

## Context summary — Wardrobe scaling, Sharl's "wife-work," and the 1770s visual direction

### ### Where the story is now

- \* We're in \*\*early-to-mid Act II\*\*: Wardrobe has proven viability, shipped a demanding \*\*200-unit wholesale order\*\*, and survived — but the cost (fatigue, overtime, lost study hours, safety risk) makes it clear the operation must \*\*scale sustainably\*\* or risk becoming exploitative.
- \* Core ethos remains: \*\*women-led competence network\*\*, governance by \*\*systems + written terms\*\*, no romance fog, no fetish optics. Work is moral, daylight-proof, and \*visible\*.

### ### Character dynamics and emotional hinge

- \* \*\*Celeste\*\* has moved from "aloof curiosity" into \*\*open stake\*\*: she admits to Sharl that she doesn't just like him — it's \*more\*, though she's not ready to name the final word. She keeps it clean: no coercion, no entitlement, no "tests," just clarity and boundaries.
- \* \*\*Sharl\*\* continues to embody "wife-work" (support infrastructure, quiet competence, logging rather than performing). His provider reflex still flickers, but he now \*\*logs it\*\* rather than acting it out.
- \* \*\*Sarah\*\* remains a beloved "loose cannon": piquant, funny, sharp, but \*\*not romantic\*\* toward Sharl. She adds flavour and pressure-tests culture without becoming the plot.
- \* \*\*Tilly\*\* becomes the new "interest vector": she misreads Celeste's restraint as Sharl's availability. Her mild, deniable attention triggers \*\*Celeste's jealousy\*\* (not possessive ownership — a provider's fear of ambiguity and drift). Tilly is status-conscious and easily corrected; she won't jeopardize her role.

### ### Key scene(s) created in this block

- \* \*\*\*"Two Inches Too Close" (Celeste POV):\*\*

Tilly drifts into deniable intimacy while Sharl is wear-testing a revised chemise. Celeste corrects culture cleanly ("Sharl isn't a focus group; he's QA"), then privately tells Sharl she's not indifferent — she's been restrained to avoid entitlement, but restraint reads as indifference to others. She admits it's \*\*more than liking\*\*, and insists he doesn't have to "provide" to be worthy of her. Ends with: \*keep it clean, then back to work.\*

### ### Patriarchy theme integration

- \* We explicitly avoid the "cheap" move where Sharl experiences women erasing his accomplishments. Instead, Wardrobe's women \*\*credit talent properly\*\* — they name labour and refuse nullification.
- \* A proposed thematic mirror to *\*Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu\**: \*\*girls' night in\*\* where Celeste, Lauren, Camille (French friend), and Sharl watch the film. Discussion of \*\*Orpheus\*\* as entitlement/possession disguised as devotion; Sharl reacts with justice-oriented disgust at patriarchal norms. Celeste and Lauren note parallels to Sharl's reluctance to claim credit, and Celeste resolves to make his authorship visible in ethical, non-theatrical ways (e.g., his name on the chemise/product page).

### ### Operations / scaling direction

- \* Post-200 order "post-mortem" beat: Celeste and Mara treat the shipment as a success \*\*and\*\* a warning. Decision: upscale with roles, not heroics:

- \* add \*\*production stitchers\*\*
- \* a \*\*finishing specialist\*\*
- \* expanded \*\*fulfilment/packing\*\*
- \* capacity rules: price/lead time staged, no martyr-maths, no invisible labour
- \* protect Celeste's \*\*education hours\*\* as non-negotiable.

### ### Visual / image generation direction (1770s)

- \* We refined prompts toward \*\*1770s\*\* authenticity and away from "storybook / folk / Victorian maid" drift.
- \* Strong "era magnets" used: \*\*robe à l'anglaise, back pleats, stomacher, fichu, apron, petticoat\*\*, documentary realism.
- \* Observed issue: AI tends to produce "button-front bodice dress" and high-neck severity, reading as \*\*puritan/colonial\*\*.
- \* Fixes recommended:
  - \* emphasize \*\*open front edges with robings + clearly visible pinned stomacher\*\*
  - \* avoid \*\*visible buttons/lacing\*\*
  - \* soften styling: \*\*mob cap\*\* often reads less severe than kerchief
  - \* add negatives: \*\*no button placket, no lace-up bodice, not Victorian, not colonial/puritan, no high neck\*\*.
  - \* Current generated images show strong progress: the second image reads more 18th-century due to square neckline + shift ruffle; next step is forcing the closure to stop drifting into buttoned bodice.

### ### Possible future format shift

- \* Because the work has been built scene-by-scene with clear beats, we noted the project could be \*\*adapted into a screenplay\*\* later without major structural pain: each scene already has a purpose, conflict, and turn.

In addition to the Context Summary (your writing is excellent as always) I'd like to add a little psyche exposure (Celeste's) here. You might recall all of our previous forays into this story - which sort-of were left underexplored by \*me\* - had Celeste discover what she found the most appealing about , well, Sharl, now... was his well-hidden and, to some degree, feminine side. Circustances have now placed him in situations that whilst completely protective and from a salacious perspective a complete fail (by design), it would be quite fascinating to see how we coulf shape the story to where Celeste \*realises\* that what she first saw in the restroom and what had sort-of made her feel safe was that Sharl

was her 'girl' (in her head, at least then, embryonically so). As she sees him fulfilling the wife-work end and his senses find it less affronting and he even unconsciously embraces the role, her feelings blossom: she realises she had stumbled upon a gem that she didn't even realise she needed. And here is where it manifests... not in words. She brushes his long hair. Are we good with this direction, Emily?

Thought for 15s >

Yes. Very good direction — and, more importantly, it's a *clean* way to let the truth surface without you (or Celeste) having to "declare" anything too early.

Hair-brushing is almost unfairly useful here, because it carries three meanings at once, all of them daylight-proof:

1. **Aftercare / caretaking** (non-sexual, practical intimacy)
2. **Claiming-by-competence** (a woman does a quiet, competent act that subtly redefines the relationship)
3. **A private recognition** (Celeste finally admits to herself what she clocked in the restroom: not "a boy in the wrong place," but *someone she felt safe with* — because there was a girl-shaped steadiness in him she could sense, even before she could explain it)

And because Wardrobe is systems-led and ethics-forward, you can stage it so it never reads as coercion, fetish, or "test." It reads as: **I saw you. I'm not sloppy with people. I'm choosing you.**

## How to make the "my girl" realisation land without saying it

You want the thought to arrive the way real thoughts arrive: sideways.

Celeste doesn't think, *He is my girl*. That's too slogan-y. She thinks things like:

- *This isn't flirting. This is... sorting. Putting something back in order.*
- *He lets me.* (and then the follow-up: *He doesn't let everyone.*)
- *He goes still the way girls go still when someone's finally gentle with them.*
- *I trust him in a way I don't trust boys. That's it. That's the difference.*

Let her be almost irritated by the clarity of it — because it means she has to behave accordingly. Celeste doesn't get to pretend neutrality anymore.

## The scene that fits your current block perfectly

Set it **after** a wear-test (chemise, shift, whatever), when Sharl's hair is a *problem* in the purely logistical sense: sweat, tangles, pins, friction at the nape from costume pieces. Something that would tempt a lesser story into "ooh intimate," but yours stays in the lane of **work + care**.

**Beat sequence (Celeste POV):**

### 1. Context anchored in competence:

Mara's notes, returns pile, production chatter outside the room — this is Wardrobe, not a boudoir.

### 2. Sharl's small fracture:

He tries to deal with his hair alone. It's awkward. He gets it half-right. He's quietly annoyed with himself.

### 3. Celeste's decision arrives as an order:

Not romantic. Not coy. A calm, firm instruction, because that's her authority style.

- "Sit."
- "You can't do that properly with your shoulders tense like that."
- "Stop fighting it. Let me."

### 4. Consent, cleanly done:

He hesitates. She doesn't pounce. She simply holds the brush out like a tool, not a proposition.

- "Yes or no, Sharl. I'm not guessing."

He nods. Or: "If you want."

And she corrects *that*, too:

- "Not 'if I want.' If *you* want."

### 5. The brushing itself becomes the realisation engine:

The first strokes are purely functional. Then she notices his whole nervous system *downshifts*. Not arousal — relief. The kind of relief Celeste recognises from girls around other girls: *being handled without being evaluated*.

### 6. Her internal hinge:

This is where the restroom memory recontextualises. She remembers feeling safe *immediately* — not because he was harmless, but because he wasn't performing maleness at her.

## 7. A small, decisive line that “claims” without theatrics:

Not “mine.” Something cleaner, sharper, more Celeste.

- “You don’t have to earn care here.”

or

- “I’m not indifferent. I’m disciplined.”

or, my favourite:

- “I’m not letting the room misread you.”

## 8. Exit back into daylight:

She ties his hair off, checks the nape like a tailor checks a seam, and stands back like she’s finished a job.

- “There. Now you can move.”

And then:

- “Back to work.”

That last beat is crucial. It tells the reader: *this is intimate, but it isn’t indulgent.*

## Why this works for Celeste psychologically (and keeps her strong)

Celeste’s attraction isn’t “oooh femininity” in a gawky way. It’s more specific — and more flattering to her intelligence:

- She’s attracted to **a kind of compliance that isn’t servility**: he takes instruction well, logs well, improves well. That’s competence-compatible.
- She’s soothed by **his lack of male entitlement**: no demand for credit as ego, no sexualisation of proximity, no opportunism.
- She realises what she wants is not “a boyfriend” as a social accessory — it’s a **partner whose nervous system fits inside her world**.

