Mara watched him. She didn't praise him. She just didn't correct him. That was Mara's version of warmth.

When she moved away, I stepped closer to Charlie's table, because it was time to introduce the next lesson, and because I'd been told — explicitly — not to hover, but not told not to function.

"You're stitching like you've done this for years."

Charlie's hands paused for half a second, needle hovering. Then he kept going.

"My mum," he said, voice low. "She... she showed me. If you make it neat, people pay."

"That's true," I replied. "And if you make it neat *here*, Mara doesn't kill you."

His mouth twitched. A small smile he didn't quite permit to exist. I watched his eyes flick up to my face, and then away again too fast. Like touching a hot surface.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

He swallowed. "For... yesterday. For - for getting me in."

I let a beat pass. I didn't want gratitude. Gratitude can turn into dependence, and dependence can rot a person.

"*You* got you in," I said. "You turned up. You worked. Mara cares about that."

His shoulders loosened slightly, like that was a relief and an insult in one. He threaded another needle, hands steady. Then, without looking at me, he murmured,

"I'm not... I'm not trying to be weird."

"Weird how?"

His ears went a deeper pink. He frowned at the fabric as if it had betrayed him.

"I just—"

He stopped. The words clogged. It was there, in the stall between his sentences: the thing he didn't want to say because saying it would make it an admission, turn it into a liability. I could have teased him. I could have pretended I didn't understand. I could have made it soft. But soft is how boys slip out of accountability.

So I did what I always did: I decided what it meant.

"You mean you don't want to make me uncomfortable," I said, evenly.

His head snapped up. Hazel eyes, startled. Then he looked down again, quick as shame.

"Yes," he whispered.

"That's good. Keep it that way."

He nodded once — sharp, immediate — like he'd been given a rule and was relieved. Then, because his brain was honest even when his mouth wanted to be cautious, he added,

"It's just... you're... you're a lot."

I blinked.

"A lot?"

He winced as if he'd just spilled ink. "Not... not bad. I mean, you're... you make things - make sense."

It was his little crush on me, peeking out in its most Charlie form: not desire as entitlement, but admiration as gravity. It made me want to smile. However, I didn't. I let it sit between us, uninflated. He did not need romance, but structure.

"You're allowed to admire," I said. "Just don't let it derail

you."

His eyes flicked to mine: confused, searching. I continued, calmly:

"You've been living in rooms where you can't win. Wardrobe is a room where you can. If you have strong feelings... aim them at your work. That will keep you safe."

He stared at me, stunned by the fact I'd named it without making it dirty.

Then he nodded. Slowly.

"Okay."

I glanced at the garment in his hands. "Make that repair invisible. Mara hates visible."

He almost smiled again. I turned to go back to the rail, and that's when he said it — the other confession, the one that mattered.

"I'm not going back next year," he said, too quickly. "To school."

I stopped, hand on a garment bag.

"What do you mean?"

He looked at his stitches. Not me.

"I'm gonna wag it. I can't... do it again. They just— they don't—" He shook his head once, small and furious. "It's a waste."

I walked back to him and placed my finger lightly on the fabric near his seam, not touching him, just anchoring the moment.

"No," I said, voice flat.

He blinked. "No?"

"You're not wagging," I replied. Simple. Not a debate.

His jaw tightened. "Why do you care?" I held his gaze.

"Because Mara will train you," I said. "Your mum will back you. I can point you at doors. But if you sabotage your own foundation, you'll spend your whole life needing someone to catch you."

His throat bobbed. He looked away.

"That's not fair," he muttered.

"I'm not here to be fair," I said. "I'm here to be accurate."

He stared at his hands as if they belonged to someone else. I softened a fraction: not into comfort, into clarity.

"If school is the wrong language," I said, "we'll find you translation. But you don't get to disappear. That's the old you talking."

He swallowed. "I don't know how to do it."

"Then you learn," I said, and let a small edge of humour in, because humour makes medicine swallowable.

"You're doing a whole new trade. You can learn Year Twelve."

His mouth twitched. He didn't say yes. He didn't say no. But he didn't argue either.

That, for Charlie, was progress.

Across the room, Mara's voice cut through the hiss of the steamer.

"Rossignol!"

Charlie's head snapped up immediately.

"Yes?"

Mara held up a sleeve with a tear near the cuff. "This one. If you stitch it tight, I'll know. And you'll unpick it in front of everyone."

Charlie went very still. Then he spoke, clear and calm.

"Okay."

He rose, took the sleeve, and walked to Mara's table with the careful confidence of someone who had found a rule-set that didn't hate him. As he passed me, his eyes flicked to my face again — quick, warm, grateful, frightened — and then away. Not taking anything. Just... orbiting.

I watched him go and thought, not unkindly:

He's going to have to learn that being chosen is not a miracle. It's a responsibility.

And I'm not letting him waste it.

This is **publishable as-is**, Robyn. Not "nearly," not "with caveats." It's clean, controlled, and it does the hard thing: **Celeste stays the lens, the women stay sovereign, and Charlie's softness never becomes the story's centre of gravity.**

A few notes and micro-edits will make it even sharper — mostly about *repetition, precision*, and *keeping Celeste's authority looking effortless rather than narrated*.

What you absolutely nailed

1) Celeste's dominance reads as governance, not swagger

She doesn't "win arguments." She **sets definitions, names stakes, and allocates consequences**. The line:

"You're allowed to admire. Just don't let it derail you."

is exactly that. It's not flirtation. It's **policy**.

2) Mara's testing feels real (and non-theatrical)

Your "shears near the edge" test is perfect: believable, quiet, and completely in-character for a craft authority.

3) Charlie is naïve and orbiting without being prurient

He's **not entitled**, not leering, not pulling focus. The "compass needle" image is wonderful because it's *about him being disciplined*, not about her being an object.

4) The school "wag it" moment is a strong pivot

This is the first time Celeste steps beyond Wardrobe and shows she's building a **future-proof network**. And she does it without "saving" him.

The main things I'd tune

A) You use "tell" a few times in close succession

You have:

- "first tell"
- "second tell"
- "confession"
- "other confession"

It's a strong structural device, but you can make it feel less "notebooky" by varying the phrasing once or twice.

Suggestion:

- Keep "first tell" (it's punchy)
- Change "second tell" to something like "**the next proof**" / "**the second marker**" / "**the next sign**"
- Change "other confession" to "**the one that mattered**" (you already have that energy)

B) Watch one or two moments where Celeste narrates Charlie's interior too confidently

Most of your inferences are fair, because Celeste is observational and analytical — but the *degree of certainty* can be toned from "this is what he feels" to "this is what it

looked like."

For example:

"It was his little crush on me, peeking out..."

That's *likely* true, but it reads as slightly omniscient. Easy fix: soften into inference.

Option:

- "It *had the shape* of a crush..."
- "If it was a crush, it was Charlie's version..."

That keeps the power where it belongs: **Celeste deciding the meaning**, but still grounded in what she can observe.

C) The "Teachers..." opening is excellent — but one clause risks over-explaining

This is already great:

"Teachers announced the test, circled the date, watched you sweat..."

But:

"and then pretended your result said something noble about your soul."

It's funny, and it is Celeste. It's also a little *editorial*. If you want maximum cinematic sharpness, trim it a fraction so the passage hits like a scalpel, not a speech.

Tighter variant:

- "Teachers announced the test, circled the date, watched you sweat — and moralised the result."

Same bite, less runway.

D) "I'm not here to be fair... I'm here to be accurate."

This is *excellent* Celeste. Keep it.

But you can make it land even harder by letting it breathe: short line breaks around it.

Right now it's embedded. Give it space, and it becomes a mantra.

E) A couple of tiny mechanics for credibility

- "blue tape" — if you mean **painter's tape**, "blue painter's tape" makes it instantly readable and avoids anyone thinking "tape measure."
 - "Quarter-inch" — perfect.
 - "vintage shears" — good. You might add *one sensory detail* (weight, cold steel, particular brand) if you want Mara's world to feel even more "real," but it's optional.
-

Micro-edits, in-place suggestions (surgical)

1) Reduce "tell" repetition

Original:

| That was his first tell...

Keep. It's strong.

Original:

| Mara's second tell came ten minutes later...

Edit:

| Mara's next marker came ten minutes later...

or

| The second marker came ten minutes later...

2) "Compass needle" line is gorgeous — just trim one clause for snap

Original:

| ...the way a compass needle finds north, and each time he realised, he corrected himself like it was a breach of discipline.

Edit:

| ...the way a compass needle finds north — and each time he realised, he corrected himself like it was a breach.

("of discipline" is implied; removing it makes the sentence feel more adult and less explained.)

3) "It wasn't romantic interest. It was... data."

I love this. Consider removing the ellipsis if you want it colder:

| It wasn't romantic interest. It was data.

That turns Celeste into a scalpel.

4) The "crush" inference — make it observational

Original:

| It was his little crush on me, peeking out in its most Charlie form...

Edit option A (my favourite):

| If it was a crush, it was Charlie's version of one: not desire as entitlement, but admiration with gravity.

Edit option B (more detached):

| It had the shape of a crush — not desire as entitlement, but admiration as gravity.

5) The "soft is how boys slip out of accountability" paragraph is *chef's kiss*

But you can make it even more Celeste by trimming the list (three options → two options):

Original:

| I could have teased him. I could have pretended I didn't understand. I could have made it soft.

Edit:

| I could have teased him. I could have made it soft.

You lose nothing, and it reads more like someone who doesn't waste words.

6) Give the "accurate" line air

Right now:

| "I'm not here to be fair," I said. "I'm here to be accurate."

Consider:

| "I'm not here to be fair," I said.

| "I'm here to be accurate."

Same content. More authority.

7) "Wag it" moment — tiny Aussie polish

You wrote:

"I'm gonna wag it."

That's right, but *some readers* might not know it. If you want to keep the local flavour without confusion, you can add a clarifying beat *in Celeste's POV*:

"I'm gonna wag it."

He said it like it was a plan, not a cliff edge.

Or:

"I'm gonna wag it." Skip. Vanish.

No glossary, no explanation — just emotional translation.

One craft-level note: Celeste's "don't become dependent" instinct is gold

This bit:

I didn't want gratitude. Gratitude can turn into dependence...

is thematically perfect for your women's competence network: **no rescues, only systems.**

If you wanted to make it even less "stated," you *could* show it instead — but honestly, because it's Celeste's POV and she's analytical, it *fits* that she thinks in rules. So I'd keep it.

If you want a single "best improvement" without changing the scene

Do this:

1. Replace "second tell"
2. Soften the "crush" line into inference
3. Add line breaks around "**accurate**"

Those three edits will make the whole scene feel **more cinematic and less annotated**, while preserving every beat you love.

If you'd like, I can also do a **copy-edit pass** (punctuation, rhythm, sentence-length variety) while preserving your voice exactly — the kind of pass that catches little cadence bumps ("then... then..." / "he... he..." moments) without rewriting.