So the “my girl” thought is really: *He belongs in the circle. He moves like someone who understands women, even when he doesn’t understand himself yet.*

And that can be *hers* to recognise first — because Celeste has the perception, and she’s earned the authority.

## Optional pressure-cooker: use Tilly as the catalyst without making it petty

If you want this to feel inevitable rather than sudden: have Celeste walk in on Tilly doing a too-friendly hair comment (“Your hair is gorgeous, Sharl,” that kind of deniable nonsense), and Celeste’s correction is polite but final:

- “We don’t comment on the tester’s body. We comment on the garment.”

Then later, privately, Celeste does the brushing — not to “compete,” but to **reassert culture: care is not a lure here; it’s a responsibility**.

That makes Celeste's jealousy read as *leadership fear of drift*, exactly as you framed it.

If you want, I can write this as a full scene draft in Celeste POV (tight, sensorial, non-salacious, with the "restroom safety" memory threading through it). But direction-wise: yes — you're steering into something emotionally potent **and** thematically consistent with everything you've built.



Beautiful. Sensitive. Ideal. Just the right tone. Please do, and thank you, Emily!

Celeste didn't think of it as intimacy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was wear-testing again. Not because anyone had "asked"—because the revised chemise needed a second run, and because he'd logged the first run without theatrics, and because he never lied about what pulled or rode up or chafed.

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

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

What was getting him, now, was his hair.

He'd grown it out for the 1770s work—at first as a practical concession to period silhouette, then because it stopped being a novelty and became just... his. It was long enough to catch in things. Long enough to hold sweat and pins. Long enough to make him look, at a glance, like someone who belonged on the far side of the room in the fitting mirror with the girls, not in the doorway holding a box cutter.

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

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

She didn't turn right away. She watched, in peripheral vision, as he did the thing he always did when he hit a minor limit: he tightened. Not dramatically. Just enough that his shoulders rose a fraction and his breath became shallow and contained.

He was trying to muscle his way through a problem that did not respond to force.

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

Then she turned.

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

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

He made an annoyed sound under his breath. Not a curse. He was careful even when he was frustrated, as if language could injure a room.

Celeste crossed to him and stopped just outside his space.

"Sit," she said.

Sharl blinked. "I'm fine."

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

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

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

His mouth twitched, almost a smile, then vanished. He looked down at the brush like it had betrayed him.

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

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

He hesitated.

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

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

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

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

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

His throat moved.

"Yes," he said.

And then, because he couldn't help himself, he added softly, "If you want."

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

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

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

"I want," he said.

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

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

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

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

That, more than anything, made her still.

Not arousal. Not embarrassment. Relief.

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

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

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

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

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

He simply... allowed it.

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

The restroom flash came uninvited, sharp as a photograph.

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

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

She knew better now.

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

This wasn't performance.

This was... alignment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not because Celeste hadn't cared.

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

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

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

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

Sharl blinked, startled by words that didn't match any question he'd asked.

"I—what?"

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

His mouth opened, then shut. He looked down at his hands.

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

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

His fingers tightened together.

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

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

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

Sharl's head dipped, the smallest movement.

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

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

Silence.

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

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

Sharl's breath caught. He didn't turn. He didn't ask for more. He simply listened, as if he didn't trust his own right to.

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

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

"That was the rule. But the reason I felt it so sharply is... I'm not neutral."

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

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

Then she stepped away.

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

Sharl turned his head slightly, enough that she could see the corner of his eye. His expression wasn't triumphant. It was stunned. Like someone who'd been told, for the first time, that the thing he'd been hiding wasn't a liability.

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

"Are we clear?" she asked.

Sharl swallowed. "Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His eyes flicked to hers, startled again.

Celeste's gaze held, steady.

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

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

"Okay," he said.

Celeste let herself exhale.

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

And it wasn't a dismissal.

It was a promise.



Enter Lauren. Without it being cliché, she knows her son enough to realise that his best chance at success in life was to do what came naturally to him: infrastructure. Wife. And she also realises that Celeste would be an ideal person for him. And, she also knows that Celeste has a 'thing' for him. And she also realises Celeste has high standards in terms of appearances. SO! This next bit SHOULD be in Lauren's POV, and can be verbose if you'd

like - I think it would need to be, to be honest. She needs to impress upon him the fact that he needs to stop being such a 'careless lad' about his appearance. Without realising it, she gives him grooming tips the mums generally give tomboyish daughters. We, of course, cannot go into feminisation language, but also - MOST DEFINITELY NOT - into the k-pop grooming for guys thing either. Lauren needs to come up with a reason - she saw Celeste comb his hair - and tell him his chances at securing something meaningful with Celeste would be massively improved with simple things like moisturising, good oral hygiene, not just daily showers but also deoderant, simple things. We starting at a stage where Sharl has had his hopes rekindled but not as provider: he's pretty much abandoned that. So, he's in a mindset where mum's words land positively, supportively.

Actionable.

Lauren noticed the hair first.

Not because it was *long*—she'd made her peace, long ago, with the fact that her son contained multitudes and that some of them refused to be marched into neat little masculinity. Not because it was *tied*—that, if anything, was an improvement.

She noticed it because it was tied the way you tied something when you had hands that knew what they were doing. Secure. Balanced. No fussy bow. Nothing performative. The knot sat clean at the nape, exactly where it wouldn't rub, exactly where it wouldn't pull.

Lauren had done that knot on a thousand mornings for a child who'd never asked for it, and had secretly loved her for doing it anyway.

Her gaze slid down and took in the rest with the clinical affection of a mother who had learned to look without flinching at truth.

Sharl's shirt was ironed—someone else's iron, she suspected, because the sleeves sat too neatly for him to have done it with his usual "good enough" impatience. His jeans were clean. His shoes were... acceptable. His hands, when he lifted them to take a roll of tape from the bench, were scrubbed in the way you scrub when you've been made accountable to a standard.

He looked better.

Not pretty. Not polished. Just *better*.

And the thing that hit Lauren hardest was that he looked better in the quiet way a person looks better when someone has finally expected something of them and meant it.

It wasn't effort for attention.

It was effort for belonging.

She watched him for a minute without interrupting—watched the way he moved through the room like a support beam that had learned to stop apologising for holding up the ceiling. He was checking a hem, logging a note, sliding a finished piece into a labelled tote with care that wasn't sentimental. No flourish. No "look at me."

Infrastructure. Always infrastructure.

Lauren had spent years trying to explain to well-meaning teachers and smug relatives that her son wasn't lazy. He wasn't defiant. He just didn't do "performance." He did *systems*. He did the boring work that made other people's shining possible.

The world loved the shining and treated the boring as if it were optional.

Wardrobe, for all its strangeness, looked like it had finally given him the one thing he'd never had: a place where boring was sacred.

She turned and found Celeste at the cutting table, head bent over paper, pencil in hand. The girl's posture was all decision. All control. Not harsh, not cruel—simply uninterested in chaos. Celeste looked up at Lauren as if she'd already clocked her presence and had been allowing the room to keep moving while she waited to engage.

That alone made Lauren like her more.

No social scrambling. No insecurity acting as politeness. Just—*present*.

Lauren's eyes flicked, almost without permission, to Sharl's hair again and then back to Celeste's face.

Ah.

So that was it.

Lauren didn't *smile* at the thought. She kept her expression neutral, the way you did when you'd discovered a key piece of information and didn't want the room to see you pocket it.

But internally: **good**.

Not because she wanted her son "matched up" like a doll. Not because she wanted romance as a distraction prize.

Because Lauren had seen what happened to boys like Sharl when no one claimed their goodness properly. They drifted. They got hired for their hands and ignored for their minds. They got taken for granted by louder people. They ended up with women who wanted a doormat or men who wanted a servant.

Celeste didn't want a doormat.

Celeste wanted competence.

And Celeste, Lauren could see even from here, had a very specific way of looking at Sharl—an attention that wasn't hungry, wasn't mocking, wasn't "*isn't this fascinating?*"

It was recognitional.

Lauren's throat tightened, unexpectedly.

She waited until the rush of the room eased—the girls moving to another station, Mara disappearing into the back with a ledger and that expression that said *no one is going to die on my watch, but some of you may suffer*.

Then Lauren drifted toward her son.

She didn't call his name from across the room. That was for people who needed to be noticed.

She walked up beside him and spoke in a voice only he would hear.

"Hi," she said.

Sharl startled, because he always startled when affection arrived quietly. He turned, and his face did that immediate shift—from composed worker to boy, for half a second—and then he steadied.

"Mum," he said, warmth and caution braided together. "You didn't say you were coming."

"I didn't know I was," Lauren replied. "I had a minute. I used it."

He nodded, as if that logic made sense in his world. "Okay."

Lauren looked at the garment in his hands, then at the notes clipped to it. She didn't pretend she understood the technicalities. She understood the posture of someone who mattered.

"You look... more like yourself," she said.

Sharl blinked. "Do I?"

"Yes," she said simply. "More solid."

He didn't know what to do with that. Praise made him awkward. He'd been trained by life to suspect compliments were an entry fee, that you'd have to pay them back with performance.

Lauren let the moment sit. Then she tipped her chin toward the tie at his nape.

"Your hair," she said.

Sharl lifted a hand toward it, reflexive. "Oh. Yeah. It was... getting in the way."

Lauren kept her tone light. "I can see that."