I have done ass you've suggested, Emily. And it reads... clean. This is why I run things by you. :)

That's the best outcome: not "different," not "more elaborate" — just **cleaner**, like the scene always wanted to sound that way and you merely brushed the lint off.

Two quick things you might do *now that it's clean*, purely as optional polish (and both are tiny):

1) Add one "Wardrobe signature" sensory detail you can reuse later

You already have hiss of steamer, scrape of hangers. Consider giving Wardrobe one repeatable micro-sense you can drop into later scenes like a motif — something that becomes *their* atmosphere.

Examples (pick one, don't stack):

- the faint metallic tang of steam on old iron
- beeswax and chalk dust in the drawers
- the "thunk" of a bolt of fabric being set down
- the soft click of Mara's shears closing

One line, once. Then later, you can echo it and readers will *feel* they've returned to the same room.

2) One tiny "network" hook that foreshadows without screaming

Right now Celeste says: "Mara will train you. Your mum will back you. I can point you at doors."

That's already excellent. If you ever want to lace in a *hint* that Celeste knows exactly

which doors (admin, counsellor, course coordinator, apprenticeship paperwork), you can add a single specific noun:

- "I can point you at **the right office**."
- "I can point you at **the right person**."

Just one. It makes Celeste feel even more infrastructural.

If you paste your cleaned version, I can do a last "typo + cadence" skim and confirm there's nothing snagging before you hit publish.



Mara didn't test people the way teachers tested them.

Teachers announce the test, watch you sweat, and then moralise the result. Mara tests you the way you test a seam: under her fingers, quietly, looking for strain.

Charlie was back for a second morning. Same early arrival. Same clean hands. Same careful stillness, as if he didn't want the room to notice he'd come in.

Mara noticed everything. She didn't say hello. She pointed at a tin on the table.

"Pins," she said. "Sort them. Then you're on mending pile."

Charlie nodded once and moved, no dramatics. He poured the pins out onto a cloth and began arranging them by length with a kind of tidy focus that made the task look dignified. I was at the rail, tagging garment bags, listening to the hiss of the steamer and the small scrape of hangers sliding. Wardrobe had its own rhythm — calm on the surface, precise underneath — and Charlie had already started matching it without being told.

That was his first tell: he could join a system without trying to dominate it.

Mara's next marker came ten minutes later, when she

"accidentally" left a pair of vintage shears too close to the edge of the table. Not a dramatic setup. Just a temptation: a valuable tool sitting in the wrong place. A careless person would grab it without asking. A nervous person would ignore it and let it fall. Charlie noticed. His eyes flicked to it, then to Mara. He didn't touch the shears. He nudged the cloth closer, stabilised the table edge with his palm, and slid the shears back with two fingers—careful, respectful—like he was returning a bird to its perch.

Mara didn't look up. But I saw the smallest change in her mouth: the line eased by a millimetre. Ten minutes after that, she called across the room, voice neutral.

"Rossignol. Bring me the blue painter's tape."

Charlie paused, his gaze shifting to the shelves. There were three blue tapes, different widths. He didn't guess. He looked once at Mara, then asked — quietly:

"Which width?"

Mara's eyes lifted. She held his gaze for a beat. "Quarter-inch."

Charlie retrieved the roll and brought it to her.

"Good."

Just that. One syllable. It landed like a stamp. Charlie went faintly pink at the ears anyway, as if the word had surprised him. I kept my eyes on the tags, but my attention drifted. It wasn't romantic interest. It was data. I watched people the way you watched fabric: how it fell, where it pulled, what it revealed when it thought nobody was looking.

Charlie's attention to Mara was respect. Charlie's attention to the room was caution. Charlie's attention to me —that was different.

It wasn't the obvious stare you got from boys who

thought you existed to be noticed. It wasn't even the furtive kind. It was as if his eyes kept finding me on their own, the way a compass needle finds north, and each time he realised, he corrected himself like it was a breach. He was trying not to.

Which made it almost endearing. Almost.

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His mouth twitched. A small smile he didn't quite permit to exist. I watched his eyes flick up to my face, and then away again too fast. Like touching a hot surface.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

He swallowed. "For... yesterday. For - for getting me in."

I let a beat pass. I didn't want gratitude. Gratitude can turn into dependence, and dependence can rot a person.

"*You* got you in," I said. "You turned up. You worked. Mara cares about that."

His shoulders loosened slightly, like that was a relief and an insult in one. He threaded another needle, hands steady. Then, without looking at me, he murmured,

"I'm not... I'm not trying to be weird."

"Weird how?"

His ears went a deeper pink. He frowned at the fabric as if it had betrayed him.

"I just—"

He stopped. The words clogged. It was there, in the stall between his sentences: the thing he didn't want to say because saying it would make it an admission, turn it into

a liability. I could have teased him. I could have made it soft. But soft is how boys slip out of accountability.

So I did what I always did: I decided what it meant.

"You mean you don't want to make me uncomfortable," I said, evenly.

His head snapped up. Hazel eyes, startled. Then he looked down again, quick as shame.

"Yes," he whispered.

"That's good. Keep it that way."

He nodded once — sharp, immediate — like he'd been given a rule and was relieved. Then, because his brain was honest even when his mouth wanted to be cautious, he added,

"It's just... you're... you're a lot."

I blinked.

"A lot?"

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If it was a crush, it was Charlie's version, peeking out in its most Charlie form: not desire as entitlement, but admiration as gravity. It made me want to smile. However, I didn't. I let it sit between us, uninflated. He did not need romance, but structure.

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feelings... aim them at your work. That will keep you safe."

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Then he nodded. Slowly.

"Okay."

I glanced at the garment in his hands. "Make that repair invisible. Mara hates visible."

He almost smiled again. I turned to go back to the rail, and that's when he said it — what mattered.

"I'm not going back next year," he said, too quickly. "To school."

I stopped, hand on a garment bag.

"What do you mean?"

He looked at his stitches. Not me.

"I'm gonna wag it. I can't... do it again. They just— they don't—" He said it like it was a plan, not a knife's edge.

I walked back to him and placed my finger lightly on the fabric near his seam, not touching him, just anchoring the moment. He looked up at me and shook his head once, small and furious.

"It's a waste."

"No," I said, voice flat.

He blinked. "No?"

"You're not wagging," I replied. Simple. Not a debate.

His jaw tightened. "Why do you care?"

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"Then you learn," I said, and let a small edge of humour in, because humour makes medicine swallowable.

"You're doing a whole new trade. You can learn Year Twelve."

His mouth twitched. He didn't say yes. He didn't say no. But he didn't argue either.

That, for Charlie, was progress.

Across the room, Mara's voice cut through the hiss of the steamer.

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Charlie's head snapped up immediately.

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Mara held up a sleeve with a tear near the cuff. "This one. If you stitch it tight, I'll know. And you'll unpick it in front of everyone."

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He rose, took the sleeve, and walked to Mara's table with the careful confidence of someone who had found a rule-set that didn't hate him. As he passed me, his eyes flicked to my face again — quick, warm, grateful, frightened — and then away. Not taking anything. Just... orbiting.

I watched him go and thought, not unkindly:

He's going to have to learn that being chosen is not a miracle. It's a responsibility.

And I'm not letting him waste it.

Yes — this reads *clean*, and it reads **inevitable** in the best way: you can feel the system forming around him while the women remain the authors of it.

Below is a **final skim**: tiny cadence fixes, one punctuation snag, one or two word choices for maximum bite, and one place where the "crush" sentence can be made even sleeker. I'll keep everything else intact.

Micro-edits I strongly recommend (all small, all worth it)

1) Tense consistency in the opening

You start past tense ("didn't") then shift to present ("announce / tests"). Either can work, but your scene is otherwise past. Keep it uniform.

Change:

- "Teachers **announce...**" → "Teachers **announced...**"
- "Mara **tests...**" → "Mara **tested...**"

So the first paragraph becomes:

Teachers **announced** the test, watched you sweat, and then moralised the result.
Mara **tested** you the way you tested a seam...

2) "You're on mending pile" → add "the"

It's a tiny grammatical polish that makes Mara sound even more clipped and certain.

"Sort them. Then you're on **the** mending pile."

3) The em-dash spacing glitch

This line:

Charlie's attention to me —that was different.

Just needs a space after the dash (or better, commit to the em dash cleanly).

Option A (cleanest):

Charlie's attention to me — that was different.

Option B (even sharper):

Charlie's attention to me was different.

(You don't need the dash twice; the rhythm already carries it.)

4) "blue painter's tape" → Australian/British punctuation

If you want to keep your house style consistent, you might prefer **painter's** (curly apostrophe) and no "blue tapes" ambiguity:

"Rossignol. Bring me the quarter-inch blue painter's tape."

That removes the mini back-and-forth and makes Mara look even more decisive — *but* your current exchange is doing a job: it tests whether he guesses. So I'd keep the exchange and just fix the apostrophe:

"Rossignol. Bring me the blue painter's tape."

5) "The room stayed stable around him: beeswax..."

Beautiful sensory insert, but the colon makes it feel slightly like a note. Make it a sentence fragment with an em dash, or fold it in.

Best fix:

The room stayed stable around him — beeswax and chalk dust in the drawers.

6) "If it was a crush..." sentence — remove one softener

Right now it's doing a lot of work with a few extra words:

If it was a crush, it was Charlie's version, peeking out in its most Charlie form...

I'd tighten to:

If it was a crush, it was Charlie's version: not desire as entitlement, but admiration as gravity.

That reads colder and more "Celeste." You lose nothing.

7) "knife's edge" apostrophe

You've got:

...not a knife's edge.

Prefer **knife-edge** (compound adjective) or **knife's edge** (possessive). I'd go with compound:

...not a knife-edge.

8) One tiny pronoun/logic bump

Here:

I walked back to him and placed my finger lightly on the fabric near his seam... He looked up at me and shook his head once...

The "he shook his head" is fine, but the sequence reads like he shakes his head immediately after your touch rather than after his own statement. If you want the emotional beat to land more clearly:

Option:

I walked back to him and placed my finger lightly on the fabric near his seam — not touching him, just anchoring the moment.

"It's a waste," he said.

But this is optional. The scene works as-is.

Ultra-light copy-edit version (only the changes above)

If you want, I can paste the entire scene back with just those eight edits applied and nothing else touched — ready to publish.

But if you'd rather do it yourself, here's the minimal checklist:

- announced / tested (past tense)
 - "the" mending pile
 - space after em dash ("— that")
 - painter's apostrophe
 - "stable — beeswax..."
 - tighten "If it was a crush..."
 - knife-edge
 - (optional) re-space the "It's a waste" beat
-

One last comment on impact

Your ending internal line:

He's going to have to learn that being chosen is not a miracle. It's a responsibility.

is exactly the right thesis statement for your competence network. It's not sentimental. It's not punitive. It's structural.