He hesitated. "Celeste—" he started, and then stopped, as if saying her name out loud might be too revealing.

Lauren waited. She didn't pounce. She didn't tease. She'd learned that jokes were knives when your child was sensitive.

"She... helped," he finished, quietly.

Lauren nodded once, as if that was merely a practical detail. Internally, she filed it under **confirmed**.

"That was kind," Lauren said aloud.

Sharl's eyes flicked toward Celeste without him meaning them to. He looked away again quickly, embarrassed by his own reflexes.

Lauren watched that tiny movement with a tenderness that made her want to put her hand on his cheek, but she didn't. He was eighteen, and touch wasn't something you

demanded from a young person who'd spent his whole life trying not to be "too much."

Instead, she leaned her hip against the edge of the bench, casual.

"I'm going to say something," she began, "and I need you not to hear it as criticism."

Sharl stiffened slightly. "Okay."

Lauren exhaled through her nose. How to do this without sounding like she was suddenly trying to remodel him.

How to do this the way you spoke to a daughter who was clever and capable and utterly uninterested in her own presentation—except presentation *mattered* when your life depended on being taken seriously.

Lauren looked at his hands again. Clean, but dry at the knuckles. She looked at his mouth. Fine, but... boys never realised how much first impressions lived there. She looked at his shirt collar. A little rumpled at the edge.

A thousand small, fixable things. Not to make him "better." To make him seen correctly.

"Sharl," she said, quietly. "You have stopped trying to impress people by doing grand gestures. I'm proud of you for that."

He frowned slightly, unsure. "I didn't—"

"I know," Lauren said. "Listen."

He fell silent.

"You do the work," Lauren continued. "You do the infrastructure. You make other people's lives easier in ways you don't even think to mention. That is your gift."

Sharl's gaze dropped. He didn't deny it, but he didn't claim it either. Claiming still felt like arrogance to him.

Lauren tilted her head, the way she did when she needed him to stay with her.

"But," she added, carefully, "there's a difference between being modest and being careless. And you... have a habit of letting 'I don't care' be mistaken for 'I don't respect myself.'"

Sharl's eyes lifted, startled. "I do respect—"

"I know you do," Lauren cut in, gently but firmly. "You respect other people beautifully. I'm talking about what you signal to the world. You signal 'don't look too closely at me.' And sometimes that's a shield. But sometimes it becomes a habit."

He swallowed. The words landed. Not as an attack. As a diagnosis.

Lauren softened her voice.

"You're in a room now with women who notice details," she said. "Not in a cruel way. In a competent way. They notice because it keeps people safe. Because it makes things work."

Sharl glanced around the studio—at the pinned patterns, the neat shelves, the labelled drawers.

"Yes," he murmured.

Lauren nodded. "One of those women... notices you."

Sharl went very still.

"Mum," he whispered, as if the air itself had ears.

Lauren kept her eyes on his, steady and unembarrassed.

"I'm not prying," she said. "I'm telling you something you need to hear."

His throat bobbed. "Okay."

Lauren let a small pause settle, then continued in the most practical tone she could manage, because practicality made this safe for him.

"If you want something meaningful with a woman who has standards," Lauren said, "you don't have to become someone else. You don't have to buy fancy things. You don't have to play a role."

Sharl's shoulders eased a fraction, grateful.

"But you do need to meet her world halfway," Lauren added. "Not with money. With care."

He blinked. "Care?"

Lauren nodded. "Basic care. The stuff you're good at giving other people. You need to give it to yourself."

Sharl looked down, as if picturing himself as a checklist. He liked checklists. They made the universe manageable.

Lauren continued, gentle but unyielding:

"Daily shower, yes. But also deodorant. Every day. Not when you remember."

Sharl's cheeks coloured faintly. "I do."

Lauren lifted a brow. "You do sometimes. I mean every day. Like you brush your teeth."

He held her gaze, chastened. "Okay."

Lauren didn't gloat. She moved on.

"Moisturiser," she said.

Sharl blinked. "What?"

Lauren kept her tone matter-of-fact, as if she'd said "pay the power bill."

"Your hands are dry," she said. "Your face, too. Dry skin reads as stress and neglect. A simple moisturiser after your shower. That's it. Not expensive. Not scented. Just... care."

He stared at her, processing. "Does that... matter?"

Lauren almost laughed, but she didn't. She chose honesty.

"It matters to women who live in their bodies," she said. "Women notice whether you treat your own body like a tool you throw in a drawer, or like something you maintain."

Sharl's eyes flickered with discomfort—then curiosity. Practical curiosity. The kind that made him learn.

Lauren nodded, encouraged.

"Oral hygiene," she said next.

Sharl opened his mouth, offended. "I brush—"

"Twice a day," Lauren said. "And floss. I am not negotiating with you on this."

His shoulders slumped. "Floss is annoying."

Lauren's voice turned dry. "So is dental work."

Sharl exhaled, half a laugh. "Okay."

Lauren wasn't finished.

"Clean clothes," she said, ticking points off on invisible fingers. "Not just 'not dirty.' Clean. And if something's wrinkled, you sort it. You don't shrug and hope the world won't notice."

He looked down at his shirt. "It's fine."

Lauren's expression softened, but her eyes stayed sharp.

"Sharl," she said, "you are not a scruffy boy anymore. You are a young adult in a professional environment. And if you are standing near a woman like Celeste—"

He flinched at her saying the name so plainly.

Lauren continued anyway.

"—then the simplest thing you can do, to show you're serious, is to look like you respect her standards."

Sharl's mouth worked, then he nodded slowly.

Lauren watched him and felt that familiar ache: her son didn't crave attention, but he craved *permission*—permission to believe he could be wanted without proving his worth through suffering.

Lauren softened again.

"This isn't about 'getting' her," she said quietly. "I don't like that language. This is about making it easier for her to choose you openly, without having to justify it to herself."

Sharl went silent.

Lauren leaned in slightly, voice lower.

"And I saw something today," she added, carefully. "I saw her tie your hair."

Sharl's eyes widened. "You saw that?"

Lauren nodded once. "I did."

His cheeks warmed again, but there was a brightness under it now—hope that didn't look like desperation. Hope that looked like a door opening.

Lauren held that hope gently, like a fragile instrument.

"She didn't do that for nothing," Lauren said. "Women like Celeste don't do casual care."

Sharl's breath caught. He looked toward Celeste again without meaning to, then back to his mother.

Lauren's voice gentled into something almost like a lullaby, except it wasn't soft. It was firm, loving, and practical.

"So," she said, "if you want to honour what she offered—if you want to step into that space with integrity—then you meet her with the basics."

Sharl nodded again, slower. "Okay."

Lauren tilted her head. "Do you want a list?"

He blinked, then something in him relaxed, because a list meant he could succeed.

"Yes," he said. "Please."

Lauren smiled then—small, satisfied.

"Right," she said. "Here's your boring little maintenance plan."

She ticked them off, one by one, as if she were training him for a sport.

"Morning: brush teeth, deodorant, clean shirt. Evening: brush teeth again. Floss. Shower. Moisturiser after."

He stared at her. "That's... a lot."

Lauren snorted softly. "It's not a lot. It's the minimum. You've simply been living like the minimum is optional."

He looked sheepish. "Okay."

"And hair," Lauren added, glancing at the neat tie again. "You don't need anything fancy. But you keep it tidy. You learn two ways to tie it so it doesn't look like you wrestled a windstorm and lost."

Sharl's mouth twitched.

Lauren's eyes softened.

"You're allowed to look cared for," she said. "You're allowed to look like you belong near someone with standards."

Sharl swallowed hard. "Mum..."

Lauren held his gaze, steady.

"I know you," she said. "And I know you're at your best when you're building something that lasts."

His eyes flicked down, then back up. "I want... something that lasts."

Lauren's chest tightened. She nodded, once.

"Then stop treating yourself like you're temporary," she said.

Sharl went still.

For a moment, he looked younger—like a boy hearing, for the first time, that self-care wasn't vanity. That it was a kind of respect.

Then he breathed out.

"Okay," he said, quietly. "I can do that."

Lauren smiled again, the kind of smile that was both pride and warning.

"Good," she said. "Because if you turn up to a woman like Celeste with your heart in your hands and toothpaste on your collar..."

He let out a small sound of horror. "I don't—"

Lauren raised her brows. "You do."

He covered his face with one hand, mortified. "Oh my god."

Lauren patted his arm once—brief, affectionate, permission-giving.

"Fixable," she said.

Sharl lowered his hand, still red-faced, but smiling now too, properly this time.

"Fixable," he echoed.

Lauren straightened, scanning the room again. Celeste was still working, still composed, still making the world make sense.

Lauren felt a surge of something fierce and grateful.

Yes.

This girl would not swallow her son and call it love.

This girl would expect him to grow.

Lauren glanced back at Sharl.

"And one more thing," she added.

He looked at her, attentive.

Lauren's voice turned very calm.

"If you are hoping," she said, "you do not sabotage yourself by pretending you don't."

Sharl swallowed. "Okay."

Lauren nodded once, satisfied.

"Good boy," she said, and meant it not as infantilisation but as acknowledgement: *you're doing the right thing*.

Sharl's eyes softened. He nodded.

Lauren pushed off the bench, collected her tote, and turned as if she were about to leave—because that was also part of how you raised someone like Sharl. You gave them the tools, then you trusted them to use them.

At the last second, she paused and glanced back at him.

"And Sharl?" she said.

He looked up.