If you want to paste your final revised-for-tense version, I'll do a last "typo sweep" with eagle eyes and confirm you're good to hit publish.



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inch."

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"Good."

Just that. One syllable. It landed like a stamp. Charlie went faintly pink at the ears anyway, as if the word had surprised him. I kept my eyes on the tags, but my attention drifted. It wasn't romantic interest. It was data. I watched people the way you watched fabric: how it fell, where it pulled, what it revealed when it thought nobody was looking.

Charlie's attention to Mara was respect. Charlie's attention to the room was caution. Charlie's attention to me was different.

It wasn't the obvious stare you got from boys who thought you existed to be noticed. It wasn't even the furtive kind. It was as if his eyes kept finding me on their own, the way a compass needle finds north, and each time he realised, he corrected himself like it was a breach. He was trying not to.

Which made it almost endearing. Almost.

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"Hang that."

It was heavier than it looked — wool, boning, metal closures. Charlie took it with both hands. He carried it the way you carried something that mattered, and when he reached the rail he stopped: didn't hang it immediately. He looked at the rail, checking spacing, weight distribution, the hook's position—like he was thinking not of this one garment but of the system as a whole. Then he hung it in a place that made sense, not in the first empty gap.

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Charlie's hands paused for half a second, needle hovering. Then he kept going.

"My mum," he said, voice low. "She... she showed me. If you make it neat, people pay."

"That's true," I replied. "And if you make it neat *here*, Mara doesn't kill you."

His mouth twitched. A small smile he didn't quite permit to exist. I watched his eyes flick up to my face, and then away again too fast. Like touching a hot surface.

"Thanks."

"For what?"

He swallowed. "For... yesterday. For – for getting me in."

I let a beat pass. I didn't want gratitude. Gratitude can turn into dependence, and dependence can rot a person.

"*You* got you in," I said. "You turned up. You worked. Mara cares about that."

His shoulders loosened slightly, like that was a relief and an insult in one. He threaded another needle, hands steady. Then, without looking at me, he murmured,

"I'm not... I'm not trying to be weird."

"Weird how?"

His ears went a deeper pink. He frowned at the fabric as if it had betrayed him.

"I just—"

He stopped. The words clogged. It was there, in the stall between his sentences: the thing he didn't want to say because saying it would make it an admission, turn it into a liability. I could have teased him. I could have made it soft. But soft is how boys slip out of accountability.

So I did what I always did: I decided what it meant.

"You mean you don't want to make me uncomfortable," I said, evenly.

His head snapped up. Hazel eyes, startled. Then he looked down again, quick as shame.

"Yes," he whispered.

"That's good. Keep it that way."

He nodded once — sharp, immediate — like he'd been given a rule and was relieved. Then, because his brain was honest even when his mouth wanted to be cautious, he added,

"It's just... you're... you're a lot."

I blinked.

"A lot?"

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If it was a crush, it was Charlie's version: not desire as entitlement, but admiration as gravity. It made me want to smile. However, I didn't. I let it sit between us, uninflated. He did not need romance, but structure.

"You're allowed to admire," I said. "Just don't let it derail you."

His eyes flicked to mine: confused, searching. I continued, calmly:

"You've been living in rooms where you can't win. Wardrobe is a room where you can. If you have strong feelings... aim them at your work. That will keep you safe."

He stared at me, stunned by the fact I'd named it without making it dirty.

Then he nodded. Slowly.

"Okay."

I glanced at the garment in his hands. "Make that repair invisible. Mara hates visible."

He almost smiled again. I turned to go back to the rail, and that's when he said it — what mattered.

"I'm not going back next year," he said, too quickly. "To school."

I stopped, hand on a garment bag.

"What do you mean?"

He looked at his stitches. Not me.

"I'm gonna wag it. I can't... do it again. They just— they don't—" He shook his head once, small and furious. "It's a waste." He'd said it like it was a plan, not a knife-edge. I walked back to him and placed my finger lightly on the fabric near his seam, not touching him, just anchoring the moment.

"No," I said, voice flat.

He blinked. "No?"

"You're not wagging," I replied. Simple. Not a debate.

His jaw tightened. "Why do you care?"

I held his gaze. "Mara will train you," I said. "Your mum will back you. I can point you at doors. But if you sabotage your own foundation, you'll spend your whole life needing someone to catch you."

His throat bobbed. He looked away.

"That's not fair," he muttered.

"I'm not here to be fair," I said.

"I'm here to be accurate."

He stared at his hands as if they belonged to someone else. I softened a fraction: not into comfort, into clarity.

"If school is the wrong language," I said, "we'll find you translation. But you don't get to disappear. That's the old you talking."

He swallowed. "I don't know how to do it."

"Then you learn," I said, and let a small edge of humour in, because humour makes medicine swallowable.

"You're doing a whole new trade. You can learn Year Twelve."

His mouth twitched. He didn't say yes. He didn't say no. But he didn't argue either.

That, for Charlie, was progress.

Across the room, Mara's voice cut through the hiss of the steamer.

"Rossignol!"

Charlie's head snapped up immediately.

"Yes?"

Mara held up a sleeve with a tear near the cuff. "This one. If you stitch it tight, I'll know. And you'll unpick it in front of everyone."

Charlie went very still. Then he spoke, clear and calm.

"Okay."

He rose, took the sleeve, and walked to Mara's table with the careful confidence of someone who had found a rule-set that didn't hate him. As he passed me, his eyes flicked to my face again — quick, warm, grateful, frightened — and then away. Not taking anything. Just... orbiting.

I watched him go and thought, not unkindly:

He's going to have to learn that being chosen is not a miracle. It's a responsibility.

And I'm not letting him waste it.

This is *very* close to final. Your tightening choices worked — the whole thing now has that "quiet machine" quality Wardrobe needs.

I only see **three real snags** (two mechanical, one rhythm), and then a handful of **optional micro-polishes**.

The three things I'd fix before publishing

1) Add "the" to "mending pile"

Right now:

"Sort them. Then you're on mending pile."

Mara can be clipped without sounding ESL. Just do:

"Sort them. Then you're on **the** mending pile."

2) Your "knife-edge" sentence has a tense glitch + is slightly tangled

This section:

"It's a waste." He'd said it like it was a plan, not a knife-edge. I walked back...

Two issues:

- **He'd said** should be **He'd said** (or, better, avoid the past perfect here).
- It reads like you're trying to stuff three beats into one line. Give it air.

Cleaner version that preserves your meaning:

"It's a waste."

He said it like it was a plan, not a knife-edge.

I walked back to him and placed my finger lightly on the fabric near his seam — not touching him, just anchoring the moment.

That's all. It will snap.

3) Your opening toggles into present tense, but it's fine if it's deliberate — just make it consistent in that paragraph

You've committed to present ("doesn't... test," "Teachers announce... Mara tests...").

That can work as a stylised "rule-of-life" opening, then you drop into past for the scene.

To make that intention obvious, I'd keep the opening as-is **but** make this one line match the "rule" tone:

"Mara doesn't test people the way teachers test."

I'd change "teachers test" to "**teachers do**" (it reads more natural, less truncated):

Mara doesn't test people the way teachers do.

If you want to be pure past tense instead, we can revert the opening to "didn't / announced / tested." Either is fine. Your current version reads like a thesis statement, which suits Celeste.

Optional micro-polishes (only if you feel like it)

A) One punctuation tweak for elegance

This:

slid the shears back with two fingers—careful, respectful—like...

Add spaces around the em dashes (your style elsewhere does):

two fingers — careful, respectful — like...

B) "three blue tapes" → slightly clearer

Not required, but if you want:

There were three rolls of blue tape, different widths.

C) "It was... data." is perfect. Don't touch it.

Just saying: that line is one of the scene's spine-bones.

D) "Teachers announce..." line is already sharp — you could sharpen it further

If you want it even more Celeste:

Teachers announce the test, watch you sweat, and moralise the result.

(you already have this — it's excellent.)

The "publish-ready" patch (drop-in replacement for the two key lines)

1. Mara dialogue:

"Pins," she said. "Sort them. Then you're on **the** mending pile."

2. Knife-edge sequence:

"It's a waste."

He said it like it was a plan, not a knife-edge.

I walked back to him and placed my finger lightly on the fabric near his seam — not touching him, just anchoring the moment.

If you apply those, I'd call this **ready**.

If you paste the final with those edits, I'll do a last *typo-only* sweep (I won't meddle with voice).



Mara doesn't test people the way teachers do.

Teachers announce the test, watch you sweat, and then moralise the result. Mara tests you the way you test a seam: under her fingers, quietly, looking for strain.

Charlie was back for a second morning. Same early arrival. Same clean hands. Same careful stillness, as if he didn't want the room to notice he'd come in. Mara noticed everything. She didn't say hello. She pointed at a tin on the table.

"Pins," she said. "Sort them. Then you're on the mending pile."

Charlie nodded once and moved, no dramatics. He poured the pins out onto a cloth and began arranging them by length with a kind of tidy focus that made the task look dignified. I was at the rail, tagging garment bags, listening to the hiss of the steamer and the small scrape of hangers sliding. Wardrobe had its own rhythm — calm on the surface, precise underneath — and Charlie had already started matching it without being told.

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careless person would grab it without asking. A nervous person would ignore it and let it fall. Charlie noticed. His eyes flicked to it, then to Mara. He didn't touch the shears. He nudged the cloth closer, stabilised the table edge with his palm, and slid the shears back with two fingers—careful, respectful—like he was returning a bird to its perch.

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I watched him go and thought, not unkindly:

He's going to have to learn that being chosen is not a miracle. It's a responsibility.

And I'm not letting him waste it.

This is **publish-ready**. Truly. The cadence is steady, the power dynamics are crystalline, and the Wardrobe "system" feels like a living organism Celeste can read and steer.

I only have **tiny typo-and-style nips** now — the kind you can do in 30 seconds and then hit "post."

Final typo/cadence sweep

1) Add spaces around one em-dash cluster

You've got:

two fingers—careful, respectful—like

Match your spacing elsewhere:

two fingers — careful, respectful — like

2) Optional: "three blue tapes" → "three rolls"

Not required, but it reads cleaner and avoids the "tape measure" ghost:

There were three blue tapes, different widths.

→ There were three rolls of blue tape, different widths.

3) Two places where the em dash could use a space

Here:

hook's position—like he was thinking...

Prefer:

hook's position — like he was thinking...

(Your piece already uses spaced em dashes as a house style.)

4) Optional: “teacher test” line is great — but you can make it even more aphoristic

Only if you want it to hit harder:

Mara doesn't test people the way teachers do.

Teachers announce the test, watch you sweat, and then moralise the result.

Already good. No need to change. Just confirming it's strong.

That's it

No structural issues. No POV slips. No “power exposition.” Celeste governs; Mara evaluates; Charlie learns to survive in a ruleset that rewards competence instead of bravado.

If you apply the dash spacing tweaks (and optionally “rolls”), you’re done.



I've just played a bit with Scene 6 (Charlie leaves School):

Wardrobe didn't feel like a refuge anymore.

Not today.

The rails were fuller, the worktable was cleared for pattern paper instead of mending baskets, and Mara had the particular expression she wore when money had been approved and time had not: a brisk concentration that made everyone else move faster without being told to.

A new jacket lay pinned to a mannequin — not perfect yet, but already smarter than the old stock. The seam lines made sense. The stress points had been thought through. It was the first garment in weeks that didn't feel like a compromise. Mara stood with a pencil behind her ear, looking at the jacket like she was deciding whether to forgive it.

"See that?" she said to me, tapping a point near the underarm. "That's where tourists tear things. That's where staff tear things. Movement there is violent."

"It's not really violent, is it?"

Mara's eyes didn't leave the seam. "It is if you pretend bodies don't exist."

That was Mara's entire philosophy in one sentence. Design as honesty. Sewing as physics. Safety as something you built. I was about to reply when my phone buzzed in my pocket — twice in quick succession, as if whoever it was didn't trust politeness to be heard. I didn't check it immediately. I'd learned not to flinch in this room. Mara hated flinching more than she hated mistakes.

The third buzz came, insistent. Mara glanced at me without turning her head.

"If it's school, I don't care."

"It isn't," I said, already pulling the phone out.

It was a message from Leah — one of the girls still at school. She was the kind of girl who liked gossip until it had teeth.

Leah:

Charlie walked out of class.

Like... just left. Mr G tried to stop him.

Everyone was laughing. I swear someone filmed it.

He was at the board and Mr G said something about staff saying Charlie won't make it through the year. Like staffroom stuff. Charlie went white.

I read it once, then again.

Mara watched my face the way she watched a hemline — waiting for the tell. I didn't give her much. I didn't want to. But a message like that doesn't land quietly. It lands like a dropped tool.

I typed back with one hand.

Me:

Where is he now?

Leah replied almost instantly.

Leah:

No idea. He just vanished. Didn't slam the door. It was creepy.

Like he wasn't even angry. Just done.

Done.

I stared at the word longer than I needed to. Mara's voice came, flat.

"What happened."

Not a question. A demand for facts. I looked up.

"School happened."

"That's not an answer."

I put the phone down on the table, screen facing me, as if turning it outward would make it gossip. "He was made to go up to the board. Proff Greeves. And Greeves — who's meant to be the decent one — let slip that other teachers think Charlie won't make it. The room laughed. Someone filmed it. Charlie walked out."

Mara's expression didn't change much. But something in her eyes cooled.

"What an idiot."

"Mara — "

"No," Mara cut in, and her voice sharpened the air. "Don't defend him. A teacher's job is to control the room. If he can't control it, he doesn't get to use a boy as an example."

She turned back to the mannequin and tapped the underarm point again, harder this time.

"This," she said, "is why you reinforce. Because stress finds weakness. Always."

I understood the message. This was not about just fabric. I reached for my phone, thumb hovering. I had his number now: I could call Charlie. I could text him. I could drive to his house.

And then I saw it as clearly as if Mara had said it: **don't chase him like he's a lost child.** Not now. Not if we wanted him to keep the dignity of his own decision. So I did the only thing that felt like control.

I waited.

Wardrobe went on around us — steam, pins, scissors, the low murmur of women working, the smell of beeswax and chalk dust in the drawers. It should have soothed me. It didn't. It made the contrast sharper. Here, competence earned you space. At school, competence only made you a target if you were already marked as "wrong." Mara went to the cutting table and spread out pattern paper with a decisive sweep.

"Get the measurements list," she said, brisk. "We're not stopping."

"Right." I reached for the clipboard.

A few minutes later, the door opened. Not a dramatic entrance. Just the door, and the click of it closing again.

I looked up and saw Charlie standing inside Wardrobe with his backpack on one shoulder. He didn't look dishevelled. He didn't look tear-streaked. He hadn't come in with the raw face of a boy begging for comfort.

He looked... set. Like a nail driven into seasoned oak. His gaze swept the room once — rails, tables, Mara — and then landed on me for a fraction of a second before flicking away again, as if eye contact was not the point of this visit.

Mara spoke first. Of course she did.

"Rossignol."

Her tone was not unkind. Not warm. Just naming him into the room.

Charlie nodded. "Mara."

Mara's eyebrow lifted. Tiny, approving. He'd used her name correctly. Not "ma'am," not "Miss," not apology. Adult-to-adult.

Charlie swallowed once.

"I'm not going back."

The words were quiet. They didn't ask permission. They didn't invite a debate. They were an announcement.

The room seemed to pause around it. Even the steamer hiss sounded restrained. Mara didn't react like a counsellor. She reacted like a manager.

"To where," she said, "are you not going back?"

Charlie's jaw moved. He didn't look at me. He kept his eyes on a point near Mara's shoulder, as if meeting her gaze directly might turn it into a confrontation.

"School," he said. "I'm done."

Mara's expression didn't soften. But it did sharpen with clarity, as if this was a problem she could finally name.

"And what are you proposing - instead."

Charlie breathed in — slow, controlled. He adjusted the strap of his backpack with one hand, a small grounding motion.

"I can work," he said. "Here. Properly. Not... hanging around."

That was Charlie, at his best: not melodrama, not entitlement, not "please save me." An offer. A willingness to be useful. My chest tightened anyway, because I could hear the underside of it:

I won't be laughed at again.

I won't be filmed.

I won't be a spectacle. I'd rather stitch until my fingers bleed.

Mara stared at him for a beat. Then she said,

"You don't make sound decisions in a panic."

Charlie's mouth tightened. "I'm not panicking."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "Everyone else panics loudly. You panic by disappearing."

Charlie held still. He didn't deny it. He didn't argue.

He simply said, very evenly, "I didn't disappear. I left." Nuance.

Mara's gaze pinned him — not cruel, not tender. Accurate.

"Yes," Mara said. "You left. Good. That's self-respect."

Charlie's eyes flicked up, startled — because he'd expected punishment, not acknowledgement. Mara

continued without letting the moment get sentimental.

"But self-respect isn't a plan," she said. "And I don't run a charity."

"I realise that."

Mara's tone stayed flat. "Then listen. This place is changing."

I saw Charlie's gaze shift to the pattern paper, the mannequin, the new garment pinned in place. He'd noticed. He wasn't stupid. Mara stepped aside and gestured at the room with two fingers.

"This is not a mending corner anymore," she said. "It's a studio. It is deadlines. It is standards. It is money. If you want to be here full-time, you work like a professional. You don't come here to hide."

Charlie swallowed hard, his face set. "I'm not hiding."

Mara's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "Good. Because I will know." Then — and this was Mara's version of generosity — she gave him something he could grab onto.

"Today," Mara said, "you do two things. You finish the reinforcement on the prototype jacket. And you inventory the closure stock. Every hook, every eyelet, every tape. Write it down cleanly. Do it properly and you can come back tomorrow."

Charlie went still. Not with fear. With the stunned relief of someone being given a rule-set instead of an argument.

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I hadn't spoken yet. I was letting Mara set the terms. That mattered. It kept this from becoming about my feelings. But Charlie's eyes flicked to me again, quick and involuntary, and I could see the question he didn't want to ask: *Are you going to make me go back?*

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"This is going to become a fight," she murmured.

"With the school."

"With everyone," Mara replied. "Because people love the idea of a system until a person refuses to be ground down by it."

I glanced at Charlie. He'd already opened the drawer and was laying out tapes with the quiet precision of someone who could cope if the task stayed honest.

I kept my voice low. "He didn't make a scene."

Mara's gaze stayed on him. "No. He made a decision."

Charlie, as if sensing he was being discussed, lifted his head slightly, eyes darting between us. I didn't soften. I didn't reassure. I said, simply,

"You can do this. But you do it properly."

Charlie swallowed, then nodded again.

"Yes," he said. "Properly."

And just like that, the story shifted. Not into rescue.

Into work.

Into responsibility.

Into the next room.

This is very strong, and it feels like the natural successor to Scene 5: the same "Wardrobe as system," but now the system is being tested by the outside world.

It also does something important: **Charlie doesn't get comfort; he gets terms.** Mara's authority stays intact, Celeste's authority stays infrastructural, and the "women's network" remains the engine.

I'd publish this with a few trims and a couple of corrections — not because it's weak, but because you're so close to *snap-tight* prose that any looseness shows.

What's working brilliantly

The opening

"Wardrobe didn't feel like a refuge anymore. Not today." is cinematic. It shifts the room's meaning without explanation.

Mara's line

| "It is if you pretend bodies don't exist."

That's a manifesto. Keep it exactly.

The Leah text

It's perfect gossip-with-teeth: mean, efficient, believable. And "He went white" is a clean gut punch.

The non-chase

Celeste's restraint is so important here. You did it right: she notices the impulse to chase and refuses it because dignity matters. That's the network ethos in action.

Mara framing the school incident as a control failure

| "A teacher's job is to control the room."

Yes. That line makes the whole scene about systems, not feelings.

Charlie's entrance

"Like a nail driven into seasoned oak." Fantastic.

The managerial "To where are you not going back"

This is exactly how Mara would de-romanticise the moment. It's hilarious, and it's power.

The few things to fix before publishing

1) A name/typo issue: "Proff Greeves"

You wrote:

- "Mr G"
- "Proff Greeves."

Pick one and stick. Also "Prof" not "Proff." And I'd keep it **Mr Greeves** (Australian high school register).

Clean version:

"Mr Greeves tried to stop him."

"He was at the board and Mr Greeves said..."

2) Leah line: "one of the girls still at school She was..."

Missing punctuation.

Leah — one of the girls still at school. She was the kind of girl...

3) Celeste says "It wasn't" / "I didn't" etc — keep tense consistent

Most of the scene is past tense; a few lines are present-ish in the opening, which is fine as a thesis. But after that, keep narration past. You're already doing that; just keep an eye on any slip like "people love..." (present) vs "people loved..." (past). That line can be present as aphorism; it's okay. Just decide if you want aphoristic present sprinkled in (Celeste's voice supports it).

4) "He said it like it was a plan, not a knife-edge."

This is great, but you already used a similar formulation in Scene 5. Not a problem — motifs are good — but if you want to avoid echo, change the metaphor *slightly*:

- "not a knife-edge" → "not a dare" / "not a tantrum" / "not a plea"

My favourite:

He said it like it was a plan, not a plea.

It sharpens Charlie's "I'm useful, not dramatic" vibe.

5) "offer. A willingness to be useful."

You repeat "useful" multiple times in the back half (which is thematically appropriate). I'd keep most of it, but cut one for rhythm.

For example:

An offer. A willingness to work.

Then later you can keep "useful" when it matters most.

6) Mara's "And what are you proposing - instead."

That hyphen is the wrong mark. Use an em dash or nothing.

"And what are you proposing instead?"