Lauren's mouth curved, faintly.

"Ask Celeste what moisturiser she uses," she said. "Not because you need her to mother you. Because it tells her you heard the standards."

Sharl blinked, then let out a breathy laugh, incredulous.

"That's... cheeky."

Lauren's eyes warmed. "It's practical."

He nodded slowly, like he was already picturing the conversation and realising it wasn't terrifying; it was simply another system to learn.

Lauren turned away then, and as she walked past Celeste, she didn't stop. She didn't interfere.

She only met the girl's eyes briefly and gave her the smallest nod—a quiet mother-to-woman acknowledgement that said:

*I see you. I see what you're building. And I approve of standards.*

Then she left the room as quietly as she'd arrived, letting the machine continue its cycle—only now, with one more bolt tightened into place.



Oh, that was SO Brilliant, Emily. I so hate to ask it, but would you be willing to do almost exactly the same but in Lauren's POV, please?

Of course. And you're right to ask — what I gave you was essentially Lauren-driven already, but it still carried a slightly "camera outside her head" feel in places. Here's the same beat, but **locked in Lauren's POV**—her cadence, her instincts, her restraint, her motherly ferocity, and that particular tenderness she has for a son who keeps trying to disappear behind usefulness.

---

I noticed the hair first.

Not the length. That wasn't the point anymore. The length had stopped being an "issue" in my mind the day I realised half the world's so-called rules were just men issuing instructions to boys and pretending it was civilisation. Hair was hair. What mattered was *signal*.

And today the signal was: **someone competent had put their hands on him.**

It was tied cleanly at the nape. Not a sloppy elastic halfway down like he'd done in the mirror at home on the rare mornings he'd tried. Not the panicked, twisted bundle he'd do when he was in a hurry and trying to pretend he wasn't.

This was... secure. Balanced. Where it wouldn't pull when he moved, where it wouldn't catch on fabric, where it wouldn't advertise itself.

The knot was the kind you made when you weren't trying to be decorative.

The kind you made when you were trying to keep someone *working*.

I stood just inside Wardrobe's doorway for a moment longer than I needed to. I let my eyes do what they'd always done—take inventory without drama. The room ran on labels and procedures and brisk female voices that didn't ask permission to be heard. Shelves. Bins. Clipboards. Patterns pinned like maps. A ledger on a table with the weight of law.

The space had standards. Not the sort you announced. The sort you lived.

And there was my son—Sharl—moving through it like he'd finally found the job he'd always been built for.

He didn't sparkle. He didn't "perform." He didn't flirt with attention or try to win people over with charm. He did what he'd always done since he was small: he found the weak point and reinforced it. He made the structure hold.

Infrastructure.

That was his nature. The part of him teachers used to call "quiet" as if quiet meant empty. The part of him relatives called "unambitious" because they only recognised ambition when it shouted.

He was holding a garment—linen, pale, precise—and he was reading notes like they were scripture. His hands were clean. His nails clipped. Not perfect, but... *Maintained*. That alone nearly made me swallow hard, because I knew how little he used to think he deserved maintenance.

I watched him for a minute.

He lifted his arms, turned his shoulders, did a slow reach as if he were testing a hinge. The garment moved. He frowned, made a note. He was calm, intent, contained. No bravado. No sulking. No show. Just honest work.

Then he tried to fix his hair with one hand.

I saw the moment it caught. The wince he tried to hide. The little tightening at his shoulders that always came when a simple task refused to cooperate.

He reached for a brush. He gave it one determined stroke—the way he attacked anything he felt he *should* be able to manage alone—and the brush snagged. His whole body flinched.

I almost stepped forward on pure reflex. I'd spent years watching him get tangled in things he could've asked for help with, and punishing himself for needing it.

But before I moved, Celeste did.

I didn't even hear her approach. She just appeared at his back the way girls do when they're confident in a room: no apology, no hesitation, no asking the air if it's okay for them to exist.

"Sit," she said.

Not mean. Not coy. Just... a decision.

He said something—*I'm fine* or *I can do it*—I couldn't quite hear it, but I saw the shape of it on his mouth. That old reflex of his: resist care because care feels like debt.

Celeste didn't argue. She held out her hand like she was asking for a tool.

He hesitated. Then he gave her the brush.

And then he sat.

I stayed where I was, still half in the doorway, because I wasn't there to intrude. I was there to see. To understand what was happening to him. To assess whether this place was good for him or merely hungry for his labour in prettier packaging.

Celeste gathered his hair the way a tailor gathers fabric. Efficient, careful, not tugging. She started at the ends and worked up. Proper technique. No yanking. No punishment.

And my son—my stubborn, self-effacing, "I don't need anyone" son—went still.

Not tense-still. Not frightened-still.

Relieved-still.

The sight hit me with such a sharp tenderness I had to blink.

Because I knew that stillness. I'd seen it in tomboy daughters who pretended they didn't care until a woman brushed their hair without judgement and suddenly they didn't have to fight the world for five minutes. I'd seen it in girls who hated being "looked at" but didn't hate being *cared for*.

Sharl wasn't a girl. That wasn't what my mind was doing.

My mind was doing something simpler, older, truer:

**My child trusts her.**

And that was not nothing.

When Celeste finished, she tied it off neatly. One tug to check it would hold. Done.

He stood. He moved. The tie stayed.

Celeste went right back to her paperwork as if she'd merely adjusted a strap on a toolbelt.

It was the opposite of flirtation.

It was *claiming-by-standard*.

It made my throat tighten because I saw it instantly: Celeste had a "thing" for him, yes—but not in a messy, teenage way. In the way a capable young woman has a thing for someone she's decided is *hers to protect* inside the rules of her world.

I waited until the room moved again—until the moment was over and everyone returned to their stations—then I walked in properly, quietly. No announcing myself. No calling his name like I needed the room to witness mother-love. He hated that.

I came up beside him at the bench and let my voice drop to the private tone I used when he was little and the world was too loud.

"Hi," I said.

He startled the way he always did when affection arrived softly. Then he found his footing.

"Mum," he said, warm but cautious. "You didn't say you were coming."

"I had a minute," I told him. "I used it."

That made sense to him. He nodded, as if I'd said I'd tightened a bolt.

I looked at the garment in his hands. Then at the notes. Then at him.

The truth was: he looked better than he used to.

Not because he'd "made an effort." Because someone had taught him that effort wasn't vanity—it was respect.

His shirt was clean. His skin wasn't greyed-out from neglect. His hair wasn't a battlefield.

Small things. Huge difference.

I didn't want to spook him with praise. Praise made him suspicious. He'd learned—too young—that compliments often came with a hook.

So I kept it plain.

"You look more... solid," I said.

He blinked. "Do I?"

"Yes," I said. "More like yourself."

He didn't know what to do with that. His eyes dropped. Then he reached for the brush again, as if he needed something to *do* with his hands.

I let a beat pass.

Then I said the thing that had brought me over to him in the first place.

"I'm going to say something," I began, "and I need you not to hear it as me having a go at you."

His shoulders rose a fraction. Automatic. The old brace-for-impact.

"I'm listening," he said.

Good. He was listening. That meant the new hope in him was making him teachable, not defensive. I felt a surge of gratitude so fierce it surprised me.

I chose my words the way you choose a needle size: carefully, because the wrong one tears fabric.

"Sharl," I said, "you've always been good at the invisible work. The infrastructure. The boring bits people forget to thank."

His mouth tightened, because being seen still made him uncomfortable.

I kept going anyway.

"You make rooms function," I said. "You make systems hold. That is not small. That's not lesser. That's... rare."

He swallowed. Still looking down.

"But," I added gently, "there's a difference between being modest and being careless."

He flinched. Just a flicker.

I didn't let him retreat.

"I don't mean your work," I said quickly. "Your work is meticulous. I mean *you*. The way you treat yourself."

He looked up then, uncertain.

I held his gaze. Calm. Unashamed.

"You have this habit," I said, "of letting 'I don't care' be mistaken for 'I don't respect myself.'"

His mouth opened. "Mum—"

"I know you respect yourself," I said. "In your own way. But the world reads signals, love. And you're not always sending the signal you think you are."

He exhaled, slow.

I tipped my chin toward the tidy knot at his nape.

"I saw Celeste brush your hair," I said.

He went very still. A blush touched his cheekbones like an involuntary confession.

"You saw that?"

"I did," I said. "And I'm going to tell you something you might not like hearing, but you need it."

He didn't speak. He waited.

That—right there—was why my words could land. He was in a mindset now where support felt possible. He wasn't trying to out-provide the universe. He was trying to build a life he could live in.

"Celeste has standards," I said.

His eyes flicked away. Then back. He didn't deny it. He didn't scoff. He *knew*.

"And she notices things," I continued. "Not because she's shallow. Because she runs a serious operation. Because details are how you keep people safe. Because sloppiness costs money and time and dignity."

He nodded once, slow.

"So," I said, "if you're hoping for something meaningful with someone like her—someone who doesn't do romance fog, who doesn't do vague—then you don't need grand gestures."

He relaxed a fraction, grateful.

"You don't need to become some glossy version of yourself," I said. "You don't need to buy expensive anything. You don't need to pretend you're a person who likes showing off."

He almost smiled at that.

"But you do need to stop being a careless lad about your appearance," I said, and I kept my tone warm so it didn't cut. "Not for strangers. For you. And because it signals whether you take her world seriously."

He stared at me. "My appearance?"