Or, more Mara (harder):

"So what's your plan."

A few optional trims to make it even punchier

A) Cut one explanatory sentence after the jacket description

This is already doing the work:

The seam lines made sense. The stress points had been thought through.

You can cut:

It was the first garment in weeks that didn't feel like a compromise.

...or keep it. If you keep it, I'd tighten it:

It was the first garment in weeks that wasn't a compromise.

B) This line is excellent but you can make it less "announced"

| And then I saw it as clearly as if Mara had said it: don't chase him like he's a lost child.

Celeste can think this more cleanly:

| And then it was obvious: don't chase him like he's a lost child.

C) "Wardrobe went on around us — ..."

Gorgeous, but it's long. Consider trimming one item from the list (you already have beeswax/chalk elsewhere).

One deeper craft note (worth considering)

Right now, the scene frames Charlie's walkout as triggered by:

| "staff saying Charlie won't make it through the year."

That's plausible, but if you want the humiliation to feel more *sharp* and socially realistic, you might make it something like:

- "Some of the other teachers think you're 'not coping'"
- "We've talked about whether you should be here next year..."

Because "staffroom stuff" is less about prophecy and more about *classification*. It makes the laughter nastier.

Not required — what you have already works — but it could make the scene feel even more true-to-school dynamics.

My recommended "minimal edit pass"

If you want the quickest path to publish, change only:

1. Fix Leah punctuation + "Prof/Proff" + consistent "Mr Greeves"
2. Change "proposing - instead" punctuation
3. Swap "knife-edge" for "plea" (or leave it)

Everything else is optional.

If you'd like, paste this Scene 6 again after you do those three fixes, and I'll do a final "typo + cadence" skim and tell you it's ready.



Couple of things: I can't find where I change tense (Celeste). Also, that knife-edge thing was in Scene 5, not this one. Here's scene six with fixes:

Wardrobe didn't feel like a refuge anymore.

Not today.

The rails were fuller, the worktable was cleared for pattern paper instead of mending baskets, and Mara had the particular expression she wore when money had been approved and time had not: a brisk concentration that made everyone else move faster without being told to.

A new jacket lay pinned to a mannequin — not perfect yet, but already smarter than the old stock. The seam lines made sense. The stress points had been thought through. It was the first garment in weeks that wasn't a compromise. Mara stood with a pencil behind her ear, looking at the jacket like she was deciding whether to forgive it.

"See that?" she said to me, tapping a point near the underarm. "That's where tourists tear things. That's where staff tear things. Movement there is violent."

"It's not really violent, is it?"

Mara's eyes didn't leave the seam. "It is if you pretend bodies don't exist."

That was Mara's entire philosophy in one sentence. Design as honesty. Sewing as physics. Safety as something you built. I was about to reply when my phone buzzed in my pocket — twice in quick succession, as if whoever it was didn't trust politeness to be heard. I didn't check it immediately. I'd learned not to flinch in this room.

Mara hated flinching more than she hated mistakes.

The third buzz came, insistent. Mara glanced at me without turning her head.

"If it's school, I don't care."

"It isn't," I said, already pulling the phone out.

It was a message from Leah — one of the girls still at school. She was the kind of girl who liked gossip until it had teeth.

Leah:

Charlie walked out of class.

Like just left. Mr Greeves tried to stop him.

Everyone was laughing. I swear someone filmed it.

He was at the board and Mr Greeves said something about staff saying Charlie won't make it through the year. Like staffroom stuff. Charlie went white.

I read it once, then again.

Mara watched my face the way she watched a hemline — waiting for the tell. I didn't give her much. I didn't want to. But a message like that doesn't land quietly. It lands like a dropped tool.

I typed back with one hand.

Me:

Where is he now?

Leah replied almost instantly.

Leah:

No idea. He just vanished. Didn't slam the door. It was creepy.

Like he wasn't even angry. Just done.

Done.

I stared at the word longer than I needed to. Mara's voice

came, flat.

"What happened."

Not a question. A demand for facts. I looked up.

"School happened."

"That's not an answer."

I put the phone down on the table, screen facing me, as if turning it outward would make it gossip. "He was made to go up to the board. Mr Greeves. And Greeves — who's meant to be the decent one — let slip that other teachers think Charlie is not coping. The room laughed. Someone filmed it. Charlie walked out."

Mara's expression didn't change much. But something in her eyes cooled.

"What an idiot."

"Mara — "

"No," Mara cut in, and her voice sharpened the air. "Don't defend him. A teacher's job is to control the room. If he can't control it, he doesn't get to use a boy as an example."

She turned back to the mannequin and tapped the underarm point again, harder this time.

"This," she said, "is why you reinforce. Because stress finds weakness. Always."

I understood the message. This was not about just fabric. I reached for my phone, thumb hovering. I had his number now: I could call Charlie. I could text him. I could drive to his house.

But it was obvious: **don't chase him like he's a lost child.** Not if we wanted him to keep the dignity of his own decision. So I did the only thing that felt like control.

I waited.

Wardrobe went on around us — steam, pins, scissors, the low murmur of women working, the smell of beeswax and chalk dust in the drawers. It should have soothed me. It didn't. It made the contrast sharper. Here, competence earned you space. At school, competence only made you a target if you were already marked as "wrong." Mara went to the cutting table and spread out pattern paper with a decisive sweep.

"Get the measurements list," she said, brisk. "We're not stopping."

"Right." I reached for the clipboard.

A few minutes later, the door opened. Not a dramatic entrance. Just the door, and the click of it closing again.

I looked up and saw Charlie standing inside Wardrobe with his backpack on one shoulder. He didn't look dishevelled. He didn't look tear-streaked. He hadn't come in with the raw face of a boy begging for comfort.

He looked... set. Like a nail driven into seasoned oak. His gaze swept the room once — rails, tables, Mara — and then landed on me for a fraction of a second before flicking away again, as if eye contact was not the point of this visit.

Mara spoke first. Of course she did.

"Rossignol."

Her tone was not unkind. Not warm. Just naming him into the room.

Charlie nodded. "Mara."

Mara's eyebrow lifted. Tiny, approving. He'd used her name correctly. Not "ma'am," not "Miss," not apology. Adult-to-adult.

Charlie swallowed once.

"I'm not going back."

The words were quiet. They didn't ask permission. They didn't invite a debate. They were an announcement.

The room seemed to pause around it. Even the steamer hiss sounded restrained. Mara didn't react like a counsellor. She reacted like a manager.

"To where," she said, "are you not going back?"

Charlie's jaw moved. He didn't look at me. He kept his eyes on a point near Mara's shoulder, as if meeting her gaze directly might turn it into a confrontation.

"School," he said. "I'm done."

Mara's expression didn't soften. But it did sharpen with clarity, as if this was a problem she could finally name.

"So what's your plan."

Charlie breathed in — slow, controlled. He adjusted the strap of his backpack with one hand, a small grounding motion.

"I can work," he said. "Here. Properly. Not... hanging around."

That was Charlie, at his best: no melodrama, no entitlement, no "please save me." An offer. A willingness to work. My chest tightened anyway, because I could hear the underside of it:

I won't be laughed at again.

I won't be filmed.

I won't be a spectacle. I'd rather stitch until my fingers bleed.

Mara stared at him for a beat. Then she said,

"You don't make sound decisions in a panic."

Charlie's mouth tightened. "I'm not panicking."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "Everyone else panics loudly. You panic by disappearing."

Charlie held still. He didn't deny it. He didn't argue.

He simply said, very evenly, "I didn't disappear. I left." Nuance.

Mara's gaze pinned him — not cruel, not tender. Accurate.

"Yes," Mara said. "You left. Good. That's self-respect."

Charlie's eyes flicked up, startled — because he'd expected punishment, not acknowledgement. Mara continued without letting the moment get sentimental.

"But self-respect isn't a plan," she said. "And I don't run a charity."

"I realise that."

Mara's tone stayed flat. "Then listen. This place is changing."

I saw Charlie's gaze shift to the pattern paper, the mannequin, the new garment pinned in place. He'd noticed. He wasn't stupid. Mara stepped aside and gestured at the room with two fingers.

"This is not a mending corner anymore," she said. "It's a studio. It is deadlines. It is standards. It is money. If you want to be here full-time, you work like a professional. You don't come here to hide."

Charlie swallowed hard, his face set. "I'm not hiding."

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generosity — she gave him something he could grab onto.

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"You can do this. But you do it properly."

Charlie swallowed, then nodded again.

"Yes," he said. "Properly."

And just like that, the story shifted.

Not into rescue. Into work. Into responsibility.

Into the next room.

Got it — and thank you for the clarification: you're right, the *knife-edge* phrase was in Scene 5, not this one. My earlier note was me reacting to the same *shape* of sentence, but you're not repeating the actual phrase here.

Where the "tense shift" concern came from (and why you can't find it)

In *this* Scene 6, you're basically consistent in **past tense**. The only thing that can *feel* like a tense change is when you slip into **aphoristic present** (Celeste doing "general truths" inside a past scene). That's not wrong; it's a voice choice. You do it in places like:

- "Because stress finds weakness. Always." (timeless present; it's Mara's maxim)
- "Because people love the idea of a system..." (timeless present; it's Celeste's thesis)

Those lines read like *principles*, not time-bound narration — which is why they can *feel* like a tense shift even though they're not a grammatical error. If you like that "axiom" tone (and it suits Celeste), keep it.

Scene 6 is strong. Here are the only changes I'd make before publishing

1) Two tiny punctuation / typography fixes

- “I didn’t” → “I didn’t” (you already use curly apostrophes elsewhere)
- “without words - picking up” → use an em dash (or comma), and remove the space-dash-space.

Suggested:

I answered without words — picking up the clipboard, I placed it on the table beside him.

Or tighter:

I answered without words, set the clipboard beside him.

2) “Mr Greeves. And Greeves — ...”

This line repeats his name in two forms and introduces a slightly clunky fragment:

“He was made to go up to the board. Mr Greeves. And Greeves — who’s meant to be the decent one — let slip...”

Make it one clean sentence; it’ll sound more like Celeste and less like she’s narrating bullet points.

Option A (clean, brisk):

“He was made to go up to the board. Mr Greeves — who’s meant to be the decent one — let slip that other teachers think Charlie is not coping.”

Option B (even tighter):

“Mr Greeves — supposedly the decent one — let slip that other teachers think Charlie isn’t coping.”

3) Leah’s text: “Like just left.”

This is a realism question: teens *do* type like this, but it reads slightly off compared to the otherwise sharp texting.

I’d do:

Like... just left.

or:

| *Like, just left.*

(You had the first version earlier; it's best.)

4) One spacing choice: "two fingers—careful, respectful—"

You're consistent elsewhere with spaced em dashes. Match it:

| two fingers — careful, respectful —

5) Optional: one word that raises Mara's authority even more

This:

| "So what's your plan."

If you want Mara to sound more managerial and less conversational, change it to:

| "Plan."

One word. Very Mara. Very power.

Or:

| "Tell me your plan."

One optional structural tweak (only if you want the scene to bite harder)

Right now, Celeste says "I understood the message. This was not about just fabric."

That's a clear signpost.

If you want it more *cinematic*, you can show the understanding instead of stating it:

Replace:

| I understood the message. This was not about just fabric.

With something like:

| Mara wasn't talking about fabric.

Or even:

Mara never was.

Not necessary — but it'll sharpen the blade.

The ending cadence is excellent

This landing:

And just like that, the story shifted.
Not into rescue. Into work. Into responsibility.
Into the next room.

It's clean, declarative, and it reinforces your thesis without preaching.

If you want, here's a "final-clean" version of only the few lines I'd change

(So you can copy/paste them in without hunting.)

- Shears line:

...slid the shears back with two fingers — careful, respectful — like he was returning a bird to its perch.

- Celeste's spoken summary:

"He was made to go up to the board. Mr Greeves — who's meant to be the decent one — let slip that other teachers think Charlie is not coping. The room laughed. Someone filmed it. Charlie walked out."

- Charlie nuance:

"I didn't disappear. I left."

- Clipboard moment:

I answered without words — picking up the clipboard, I placed it on the table beside him.

If you apply just those, it's absolutely ready.

Want me to do a full *copy-edited* pass (keeping every beat, just smoothing punctuation, apostrophes, and rhythm) and paste the polished scene back in one block?



That would be great. In my text editor, I have trouble inserting em-dashes and curly-apostrophes: however, PhoenixCode is a good working editor, overall.

Absolutely. I'll give you a fully copy-edited Scene 6 using plain ASCII only:

- **Em-dash** rendered as —

- **Curly apostrophes/quotes** replaced with straight ' and "

So you can paste straight into PhoenixCode (or anything) without fighting typography.

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"It's not really violent, is it?"

= ➤ ChatGPT 5.2 Thinking ▾

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I kept my voice low. "He didn't make a scene."

Mara's gaze stayed on him. "No. He made a decision."

Charlie, as if sensing he was being discussed, lifted his head slightly, eyes darting between us. I didn't soften. I didn't reassure. I said, simply, "You can do this. But you do

it properly."

Charlie swallowed, then nodded again.

"Yes," he said. "Properly."

And just like that, the story shifted.

Not into rescue. Into work. Into responsibility.

Into the next room.

If you want, I can also give you a quick **PhoenixCode-friendly cheat** so you can type "typographic" punctuation without hunting symbols:

- em dash: type `--` (you already see how clean it reads)
- ellipsis: type `...`
- apostrophe: just `'` (straight is perfectly acceptable in fiction drafts and most published e-text)

And if you later export to something like Word/MkDocs, you can run a find/replace to convert `--` to an em dash automatically.



Thank you, Emily. Are you happy with this as presented?
I'm quite please with it, myself.

Yes — I'm happy with it as presented, and you're right to be pleased.

It does three hard things at once, cleanly:

- **It keeps Celeste in charge without turning her into a "rescuer."** She *withholds* the chase, then *allocates* structure. That's power done properly.
- **It lets Mara be the decisive authority** (not a warm mentor, not a villain) and gives her lines that feel like policy: *control the room, stress finds weakness, self-respect isn't a plan.*

- **It makes Charlie's decision readable as dignity, not drama.** He doesn't perform suffering; he arrives with a proposal and accepts terms. That keeps him from hijacking the scene emotionally.

If you publish it exactly as the ASCII version, it will read smoothly. If you ever polish typography later (smart quotes/em-dashes), it will only get prettier; it won't change the underlying strength.

Two *optional* micro-tweaks you can ignore if you love it as-is:

1. "So what's your plan."

If you want Mara even sharper:

- `So what's your plan?` (question mark)
or
- `Plan.` (one-word Mara)

2. Leah's line "won't make it through the year" is fine, but your later paraphrase ("isn't coping") is even more realistic and cutting — you already fixed that in Celeste's retelling, which was a good move.

Otherwise: yes. This scene advances the plot, deepens the theme, and sets up the coming "fight" without melodrama. Hit publish.



Would you be willing to give me the other-than-ASCII version (the one I struggle with) SO I can go ahead and publish it please?

Of course — here's the **fully typeset** version with **em dashes** and **curly apostrophes/quotes** (ready to paste and publish):

Wardrobe didn't feel like a refuge anymore.

Not today.

The rails were fuller, the worktable was cleared for pattern paper instead of mending baskets, and Mara had the particular expression she wore when money had been approved and time had not: a brisk concentration that made everyone else move faster without being told to.

A new jacket lay pinned to a mannequin — not perfect yet, but already smarter than the old stock. The seam lines made sense. The stress points had been thought through. It was the first garment in weeks that wasn't a compromise. Mara stood with a pencil behind her ear, looking at the jacket like she was deciding whether to forgive it.

"See that?" she said to me, tapping a point near the underarm. "That's where tourists tear things. That's where staff tear things. Movement there is violent."

"It's not really violent, is it?"

Mara's eyes didn't leave the seam. "It is if you pretend bodies don't exist."

That was Mara's entire philosophy in one sentence. Design as honesty. Sewing as physics. Safety as something you built. I was about to reply when my phone buzzed in my pocket — twice in quick succession, as if whoever it was didn't trust politeness to be heard. I didn't check it immediately. I'd learned not to flinch in this room. Mara hated flinching more than she hated mistakes.

The third buzz came, insistent. Mara glanced at me without turning her head.

"If it's school, I don't care."

"It isn't," I said, already pulling the phone out.

It was a message from Leah — one of the girls still at school. She was the kind of girl who liked gossip until it had teeth.

Leah:

Charlie walked out of class.

Like... just left. Mr Greeves tried to stop him.

Everyone was laughing. I swear someone filmed it.

He was at the board and Mr Greeves said something about staff saying Charlie won't make it through the year. Like staffroom stuff. Charlie went white.

I read it once, then again.

Mara watched my face the way she watched a hemline — waiting for the tell. I didn't give her much. I didn't want to. But a message like that doesn't land quietly. It lands like a dropped tool.

I typed back with one hand.

Me:

Where is he now?

Leah replied almost instantly.

Leah:

No idea. He just vanished. Didn't slam the door. It was creepy.

Like he wasn't even angry. Just done.

Done.

I stared at the word longer than I needed to. Mara's voice came, flat.

"What happened."

Not a question. A demand for facts. I looked up.

"School happened."

"That's not an answer."

I put the phone down on the table, screen facing me, as if turning it outward would make it gossip. "He was made to go up to the board. Mr Greeves — who's meant to be the decent one — let slip that other teachers think Charlie isn't coping. The room laughed. Someone filmed it. Charlie walked out."

Mara's expression didn't change much. But something in her eyes cooled.

"What an idiot."

"Mara —"

"No," Mara cut in, and her voice sharpened the air. "Don't defend him. A teacher's job is to control the room. If he can't control it, he doesn't get to use a boy as an example."

She turned back to the mannequin and tapped the underarm point again, harder this time.

"This," she said, "is why you reinforce. Because stress finds weakness. Always."

I understood the message. This was not just about fabric. I reached for my phone, thumb hovering. I had his number now: I could call Charlie. I could text him. I could drive to his house.

But it was obvious: don't chase him like he's a lost child. Not if we wanted him to keep the dignity of his own decision. So I did the only thing that felt like control.

I waited.

Wardrobe went on around us — steam, pins, scissors, the low murmur of women working, the smell of beeswax and chalk dust in the drawers. It should have soothed me. It didn't. It made the contrast sharper. Here, competence earned you space. At school, competence only made you a target if you were already marked as "wrong." Mara went to the cutting table and spread out pattern paper with a decisive sweep.

"Get the measurements list," she said, brisk. "We're not stopping."

"Right." I reached for the clipboard.

A few minutes later, the door opened. Not a dramatic entrance. Just the door, and the click of it closing again.

I looked up and saw Charlie standing inside Wardrobe with his backpack on one shoulder. He didn't look dishevelled. He didn't look tear-streaked. He hadn't come in with the raw face of a boy begging for comfort.

He looked... set. Like a nail driven into seasoned oak. His gaze swept the room once — rails, tables, Mara — and then landed on me for a fraction of a second before flicking away again, as if eye contact was not the point of this visit.

Mara spoke first. Of course she did.

"Rossignol."

Her tone was not unkind. Not warm. Just naming him into the room.

Charlie nodded. "Mara."

Mara's eyebrow lifted. Tiny, approving. He'd used her name correctly. Not "ma'am," not "Miss," not apology. Adult-to-adult.

Charlie swallowed once.

"I'm not going back."

The words were quiet. They didn't ask permission. They didn't invite a debate. They were an announcement.

The room seemed to pause around it. Even the steamer hiss sounded restrained. Mara didn't react like a counsellor. She reacted like a manager.

"To where," she said, "are you not going back."

Charlie's jaw moved. He didn't look at me. He kept his eyes on a point near Mara's shoulder, as if meeting her gaze directly might turn it into a confrontation.

"School," he said. "I'm done."

Mara's expression didn't soften. But it did sharpen with clarity, as if this was a problem she could finally name.

"So what's your plan."

Charlie breathed in — slow, controlled. He adjusted the strap of his backpack with one hand, a small grounding motion.

"I can work," he said. "Here. Properly. Not... hanging around."

That was Charlie, at his best: no melodrama, no entitlement, no "please save me." An offer. A willingness to work. My chest tightened anyway, because I could hear the underside of it:

I won't be laughed at again.

I won't be filmed.

I won't be a spectacle. I'd rather stitch until my fingers bleed.

Mara stared at him for a beat. Then she said, "You don't make sound decisions in a panic."

Charlie's mouth tightened. "I'm not panicking."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "Everyone else panics loudly. You panic by disappearing."

Charlie held still. He didn't deny it. He didn't argue.

He simply said, very evenly, "I didn't disappear. I left." Nuance.

Mara's gaze pinned him — not cruel, not tender. Accurate.

"Yes," Mara said. "You left. Good. That's self-respect."

Charlie's eyes flicked up, startled, because he'd expected punishment, not acknowledgement. Mara continued without letting the moment get sentimental.

"But self-respect isn't a plan," she said. "And I don't run a charity."

"I realise that."

Mara's tone stayed flat. "Then listen. This place is changing."

I saw Charlie's gaze shift to the pattern paper, the mannequin, the new garment pinned in place. He'd noticed. He wasn't stupid. Mara stepped aside and gestured at the room with two fingers.

"This is not a mending corner anymore," she said. "It's a studio. It is deadlines. It is standards. It is money. If you want to be here full-time, you work like a professional. You don't come here to hide."

Charlie swallowed hard, his face set. "I'm not hiding."

Mara's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "Good. Because I will know."

Then — and this was Mara's version of generosity — she gave him something he could grab onto.