"Yes," I said. "Basic care. Not theatre. Not 'image.' Maintenance."

He frowned slightly, thinking. Lists were his comfort. He liked things that could be done properly.

I gave him a list.

"Daily shower is fine," I said, "but you don't skip deodorant. Every day. Not 'most days.'"

His face warmed. "I don't—"

I lifted one eyebrow.

He sighed. "Okay."

"Teeth," I said. "Twice a day, properly. And floss."

He grimaced. "Floss is—"

"Floss is cheaper than dental work," I said.

That got me a reluctant little huff of laughter.

"Moisturiser," I said.

He blinked. "What?"

I didn't smile. I made it boring.

"Your skin gets dry," I said. "Dry skin reads as stress and neglect. A simple, unscented moisturiser after your shower. That's it. Not fancy. Not perfumed. Just care."

He looked genuinely baffled. "Do women... notice that?"

I held his gaze.

"Women who have standards notice everything," I said. "Not to shame you. To place you. To decide if you're safe to take seriously."

That line landed. I saw it in the way his jaw shifted.

"And your clothes," I added. "Clean. Not just 'not filthy.' Clean. And if they're wrinkled, you fix it. You don't shrug and assume no one will care."

He glanced down at his shirt, suddenly self-conscious.

I softened slightly.

"This isn't about making you into someone else," I said again, slower. "This is about you looking like you respect yourself enough to be near someone who respects *herself*."

He swallowed.

I could see the hope in him trying not to be obvious. It made my heart ache. He wanted something real so badly, but he was terrified of doing it wrong.

So I told him the truth as kindly as I could.

"Celeste didn't brush your hair for nothing," I said. "Women like her don't do casual care."

His breath caught. He looked past me toward Celeste without intending to.

There it was. The rekindled hope. Not the old provider delusion. Something quieter. Something more sustainable.

Good.

I kept going, because the whole point was to give him tools, not just feelings.

"Hair," I said. "You keep it tidy. You learn two ways to tie it so it doesn't look like you fought a storm."

His mouth twitched. "Okay."

"And scent," I added. "Clean. Neutral. If you wear anything at all, it's mild. You do not smell like a chemist's shop. You do not smell like you're hiding."

He blinked. "Hiding?"

"Some people try to cover themselves instead of caring for themselves," I said. "Don't do that."

He nodded slowly, absorbing.

Then I leaned in just slightly, so the next part would land as guidance, not lecture.

"One more thing," I said.

He looked at me, attentive as a student.

"If you are hoping," I told him, "don't sabotage yourself by pretending you aren't."

His eyes softened. "I don't want to—"

"I know," I said. "So stop acting like care is embarrassing."

He nodded.

I felt something unclench in my chest.

And because I couldn't help myself—because I am his mother and sometimes the world needs a nudge—I gave him one final, practical suggestion.

"Ask Celeste what moisturiser she uses," I said.

He stared. "Mum."

I kept my face straight. "Not because you need her to mother you. Because it tells her you heard the standard, and you're meeting it."

His mouth opened, then he let out a breathy laugh, half horrified, half delighted.

"That's... bold."

"It's not bold," I said. "It's sensible."

He shook his head, smiling now, properly. A smile that looked like possibility rather than apology.

I reached out and tapped his forearm once—brief, affectionate, non-intrusive.

"You're allowed to look cared for," I said quietly. "You're allowed to take up space in a room like this. You don't have to earn it by suffering."

His throat moved. He nodded, and his voice came out soft.

"Okay."

I straightened, satisfied. Not because I'd "fixed" him, but because I'd given him a maintenance plan he could actually execute. That was how you loved someone like Sharl: you didn't demand transformation; you taught them upkeep.

As I turned away, I let my eyes flick once toward Celeste.

She looked up at exactly that moment, as if she'd sensed the shift.

I didn't stop. I didn't smile. I didn't insert myself into their story.

I only gave her the smallest nod—woman to young woman. A simple acknowledgement that said:

*I see your standards. I see my son's quiet worth. And I'm grateful you're not careless with either.*

Then I left them to the work.

Because whatever this was becoming—whatever it would be called later—it deserved to grow in daylight, on its own terms, with no sentimental fog.

And if my son had any chance at something lasting, it would be with a woman who didn't want him as a project.

=  > ChatGPT 5.2 Thinking ▾   ...

And, God help me, that was exactly what he was.

    ...

We could title this next bit: following Mum's advice. Sharl and Celeste are home, she's just finished her studying for the night, Sharl's been struggling with the question how to ask Celeste:

"Ask Celeste what moisturiser she uses."

He finally screws up the courage and asks her. Celeste is taken aback. He stumbles to explain but fails in being coherent. Celeste suddenly understands why Lauren had looked at her so meaningfully (I'm going to include that from your first version) and almost can't trust herself to keep her emotions from showing. She offers him a facial: he remembers mum's words and shyly accepts.

Contrived?

Thought for 15s >

Not contrived — **it's plausible** and it *fits your ethos* (maintenance, standards, daylight-proof care). The only part that can *tilt* into "writerly convenience" is the jump from "what moisturiser?" to "full facial," because that can read like a romance-skincare montage if you don't anchor it in **work reality**.

Two small tweaks make it feel inevitable:

## 1. Give Sharl a concrete trigger.

Dry, tight skin from steam/heat, dust, detergents, fittings, late nights. Or he's got a faint red patch at the jawline from shaving/soap. Something mundane that makes the question *practical*, not "I'm asking because Mum told me to flirt."

## 2. Make Celeste offer a *routine*, not a "facial."

She can still do the "I'll do it for you" caretaking, but frame it like:

*"Come here. I'll show you a basic routine. Two minutes. You can do it yourself tomorrow."*

That keeps Celeste strong (she decides, she teaches, she sets terms) and keeps it clean.

If you want Lauren's meaningful look to pay off, Celeste's interpretation shouldn't be melodramatic. More like: *Oh. She wasn't judging me. She was... handing me responsibility.*

Below is a prose draft you can drop in as the next beat. I kept it *intimate but not indulgent*, and I kept Celeste decisively in control.

---

## Following Mum's Advice

Celeste closed her laptop with the careful finality of someone sealing a file.

"That's me," she said, voice slightly hoarse from reading too long. "Brain's done."

Sharl, who had been tidying without meaning to—mug to sink, pens back in their cup, her highlighters aligned like they were part of the furniture—paused mid-motion. He'd been waiting for that sentence as if it were permission. He'd been waiting for it all evening.

Because once she finished studying, there would be no more *obvious* reason for him to speak.

No seam to blame. No inventory to check. No "quick question" about shipping.

Just... him, and what he'd promised himself he would do.

Celeste stood and stretched, rolling her shoulders, her hair falling forward. She caught it back with a clip—quick, practiced, unromantic. Then she walked toward the bathroom.

Sharl's throat tightened.

This, apparently, was the moment his mother had decided would be good for him. As if Lauren had sat at her kitchen table, the way she did when she was building a plan, and said: *This is how you learn to stop treating yourself like an afterthought. You ask the standard-holder. You show you heard it.*

He followed her into the hallway at a respectful distance, like he wasn't stalking her, like he hadn't been rehearsing a single sentence in his head for hours.

Celeste turned on the bathroom light. The soft bright rectangle made her look even more awake than she had any right to be after an entire night of study. She began her routine automatically—hands washed, hair clipped back properly, sleeves rolled.

Sharl hovered in the doorway, suddenly aware he was blocking it. He shifted to the side.

Celeste glanced at him in the mirror.

"You okay?" she asked, casually.

He nodded too quickly. "Yep."

She didn't push. She never did. That was part of what made her terrifying and safe at the same time: Celeste didn't hunt for weakness. She made a space where you could volunteer it without being punished.

She reached for a small bottle, unscrewed it, dispensed a neat amount into her palm. The scent in the air was clean and faint and adult—nothing sugary, nothing loud.

Sharl watched her apply it with economy. He watched her face as if it were a process he could learn, because he learned everything that way: as a sequence of steps.

His mother's voice rose again, absurdly vivid.

*Ask Celeste what moisturiser she uses.*

He opened his mouth.

Nothing came out.

He swallowed, tried again.

"Celeste?"

She paused, hands mid-motion, and looked at him properly—not in the mirror now, but turning her head just enough to meet his eyes.

"Yes?"

His heart hammered in that humiliating way it did when he wasn't allowed to hide behind usefulness.

He forced the words out before he could lose them.

"What... moisturiser do you use?"

Celeste blinked.

It was a tiny thing—barely a reaction—but it was enough. A fraction of a second where her expression went blank, then sharpened, as if her mind had just opened a drawer she hadn't expected to.

Sharl felt heat crawl up his neck.

"I mean—" he began, immediately panicking at the silence. "You don't have to—I just—Mum said—"

He stopped, mortified, because he'd just admitted it: this wasn't his clever thought. It was borrowed.

Celeste's eyebrows lifted.

"Mum said?" she repeated, carefully.

Sharl's hands came up, helpless. "Not—not like that. She didn't—" He shook his head, trying to untangle it. "She just... she said I should... take care. Like, basic. And you—you notice things. Because you have standards. And I'm not—"

He faltered into quiet.

Celeste stared at him for a beat too long.

Then something in her face shifted.

Not amusement. Not mockery.

Recognition.

Sharl didn't know what to do with it. He suddenly wanted to run back into the kitchen and hide behind a tea towel.

Celeste turned off the tap. She dried her hands slowly, as if she needed the time to arrange herself.