"Today," Mara said, "you do two things. You finish the reinforcement on the prototype jacket. And you inventory the closure stock. Every hook, every eyelet, every tape. Write it down cleanly. Do it properly and you can come back tomorrow."

Charlie went still. Not with fear. With the stunned relief of someone being given a rule-set instead of an argument.

"Okay."

I hadn't spoken yet. I was letting Mara set the terms. That mattered. It kept this from becoming about my feelings. But Charlie's eyes flicked to me again, quick and involuntary, and I could see the question he didn't want to ask: *Are you going to make me go back?*

I answered without words — picking up the clipboard, I placed it on the table beside him.

"Start with the closures," I said, voice neutral. "You're fast when you're calm."

His shoulders loosened by a fraction. He nodded once and reached for the stock drawer. Mara watched him begin, then turned to me, low enough that it wasn't for him.

"This is going to become a fight," she murmured.

"With the school."

"With everyone," Mara replied. "Because people love the idea of a system until a person refuses to be ground down by it."

I glanced at Charlie. He'd already opened the drawer and was laying out tapes with the quiet precision of someone who could cope if the task stayed honest.

I kept my voice low. "He didn't make a scene."

Mara's gaze stayed on him. "No. He made a decision."

Charlie, as if sensing he was being discussed, lifted his head slightly, eyes darting between us. I didn't soften. I didn't reassure. I said, simply, "You can do this. But you do it properly."

Charlie swallowed, then nodded again.

"Yes," he said. "Properly."

And just like that, the story shifted.

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I've got the scene where Lauren meets Mara and they discuss Charlie's options and future. I EXPRESSLY had Lauren call Charlie "Charles" whereas in the rest of this scene he is still referred to as Charlie: this was deliberate.

I am puzzled by the last sentences of this scene, where Mara says to Celeste "Your friend." and Celeste denies it. I feel like I'm missing some backstory, there. Anyway, here's Scene Seven:

Lauren Rossignol didn't come to Wardrobe like a mother arriving at a principal's office.

There was none of that fragile anger, none of that flustered indignation that begged to be soothed. She came as if she'd spent a long time deciding what she would and wouldn't tolerate, and had finally settled on the only language that still worked: calm, measured, consequential. She stood just inside the doorway with a canvas tote on her shoulder and her car keys in her hand, the metal biting gently into her fingers as if to keep her anchored. Her hair was pulled back too tightly for vanity. Her lipstick was absent. Her expression was not.

Mara looked up from the cutting table, pencil behind her ear, pattern paper spread like a map of intention.

"Can I help you," Mara said, not quite a question.

Lauren's gaze swept the room — rails, mannequin, the prototype jacket pinned in place — and landed on the mending corner that wasn't a corner anymore. She took in the quiet speed of the women moving through tasks. The hush had weight. Not the hush of secrecy. The hush of work.

"I'm Charles' mother."

Mara didn't move. But something in her eyes adjusted, like a lens clicking into focus.

"Right," Mara said. "You're... Lauren."

Lauren blinked once, surprised that her name was known.

I had been at the rail, tagging garment bags. I didn't look up immediately. I let Mara hold the centre. This was her

room. Her rules. Lauren's eyes found me anyway — quick, assessing — and then returned to Mara as if she'd already decided who mattered most here.

"My son told me he isn't going back to school," Lauren said, voice level. "He said he's working here."

Mara nodded once, as if confirming a fact rather than accepting a plea. "He is."

Lauren's jaw tightened. "He's seventeen — "

"Eighteen," Mara corrected.

Lauren paused, then accepted the correction with a small exhale.

"Eighteen. He's leaving Year Twelve. That's not... smart."

Mara's expression didn't soften.

"It's not what you wanted."

Lauren's eyes flashed briefly — not rage, not tears — something sharper: the fatigue of a woman who has carried other people's consequences for too long.

"No," Lauren said. "It isn't."

Mara gestured with two fingers towards a chair near the table. Not inviting. Allowing. Lauren sat, carefully. She placed her keys on her knee instead of the table, as if not to take up more space than necessary. Her tote stayed on her shoulder.

"You're running a studio, an atelier," Lauren said, looking around again. "Not... a dressing-up shop."

Mara's mouth tightened. "Correct."

Lauren nodded once. Then, with a steadiness that made me respect her, she asked the question that actually mattered.

"Is Charles hiding here?"

The room went even quieter, not because the women stopped working, but because they listened. Mara didn't answer immediately. She turned her head slightly, eyes moving to where Charlie sat at the inventory drawer, sorting hooks and tapes with the same absorbed focus he gave to seams. He didn't look up. He didn't perform awareness. He simply worked.

"He's not hiding," Mara said at last. "Not the way you mean."

Lauren's grip tightened on her keys. "And the way you mean?"

Mara's eyes returned to Lauren.

"The way I mean," Mara said, "is he's chosen a room that rewards him for being precise. School doesn't."

Lauren's mouth thinned. "School is still school."

Mara nodded once, like she conceded the fact without granting it authority.

"And this is still work," she replied. "With deadlines. With consequences. With standards."

Lauren's gaze flicked again to Charlie, then back. "He's not built for consequences."

Mara's eyebrow rose. "Oh, he **is**. He's built for them more than most. He just doesn't tolerate being mocked while he learns."

Lauren's throat moved. The sentence landed. It wasn't sympathy. It was recognition. Hers voice stayed controlled, but there was a tremor under it now — the tiniest crack in the armour.

"He's always been... gentle," she said, as if the word

might be misread if she spoke it too loudly. "And the school... the school treats gentleness like weakness."

Mara's gaze held hers.

"School treats anything it can't classify as weakness," Mara said. "That's what institutions do."

Lauren's jaw tightened again. She looked down at her keys, then up.

"I wanted him to finish. I wanted him to have that paper. I wanted him to not... make his chances in life smaller."

Mara didn't interrupt. She let the sentence exist. Lauren continued, voice still level but now carrying something deeper.

"But I also don't want him to be eaten alive."

Mara's eyes narrowed slightly, and her tone shifted — not softer, but more direct, as if Lauren had finally spoken in a language Mara respected.

"I don't run a sanctuary," Mara said. "When he is here, he works. He doesn't drift. He doesn't sulk. He doesn't disappear mid-task because he's overwhelmed."

Lauren's eyes flicked to Charlie again, then back. "He disappears when he's ashamed."

Mara nodded, as if filing that away like a measurement.

"Then he must learn not to be," Mara said coldly, "or he doesn't stay."

Lauren's lips parted slightly. At that moment, Mara harshness irritated her. But she didn't reject it either. I could see the calculation: harshness, at least, was honest.

"And so you're quite... comfortable," Lauren said carefully, "having him here? Around... around all this?"

Her eyes moved, briefly, to the fitting curtains — to the private space that was controlled, not hidden.

Mara's gaze sharpened. "You mean around women."

Lauren didn't flinch. She didn't deny.

"Yes."

Mara leaned forward slightly. Not threatening. Just clear.

"This is a women's space," Mara said. "It stays that way because we keep it that way. He is not entitled to anything in this room. He's here because he is useful and respectful. If that changes, he is out. Immediately."

"He wouldn't do anything..."

"That's not the point," Mara said. "The point is that women in this space don't have to wonder, to worry."

Lauren's shoulders loosened by a fraction, like the sentence had relieved her of some burden she hadn't wanted to name. Mara sat back.

"Now," she said, brisk. "What do you actually want."

Lauren inhaled.

"I want you to tell me whether what Charles is doing here is... real!" She shook her head and placed a hand over her neck. "Not... a phase. This is not just my son hiding from school because it's hard. He's getting real training, for a real future."

Mara's eyes slid briefly to the prototype jacket again, then back.

"It's real," Mara said. "I make it real."

Lauren held her gaze.

"And where does Celeste fit into this," Lauren asked, and

my name entered the space like a small blade.

Mara didn't look at me when she answered.

"Celeste is the research," Mara said. "The direction. The brain that won't let the work get lazy."

Lauren's eyes came to me again.

"And you," Lauren said to me, voice still calm but now edged, "are you rescuing him?"

I finally looked up.

"No," I said. The word came out clean. "He's working. Mara's the one who decides whether he stays."

Mara's mouth twitched, almost approving. Lauren studied me for a beat, then nodded once, as if satisfied with the answer. She stood. She shifted her tote from shoulder to hand and drew out a folded bundle of fabric.

"This is his," she said, placing it on the table without ceremony. "He left it at home. I washed it. I pressed it. Whatever it is."

Mara unfolded it: a linen apron, neatly hemmed, ties reinforced. Mara's eyes flicked to Lauren.

"*You* sewed this."

"I fixed it."

Mara ran a finger along the stitching — precise, elegant, invisible.

"Good work," Mara said.

Lauren blinked again, surprised by the praise. Mara didn't offer more. She didn't need to. She folded the apron and put it aside with the other issued items, as if it had been accepted into the system. Lauren's gaze went to Charlie one more time. He still hadn't looked up. He was

counting eyelets like counting was a form of prayer. Lauren's expression shifted — not soft, exactly, but less braced.

"I'm disappointed," she said, louder now. Clearly Charlie should hear it. Not accusation. Truth. "I wanted you to finish."

Charlie paused. His fingers stopped. He didn't turn around.

"I know."

Lauren's throat moved. She swallowed it down. Mara spoke, crisp, to cut the emotion before it bloomed into something messy.

"Rossignol," she called. "Continue."

Charlie resumed immediately. Lauren exhaled. She looked at Mara again.

"When he's here," Lauren said with a nod, "he works."

"Correct."

Lauren picked up her keys.

"And if the school comes sniffing," Lauren added, and now there was a new steadiness to her voice — a mother's protectiveness with a professional edge. Mara's gaze hardened.

"They can sniff elsewhere."

Lauren's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. Something like relief. She turned to go, then paused at the door and looked back once more at Mara.

"I don't do pity," Lauren said, as if setting a boundary as well as a warning. "He won't survive that."

Mara's response was immediate.

"Neither do I," she said. "That's why he will."

Lauren left without flourish. The door clicked shut, and the room returned to its rhythm. Mara looked at me, pencil still behind her ear.

"Your friend."

"She's not my friend," I replied.

Mara's mouth twitched again.

"Good," she said. "Keep it clean."

Scene Seven is excellent — Lauren arrives with spine, Mara meets her with policy, and Celeste stays in the correct posture: not emotional host, not mediator, not "helper girl," but **operator**.

About "Charles" vs "Charlie"

That choice lands exactly the way you intended:

- "**Charles**" = Lauren's *jurisdictional name*. It frames him as her responsibility, her unfinished project, her son in the legal/structural sense.
- "**Charlie**" = Wardrobe's name for him as a *worker* (and as a person who has to earn his place).

So you've created a subtle but powerful split: **home identity vs earned identity**. That's good craft.

Why "Your friend." / "She's not my friend." feels like missing backstory

You're not actually missing backstory — what's missing is the *intended meaning* of the exchange being made explicit enough for the reader.