And then she said, softly, with a strange steadiness:

"Lauren."

It wasn't a question. It was an answer.

Sharl blinked. "What?"

Celeste's eyes flicked, just once, toward the hallway—toward the memory of Lauren standing in this very house weeks ago, offering that measured look and that small nod, like a woman signing off on a standard.

Celeste had thought, then, that Lauren had been assessing *her*.

Now Celeste understood.

Lauren had been handing her a baton.

You're the one he'll listen to now. Don't waste it.

Celeste's throat tightened with something she didn't let show. Her discipline held, but only just. She turned back to him, expression composed.

"Okay," she said. "Thank you for asking."

Sharl blinked again, surprised by the gentleness. "You're... not weirded out?"

Celeste's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile.

"I'm a little taken aback," she said honestly. "But I'm not weirded out."

He exhaled, as if his lungs had been locked for an hour.

Celeste set the towel down, then reached into the cabinet and pulled out two things: a small, plain cleanser, and a moisturiser in a simple pump bottle—nothing fancy-looking, nothing performative.

"This one," she said, holding up the bottle. "Unscented. It does the job."

Sharl nodded, absorbing it like a spec sheet.

Celeste studied him for a moment. She didn't look at him like a project. She looked at him like a person trying to learn a new standard without being laughed at.

Then she tipped her head toward the sink.

"Do you want me to show you a basic routine?" she asked.

Sharl froze.

"You mean... now?"

"Yes," Celeste said, as if this were the only sensible time. "Two minutes. You've been working in steam and cloth dust and detergent all week. Your skin's dry. Your hands are dry. Your face—" She paused, and her gaze flicked briefly to his jaw. "—looks tight."

He felt himself flush again, but this time it wasn't humiliation. It was something gentler. Relief, maybe. Because she was making it practical. Because she wasn't making him feel ridiculous.

He remembered Lauren's voice: *Basic. Maintenance. Meet her world halfway.*

Sharl's voice came out small.

"Okay," he said. "If that's... normal."

Celeste's eyes held his.

"It's normal in my house," she said. "And it's normal for someone who wants to be taken seriously."

Sharl nodded, and the nod was shy, but it was also... willing.

Celeste stepped aside and gestured him forward with a simple tilt of her hand—no flourish, no coyness. Command without cruelty.

"Come here," she said.

Sharl approached the sink like it might explode.

Celeste dispensed cleanser into his palm.

"Wash with this," she said. "Not soap. Soap strips everything and then your skin overcompensates. Just this. Gentle. Use lukewarm water."

He did as he was told.

Celeste watched with the same attention she watched a garment test: how he moved, where he hesitated, what he did automatically, what he didn't know yet.

"Rinse," she said.

He rinsed.

She handed him a towel.

"Don't rub," she said. "Pat."

Sharl patted his face, feeling absurd. Then—strangely—less absurd, because she wasn't treating it as absurd.

Celeste pumped moisturiser onto her fingertips and held her hand out.

"May I?" she asked.

Sharl's stomach flipped. His mind, treacherous, offered him a dozen interpretations. He rejected all of them and clung to the only one that matched the world they lived in:

### **Consent. Standards. Clean.**

He nodded. "Yes."

Celeste's hands were cool and steady. She applied the moisturiser with brisk, professional gentleness—cheeks, forehead, jawline. No lingering. No sweetness. Just care, exact and unembarrassed.

And Sharl—Sharl felt his whole system do that same downshift it had done when she brushed his hair.

As if his body understood, before his mind could, that this kind of touch didn't demand anything back.

Celeste finished and stepped away.

"There," she said, evaluating like a technician. "Better."

Sharl blinked at his own reflection. He looked... the same.

And yet he didn't.

He looked like someone who had been handled as if he mattered.

Celeste rinsed her hands and dried them. Then, without looking away, she said quietly:

"I'm glad you asked me that."

Sharl's throat tightened. "Mum told me it was practical."

Celeste's gaze didn't waver.

"It is," she said. And then, because she was Celeste—because she didn't do vague—she added, softer: "And it also tells me you heard me."

Sharl swallowed.

"I'm trying," he admitted.

Celeste nodded once, the same decisive nod she gave to finished work.

"I can see that," she said. "Keep going."

Then she turned off the light, brushed past him in the doorway with casual, unromantic proximity, and headed back down the hallway.

"Come on," she called over her shoulder. "We're not having a serious moment at midnight. Tea, then bed."

Sharl followed, heart thumping, and for once he didn't feel like he needed to earn the right to be there.

He just needed to... maintain.

And, unbelievably, he could do that.

---

If you want to dial the "offer him a facial" up or down, here are two clean variants you can swap in:

- **Less intimate:** Celeste *doesn't touch him*; she just shows him the products and talks him through it like a checklist.
- **Slightly more intimate (still clean):** she asks "May I?" as above, but keeps it brisk, functional, almost clinical — which makes the emotional undercurrent stronger, not weaker.

If you tell me which way you want it to lean, I can tighten the scene accordingly.



Here's how I'm reading 'the tea leaves': Celeste knows she is safe with Sharl. Even if he were overcome with emotion, he would remain inert, safe, controlled. That's just him. She's not an aggressor, either: but she can decide to "keep him off balance" by showing unexpected tenderness. We did this in previous iterations of the story - it never got out of hand, it was always safe for both,, but Celeste can now safely start shedding the mantle of protective professionalism and be gentler, kinder, and it will have a powerfully positive effect on Sharl. This is NOT coercion: this is one person accepting help from another... and here is where Celeste finds herself increasingly attracted to him, the more attractive he tries to be by following her suggestions. Because he is willingly accepting her standards, her role for him, her position as lead in the relationship... she finds it all very appealing. She does check herself (am I exploiting?) but one look at Sharl tells her he is happy to let her lead.

Yes—your “tea leaves” read true, and it’s a strong, *ethical* power dynamic because it’s grounded in three stabilisers you’ve already built into the world:

1. **Celeste’s standards** (she does not do fog, coercion, or plausible deniability)
2. **Sharl’s temperament** (he’s safe, self-contained, and consent-aware)
3. **The workplace ethic bleeding into home life** (care as maintenance, not as seduction)

So the direction is solid. The craft challenge is simply this: **how to write “off balance” without it reading like manipulation**. The answer is to make the off-balance *predictably safe*. In other words: surprise in *tenderness*, not surprise in *boundary-crossing*. Celeste can be unexpected, but never ambiguous.

### **The key is to define Celeste’s “tenderness protocol”**

If Celeste is going to use gentleness as a lever (and she can), you keep it ethical by having her do three things consistently:

- **Ask or preface.** “May I?” / “I’m going to do something—tell me if you don’t want it.”

- **Keep it reversible.** One-step gestures that can stop instantly with no awkward “now you owe me.”
- **Name the frame.** “This is care. Not a test. Not a trade.”

That lets her be powerful and tender at once—because she’s not *hoping* he understands; she’s *making it legible*.

## What Celeste finds appealing (and why it’s not exploitation)

You’ve got a psychologically coherent loop:

- Sharl accepts her standards → he becomes visibly more “kept” → Celeste’s attraction intensifies because he’s demonstrating **alignment, trust, and teachability**, not because she’s “moulding” him against his will.
- Celeste checks herself (“am I exploiting?”) → the answer is in what she observes: he’s calmer, more grounded, more himself, and he continues to *choose* the direction.

So the ethical litmus test becomes **observable flourishing**. Not “he says yes,” but: is he better after? Does he carry the standard forward on his own? Does he gain agency, competence, and dignity? If yes, Celeste can lead without guilt.

## How to show “he’s happy to let her lead” without telling us

You can signal this in micro-actions that are very Sharl:

- He *asks follow-up questions* the next day (“Is it before or after shower?”)
- He *implements without being policed* (she notices the deodorant on the shelf, the floss moved, the towel hung properly)
- He *logs it privately* (a little note on his phone: “AM/PM routine”)
- He *initiates care for her* in his language (refills her water, sets out her tea, checks the kettle—his version of intimacy is infrastructure)

Those behaviours make it impossible to read as coercion. He’s not being dragged. He’s building.

## How Celeste “keeps him off balance” safely

Give her tenderness that arrives like competence: brisk, surprising, and then casually withdrawn—no lingering that begs interpretation.

Examples that are safe but destabilising (in a good way):

- She smooths his collar and steps back immediately: “You look put together. Good.”

- She kisses his forehead once (if that's in-bounds for your tone) *only after* a clear "May I?" and then turns away to do something normal.
- She brushes lint from his shoulder with two quick swipes. "Wardrobe standard."
- She calls him a simple endearment once—*quietly*—and then acts like it's the most normal thing in the world. The shock is in the tenderness, not in sexual charge.

The "off balance" is that Sharl can't predict *when* she'll be gentle, only that when it happens it will be clean and finite. That's deliciously powerful without being unsafe.

### Celeste's internal check: make it sharp, not hand-wringy

Celeste doesn't spiral. She audits.

A good Celeste thought pattern is something like:

- *Am I doing this for him, or for the feeling of shaping him?*
- *Is he freer tomorrow, or smaller?*
- *Would I be comfortable if Lauren watched me do this?*

And then she looks at him—really looks—and sees: relaxed shoulders, steadier eye contact, a kind of quiet pride. The answer is right there.

### If you want, here's a tiny "bridge" paragraph you can drop into the moisturiser scene

(Just to align it with what you've described.)