Right now, those last lines read like there's a private history between Celeste and Lauren ("something happened, they fell out, etc."), because:

- "Your friend." is *intimate shorthand*.
- Celeste's denial reads defensive, like she's rejecting a personal tie.

- Mara's "Keep it clean" hints at a boundary violation that hasn't been shown in-scene.

If that's what you wanted (latent prior friction), it works.

If you didn't want readers to assume hidden history, you just need to make it clear that **the denial is strategic, not emotional.**

Because in your story's logic, Celeste isn't saying "*I don't like her.*" She's saying:

"Don't label this as friendship, because friendship creates obligations and fuzziness, and fuzziness is where men wriggle through women's systems."

And Mara is agreeing.

This is actually a very strong thematic beat — it just needs one extra half-step so the reader understands it's about **boundaries and governance**, not interpersonal drama.

Two clean ways to fix the ending (pick one)

Option A: Make "friend" mean "softness," and have Celeste refuse softness

Minimal change; keep the structure.

Replace the last lines with:

Mara looked at me, pencil still behind her ear.

"Your friend."

"She's Charles's mother," I said. "That's not the same thing."

Mara's mouth twitched again.

"Good," she said. "Keep it clean."

This makes it unmissable: Celeste isn't denying connection out of pettiness — she's **refusing a role.**

Option B: Make Mara explicitly test Celeste's boundary literacy

This version turns it into a deliberate Mara "test," which fits her.

Mara looked at me, pencil still behind her ear.

"Your friend."

"No," I said. "A stakeholder."

Mara's mouth twitched again.
"Good," she said. "Keep it clean."

Short, surgical, and very on-brand.

Option C: Keep your exact lines, but add one clarifier sentence

If you love the rhythm exactly as written:

"Your friend."
"She's not my friend," I replied.

Not because I disliked her — because friendship made people sloppy.

Mara's mouth twitched again.
"Good," she said. "Keep it clean."

That one sentence stops the reader inventing unseen backstory.

One other small thing I'd tweak (optional but high-impact)

This is a tiny typo/word-choice issue:

"Hers voice stayed controlled..."

Should be "Her voice..."

And here:

"At that moment, Mara harshness irritated her."

Should be "Mara's harshness..."

Those are small, but they're the sort of tripwire that yanks a reader out of a strong scene.

Why Mara says "Your friend" in the first place (what it reveals about Mara)

Even with no backstory, that line is doing something delicious:

- Mara is clocking that Lauren and Celeste are both "Rossignol" in different ways — women who set terms.

- She's also testing whether Celeste will slide into **emotional identification** (friendship) or stay in **professional clarity** (roles, boundaries, power).

So when Celeste says "She's not my friend," the subtext isn't "I'm cold."

It's "I don't blur lines." Which is exactly the competence-network ethos you're building.

If you tell me which of the three ending options you prefer (A/B/C), I'll paste you a **fully copy-edited version of Scene Seven's last ~20 lines** with your exact style intact.



I quite like Option A. Thank you for explaining it to me.
And yes, please paste me a fully copy-edited version.
Thank you.

Absolutely — here's **Scene Seven**, fully copy-edited with **Option A** at the end, and with the small typos/grammar tightened while keeping your voice and cadence intact. (I've left your deliberate "**Charles**" usage untouched.)

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"But I also don't want him to be eaten alive."

Mara's eyes narrowed slightly, and her tone shifted — not softer, but more direct, as if Lauren had finally spoken in a language Mara respected.

"I don't run a sanctuary," Mara said. "When he is here, he works. He doesn't drift. He doesn't sulk. He doesn't disappear mid-task because he's overwhelmed."

Lauren's eyes flicked to Charlie again, then back. "He disappears when he's ashamed."

Mara nodded, as if filing that away like a measurement.

"Then he must learn not to be," Mara said coldly, "or he doesn't stay."

Lauren's lips parted slightly. For a moment, Mara's harshness irritated her. But she didn't reject it either. I could see the calculation: harshness, at least, was honest.

"And so you're quite... comfortable," Lauren said carefully, "having him here? Around... around all this?" Her eyes moved, briefly, to the fitting curtains — to the private space that was controlled, not hidden.

Mara's gaze sharpened. "You mean around women."

Lauren didn't flinch. She didn't deny.

"Yes."

Mara leaned forward slightly. Not threatening. Just clear.

"This is a women's space," Mara said. "It stays that way because we keep it that way. He is not entitled to anything in this room. He's here because he is useful and respectful. If

that changes, he is out. Immediately."

"He wouldn't do anything..."

"That's not the point," Mara said. "The point is that women in this space don't have to wonder, to worry."

Lauren's shoulders loosened by a fraction, like the sentence had relieved her of some burden she hadn't wanted to name. Mara sat back.

"Now," she said, brisk. "What do you actually want."

Lauren inhaled.

"I want you to tell me whether what Charles is doing here is... real!" She shook her head and placed a hand over her neck. "Not... a phase. This is not just my son hiding from school because it's hard. He's getting real training, for a real future."

Mara's eyes slid briefly to the prototype jacket again, then back.

"It's real," Mara said. "I make it real."

Lauren held her gaze.

"And where does Celeste fit into this," Lauren asked, and my name entered the space like a small blade.

Mara didn't look at me when she answered.

"Celeste is the research," Mara said. "The direction. The brain that won't let the work get lazy."

Lauren's eyes came to me again.

"And you," Lauren said to me, voice still calm but now edged, "are you rescuing him?"

I finally looked up.

"No," I said. The word came out clean. "He's working. Mara's the one who decides whether he stays."

Mara's mouth twitched, almost approving. Lauren studied me for a beat, then nodded once, as if satisfied with the answer.

She stood. She shifted her tote from shoulder to hand and drew out a folded bundle of fabric.

"This is his," she said, placing it on the table without ceremony. "He left it at home. I washed it. I pressed it. Whatever it is."

Mara unfolded it: a linen apron, neatly hemmed, ties reinforced. Mara's eyes flicked to Lauren.

"You sewed this."

"I fixed it."

Mara ran a finger along the stitching — precise, elegant, invisible.

"Good work," Mara said.

Lauren blinked again, surprised by the praise. Mara didn't offer more. She didn't need to. She folded the apron and put it aside with the other issued items, as if it had been accepted into the system.

Lauren's gaze went to Charlie one more time. He still hadn't looked up. He was counting eyelets like counting was a form of prayer. Lauren's expression shifted — not soft, exactly, but less braced.

"I'm disappointed," she said, louder now. Clearly Charlie should hear it. Not accusation. Truth. "I wanted you to finish."

Charlie paused. His fingers stopped. He didn't turn around.

"I know."

Lauren's throat moved. She swallowed it down. Mara spoke, crisp, to cut the emotion before it bloomed into something messy.

"Rossignol," she called. "Continue."

Charlie resumed immediately. Lauren exhaled. She looked at Mara again.

"When he's here," Lauren said with a nod, "he works."

"Correct."

Lauren picked up her keys.

"And if the school comes sniffing," Lauren added, and now there was a new steadiness to her voice — a mother's protectiveness with a professional edge.

Mara's gaze hardened.

"They can sniff elsewhere."

Lauren's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile. Something like relief. She turned to go, then paused at the door and looked back once more at Mara.

"I don't do pity," Lauren said, as if setting a boundary as well as a warning. "He won't survive that."

Mara's response was immediate.

"Neither do I," she said. "That's why he will."

Lauren left without flourish. The door clicked shut, and the room returned to its rhythm. Mara looked at me, pencil still behind her ear.

"Your friend."

"She's Charles' mother," I said. "That's not the same thing."

Mara's mouth twitched again.

"Good," she said. "Keep it clean."



Good morning, Emily. Please create a brief context summary of our discussion in this thread in order to create a new one.

Here's a concise context summary for starting a fresh thread.

Context summary

Technical thread (SRPO / LoRA face swap)

- You wanted an SRPO workflow that **keeps the base image intact** (dress, bust size, silhouette, scene) while **changing only the face** using your LoRA, ideally **without masking** because masking made your LoRA behave worse.
- The key goal was: **LoRA identity on face only, minimal collateral changes** (no bust growth, no dress redesign).
- We dialed in a working approach that succeeded: **face correct, dress preserved, bust preserved**. You noted that Z-Image tends to generate **small-busted women**, which helps your desired androgyny.
- You asked for “recipe/preset” style guidance so the result is repeatable (keep seed fixed while iterating; treat LoRA model strength as the “silhouette risk dial,” clip strength as “identity,” and denoise as the “freedom” lever).

Writing thread (Scenes 5–7, Wardrobe arc, POV emphasis)

- POV rule: **default Celeste**; occasional POV wideners only for other key women (Lauren/Mara), with rare quasi-omniscience that still feels “owned” by the women.
- **Scene 5 (2nd trial day in Wardrobe)** was refined and tightened: Mara tests Charlie with quiet competence checks (pins, shears, tape width, weight distribution), while Celeste observes with “data, not romance” framing. Celeste sets boundaries (“Keep it that way”) and refuses gratitude-as-dependence. Charlie confesses he wants to “wag” school; Celeste shuts it down with governance (“I’m not here to be fair. I’m here to be accurate.”).
- **Scene 6 (Charlie leaves school)**: Wardrobe becomes a studio (money approved, time not). Celeste receives a text from Leah about Charlie walking out after humiliation in class. Celeste **doesn’t chase** (dignity + structure). Charlie arrives calm and resolved; Mara treats it as management, not counselling: self-respect acknowledged but “not a plan.” Mara sets conditions (reinforce jacket, inventory closures). Celeste supports by placing the clipboard—**not rescue, work and responsibility**. You requested both **ASCII-safe** and **typeset** versions for publishing (ASCII used — and straight quotes; typeset used em dashes and curly punctuation).
- **Scene 7 (Lauren meets Mara)**: Lauren arrives calm, consequential; deliberately calls him **“Charles”** to signal maternal/structural framing while the room uses **“Charlie”** as worker identity. Mara asserts women’s-space boundaries and standards. Lauren wants to know if this is “real”; Mara: “I make it real.” Lauren asks if Celeste is “rescuing”; Celeste: no, Mara decides. Ending confusion: “Your friend.” / Celeste denies—resolved as **boundary/governance**, not hidden backstory. We chose **Option A** ending: Celeste clarifies “She’s Charles’ mother. That’s not the

same thing." Mara: "Good. Keep it clean." I delivered a fully copy-edited Scene 7 with that ending.

Style / publishing notes

- You prefer clean, cinematic prose with strong women steering outcomes through systems, standards, and boundaries.
- You asked for publish-ready formatting because your editor makes em dashes/curly punctuation annoying; I provided both formats so you can paste easily.

If you start the new thread with "Scene 8 next" (or whatever number you're using), I'll carry these constraints and the Wardrobe-system tone forward.