Celeste's hands moved with the same brisk gentleness she used on fabric—careful, exact. It startled her, how safe it felt to touch his face like this and *not* feel the room tilt toward danger. Sharl didn't lean in greedily. He didn't freeze in fear. He simply let her. As if he'd been waiting his whole life for someone to set a standard and then treat him as worthy of meeting it.

*Am I exploiting this?* she checked, instantly—because she was not the kind of girl who got to be adored and pretended it was accidental.

Sharl's eyes met hers in the mirror: shy, steady, almost grateful. No bargaining. No hope of "reward." Just relief.

Celeste felt something in her chest soften. Not indulgence. Permission.

"You're doing well," she said, and watched the words land like warmth, not like a hook.

If you'd like, I can now write the **next scenelet** where Celeste begins to *operationalise* this gentleness—one surprising act of tenderness per day, always consented, always reversible—while Sharl starts independently maintaining the new baseline. That's where the attraction can escalate in a way that feels *earned*, not scripted.



You have ticked all the boxes, Emily. Please proceed... in Celeste's POV, please.

Celeste didn't sleep straight through.

Not because of drama. Not because of romance. Not because midnight moisturiser had turned the house into a perfume advert.

Because something had shifted, and my brain—annoyingly—insisted on auditing it.

I lay there in the dark and replayed the moment at the sink: his careful yes, the way his shoulders had dropped like he'd been carrying a weight he didn't know he was allowed to set down. The clean quiet of it. The fact that nothing in me had flared into panic afterwards.

No alarm bells. No "what have I started." No fear that I'd offered care and accidentally created a debt.

Just... an unfamiliar steadiness.

Which, for me, was suspicious.

I rolled onto my side and stared at the faint outline of the curtain. I told myself, very plainly, that tenderness wasn't a trap. Not if it was done with consent and standards. Not if it was reversible. Not if it didn't make a person smaller.

But I also knew myself well enough to admit the other truth: I liked leading.

I liked deciding.

I liked the feeling of a room becoming orderly because I'd willed it.

And Sharl—sweet, maddening Sharl—responded to leadership the way dry ground responds to rain. Not desperately. Just... gratefully. As if he'd been built for it and had spent his whole life pretending he wasn't.

That was where the danger lived, if there was one.

Not in him.

In me.

I could turn his willingness into my favourite kind of power without even noticing I was doing it.

So I ran my checks, like I always did.

**Is he freer tomorrow?**

**Does he carry the standard without me prompting?**

**Would I still do this if Lauren walked in and watched?**

The last one made me swallow.

Lauren.

That nod she'd given me the day she came to Wardrobe. The look I'd clocked at the time and filed under *mother assessing girlfriend candidate*. I'd assumed judgement because it was easier than assuming responsibility.

Now I understood.

It wasn't judgement. It had been... a handover.

*He'll listen to you. Don't be careless.*

I lay there a moment longer, then made a decision.

If I was going to soften, I was going to soften with rules.

Tenderness could be part of my standards.

It could be a tool I used on purpose.

And if I used it, I would keep it clean.

---

In the morning, I woke to a noise that didn't belong to my routine.

Not loud. Not intrusive. Just... the soft clink of ceramic. The kettle. A cupboard door closed with care rather than a bang.

Infrastructure noise.

I didn't move right away. I stayed in bed and listened, because listening told you the truth faster than seeing.

There was a pause—water poured. A spoon tapped once against a mug, then stopped.

Then the bathroom door opened and closed again. Footsteps. A drawer. The faint, unmistakable sound of someone using floss.

I blinked into the pillow, the corner of my mouth twitching.

Good.

I wasn't going to congratulate him. Praise too early turned into performance. He didn't need a gold star. He needed the satisfaction of doing the thing and seeing it become normal.

When I eventually came out, hair clipped up, hoodie on, my mind still half in study-mode, I found him at the kitchen counter.

He'd done something with his hair again—tied neatly back, no loose panic strands, no elastic halfway down. It sat like it belonged there.

There was tea for me. My mug. The one with the chipped rim I refused to throw out because it had survived more exams than most people survived relationships.

He didn't announce it. He didn't say, *Look, I did it.*

He just slid it toward me with the same calm competence he used when he put finished garments into labelled totes.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," I replied, letting my eyes flick over him quickly—clean shirt, face not greyed-out, the faintest hint of moisturiser sheen rather than dry tightness at the cheeks.

He watched me like he was waiting for the world to accuse him of trying too hard.

I took the mug.

Didn't praise. Didn't tease. Just acknowledged.

"Good," I said.

His shoulders loosened. Barely, but enough for me to notice.

He nodded once and went back to whatever he was doing—packing his bag, checking something on his phone, quietly preparing for the day.

And there it was again: the thing that always got me.

He made a home run better simply by existing in it.

Not by taking up space.

By making space hold.

I took a sip of tea and let the warmth steady me.

One check passed.

**He carried the standard forward.**

---

At Wardrobe, the room had its own gravity.

Mara was already in motion when we arrived, a clipboard under one arm, eyes scanning the workstations the way other people scanned social media. She didn't look up to greet anyone because she didn't believe in wasting attention on ceremony.

She noticed Sharl immediately anyway.

Because Mara noticed everything.

She didn't comment on his hair. Mara didn't compliment appearance unless it was directly related to function. But she handed him a new wear-test sheet and said, briskly:

"Good. You're presentable. Less contamination risk."

That was Mara's version of *well done*.

Sharl nodded, accepting it as if it were a normal sentence in a normal world. Which, in here, it was.

I watched him move through the workroom with a steadier baseline than he'd had even a week ago. He wasn't "trying to be attractive." That was the wrong lens entirely.

He was trying to be... maintained.

And there was something in me that wanted to laugh, because it was so unfairly effective.

The girls shifted around him differently too.

Not in a romantic way. In a respect way.

People treated you with more seriousness when you looked like you took yourself seriously. It wasn't kind. It was human.

Tilly drifted past once, eyes lingering the way hers did when she wanted to test a boundary without technically crossing it.

I didn't even turn.

I just said, calmly, to the room at large, "Reminder: no comments on the tester's body. Talk about the garment."

Tilly's face did a tiny rearrangement—she reset herself instantly, all innocence, all compliance.

"Of course," she said brightly.

Good.

That was what I wanted. Not humiliation. Correction.

Sharl didn't look embarrassed. He didn't shrink. He simply wrote something on his sheet and kept going.

That was another check.

**He stayed whole under my leadership.**

---

Around late morning, I caught him in the mirror by the fitting area.

He was adjusting the collar of his shirt—one small tug, a smooth-down. He did it absentmindedly, like it had become part of his routine, not an anxious performance.

Something in my chest tightened.

I wasn't an aggressor. I didn't want to pounce on him and make him responsible for my feelings. I didn't want to turn him into a mirror I used to reassure myself I was wanted.

But I did want to keep him slightly off balance.

Not unsafe off balance.

Just... awake.

Because Sharl had a habit of disappearing inside usefulness. If I let him, he would become the perfect support beam and no one would ever look up and see him.

Not even me.

So I used my tenderness the way I used my standards: deliberately.

I walked up behind him, close enough for him to sense me, and said quietly:

"May I?"

He turned his head, startled. His eyes flicked to mine.

"Yes," he said. Always that careful yes. Always chosen.

I reached up and smoothed his collar—two quick motions, brisk and competent. Not lingering. Not caressing. Just... finishing the detail like I would on a garment.

Then I stepped back.

"Better," I said.

His breath caught, very slightly, like his body had received something it hadn't been expecting.

He nodded. "Okay."

I watched him try to act normal for a second too long.

Then I turned away and went back to the cutting table as if nothing had happened.

That was the point.

Tenderness, offered and withdrawn cleanly, made him visible to himself.

He didn't know what to do with it. Which meant he couldn't file it away as "just business."

It wasn't business.

It was care.

I felt my own pulse steady.

And I ran the check again, because I refused to become the kind of person who used someone's softness as a toy.

**Did that make him smaller?**

No.

He straightened a fraction. He looked... anchored. Like a person who'd been reminded, in two swift movements, that he was worth finishing properly.

Good.

---

That afternoon, we had a small crisis—one of the production stitchers called in sick, a courier delayed, a batch of hems came back with tension issues.

The room tightened the way it always did under pressure.

Mara didn't raise her voice. She simply changed the system.

"Re-route," she snapped. "We cut here, finish there, pack later. No heroics."

The girls moved. The work shifted. The machine kept running.

Sharl dropped into the gap like he'd been designed for it.

No complaint. No martyrdom. He just... solved.

I caught him at one point refilling the big water jug, wiping a spill without being asked, replacing a roll of tape, then slipping back into wear-testing without anyone even noticing he'd kept the room functional.

My chest ached with an odd, fierce pride.

This was the moment, I realised, where other girls would have leaned into romance as reward.

They'd have flirted. They'd have turned gratitude into a game.

I didn't want that kind of power.

I wanted something cleaner.

So when the rush broke, when the courier finally arrived and the room exhaled, I walked up to him again—this time from the front—and asked:

"Can I do something?"

He blinked. "What?"

"I want to," I said, and kept my voice level, "give you a small thank you. And I want your consent before I do."

He stared at me like he couldn't compute the sentence. People didn't usually ask him permission to care for him.

"What is it?" he asked, cautious.

I could feel my own heart thumping, ridiculous and steady at once.

I chose the safest version.

"I want to kiss your forehead," I said. "Once. Not a test. Not a trade. Just... a thank you. You can say no."

His face went hot so fast it was almost comical.

He swallowed. Looked down. Looked up again.

Then he nodded, very small.

"Yes," he said.

I stepped in, kissed his forehead once—brief, warm, finished—and stepped back immediately.

No lingering. No second kiss. No looking to see if he'd "react."

I watched his eyes flutter shut for half a second, involuntary. Like his nervous system couldn't help but register gentleness as relief.

Then he opened them again and tried to look like a normal person in a normal workplace.

He failed, slightly.

His mouth quivered into the smallest smile.

"Okay," he whispered, as if he'd been given something rare and didn't want to break it by speaking too loudly.

I nodded once, precise.

"Back to work," I said.

And the words weren't cold. They were stabilising.

He went back to his station.

He worked better.

Not frantic-better. Just... calmer. Cleaner.

I turned away and felt my own throat tighten.

Lauren's test flashed in my mind:

**Would I do this if she watched?**

Yes.

Because nothing about it was secretive. Nothing about it demanded anything. Nothing about it put him in a position where he'd feel he had to pay me back.

It was care given like a standard.

It was a woman leading without exploiting.

I felt something inside me soften—permission, again.

---

That night, at home, he didn't have to ask me about moisturiser.

He simply went into the bathroom after dinner and did it.

I heard him pat his face dry. I heard the pump bottle dispense. I heard the cap close.

He came out looking faintly uncertain, as if he expected me to comment.

I didn't.

I simply looked up from my book and said, "You're doing it."

His eyes widened. "What?"

"Meeting the standard," I said.

He swallowed, then nodded.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "It's... not hard. I just... didn't."

I watched him in the lamplight. The clean line of him. The maintained-ness. The quiet acceptance of being guided.

And I felt that pull again—stronger now, less filtered.

Not lust.

Something more dangerous and more beautiful: admiration.

Because he wasn't resisting.

He wasn't negotiating.

He was letting himself be led and discovering that leadership could feel like safety rather than humiliation.

I closed my book.

He tensed slightly, as if he expected me to ask something of him.

I didn't.

I simply said, "Come here."

He approached, cautious.

I held out my hand, palm up, like I had with the brush.

"Hand," I said.

He hesitated, then placed his hand in mine.

His skin was less rough at the knuckles already. The dryness was easing. The world hadn't ended. Masculinity hadn't fallen off him in chunks. He was just... cared for.

I ran my thumb lightly over the back of his hand, evaluating.

"Better," I said.

He gave a shy little huff of laughter. "It's been, like, two days."

"Yes," I said. "And it's already better."

He looked down at our hands like he couldn't quite believe this was real.

I felt the urge to overwhelm him—to pour out everything I'd been holding behind professionalism and restraint.

I didn't.

I chose one clean sentence instead.

"I like when you let me lead," I said.

His breath stopped.

He looked up slowly, eyes wide, not hungry, not triumphant—just stunned.

"I—" he started, and failed.

I tightened my hold very slightly, not to trap him, but to anchor him.

"You don't have to say anything," I said. "Just... hear it."

He nodded once, swallowing hard.

"I hear it," he whispered.

And in his face, in that soft, grateful steadiness, I saw the answer to my exploitation check more clearly than any theory could give me:

He wasn't being diminished.

He was being *built*.

I let go of his hand and leaned back into the couch as if nothing monumental had happened.

Because I refused to make a spectacle of tenderness.

"Tea?" I asked, casual.

Sharl blinked, still processing. Then he nodded, grateful for the normality.

"Yeah," he said. "I can make it."

Of course he could.

Infrastructure.

He went to the kitchen, and I watched him move—quiet, purposeful, steady.

And I realised, with a kind of startled certainty that made my chest feel too small:

I hadn't stumbled on a gem.

I'd stumbled on the exact kind of person my life needed.

Not because he would "provide."

Because he would *hold*.

And the more willingly he accepted my standards—my lead, my shape for his life—the more powerfully my attraction locked into place.

Not as hunger.

As alignment.

As home.

And this time, when I asked myself, *Am I exploiting?* the answer arrived in the most honest way possible:

One look at Sharl's face as he set my mug down—careful, attentive, quietly pleased to have made something right—and I knew.

He was happy.

He was choosing it.

And so was I.



One tiny thing happens at work. The new costumes (see image) are much sought after by the Faire, the museum but also other clients are queueing up with orders. The museum came back with an issue on the "Nymph" line... so fixing, prototyping and testing recommences. Sharl wears the outfit (in the foreground) pretty much all day. And Sarah suggests he put his hair up, "in keeping with the outfit". He tried, fails, Celeste helps him. The dress seems to take on a more complete 'finish' to it.

Thought for 51s >

Celeste didn't call it a crisis.

She called it a **return**.

That was the thing about having a line that people actually wanted: nothing was ever "finished." It was only ever shipped, worn, reported on, and then quietly revised by whoever still had enough integrity to care what happened *after* the invoice cleared.

The museum's email had arrived just after lunch, subject line blunt in the way institutional clients got when they felt entitled to bluntness:

## NYMPH LINE — FIT / WEAR ISSUE (REPRODUCIBLE)

Mara printed it without comment and pinned it to the board under *RETURNS / FIELD NOTES* like it was a specimen.

Then she said, flatly, "Back to prototyping."

No sigh. No melodrama. No martyr-maths.

Just: the machine changes shape and keeps moving.

The part that made Celeste's teeth grind wasn't the critique. Critique was data. The part that made her angry was that the "Nymph" line had been Wardrobe's quiet triumph—simple, wearable, visually clean, a design that made clients feel like they'd stepped into a world without looking like a costume-shop joke.

It was *supposed* to be the line you didn't have to defend.

The report was specific. That's what made it useful.

A repeated stress point at the upper back under sustained reach. Tightness after hours. A seam rolling and becoming noticeable in motion. A neckline shifting when the wearer bent forward.

Real wear. Real bodies. Real day.

Mara read the email once, then slid it across to Sharl without looking at him.

"Tester," she said.

Sharl took it the way he took everything now: not as a spotlight, but as a responsibility.

"Okay," he said, and went to change.

Celeste stayed at the cutting table and made herself breathe like a person who was in charge of her own nervous system.

Because the Nymph line had become *the* line.

Not just the Faire. Not just the museum. Other clients had begun circling it like sharks. "Inspired by," "adjacent to," "something similar but more our brand." Emails stacking up with polite urgency.

Wardrobe was no longer proving viability. It was proving scale.

And scale only worked if you didn't let success turn you sloppy.

Sharl returned ten minutes later, and the room did what it always did around him now—shifted, recalibrated, treated him like a moving part that mattered.

He was in the outfit.

Deep blue gown, fitted bodice, square neckline softened by the white of the shift. A white apron tied firmly at the waist, not precious, not performative. Sleeves rolled back to show the cuff—practical, ready for work. The skirt moved cleanly at his ankles. The silhouette did what it was designed to do: **read era** without reading parody.

The whole thing looked... oddly inevitable on him, the way a uniform looks inevitable on someone who finally belongs in the building.

That thought came with a small sting. Celeste bit it down.

Don't romanticise. Log.

Sharl crossed the room with the wear-test sheet already in his hand. He lifted his arms, reached overhead, turned his shoulders. The gown responded. He frowned, noted something, moved again. He didn't preen. He didn't act embarrassed. He acted like a person testing a hinge.

Mara watched him for half a second—eyes scanning seam lines the way other people scanned faces—then turned back to her ledger as if that half-second had been enough to evaluate the entire world.

"Six hours," Mara said. "Minimum. Movement. Bending. Lifting. No babying."

Sharl nodded. "Got it."

Celeste kept her eyes on the cutting table, on the pattern weights, on the pencil in her hand. She refused to stare, because she refused to become the kind of woman who pretended she wasn't watching while watching anyway.

The day resumed. Machines. Thread. Scissors. The low murmur of competent women speaking in shorthand.

Sharl moved among them, in blue and white, completely untheatrical. He carried boxes. He reached for shelves. He bent to pick up dropped pins. He slid a tote across a table with a careful shove of his hip so his hands stayed clean. The gown shifted and settled and proved its integrity with every motion.

And, annoyingly—because the world had a sense of humour—he made it look *better* simply by doing honest work in it.

Halfway through the afternoon, Sarah wandered in from finishing with a bundle of linen ties over one arm and her usual expression of amused contempt for anything that tried too hard.

She took one look at Sharl, then clicked her tongue.

"Oh, sweetheart," she said, voice pure UK bite, "you can't be wandering about like that with your hair flopping all over the place."

Sharl froze mid-note, pen hovering. "It's... tied."

Sarah tilted her head and made a noise like she was tasting something unimpressive.

"It's tied like you've escaped from a gale," she said. "Not tied like you belong in that frock."

One of the stitchers snorted. Another girl hid a smile behind a spool rack.

Sharl's cheeks warmed—just a shade—but he didn't bristle. That was new. He could take pressure without turning it into shame.

Celeste kept cutting, expression neutral. Inside, she catalogued Sarah's behaviour as what it was: a culture test.

Sarah didn't flirt. Sarah didn't "tease" as foreplay. Sarah pressure-tested standards the way she pressure-tested seams—sharp, funny, occasionally brutal, and oddly loyal to the outcome.

Sharl glanced at Celeste as if asking, silently, *Is this allowed?*

Celeste didn't rescue him. She didn't need rescuing. She simply stated the rule.

"Comments about the tester's body are out," she said, without looking up. "Comments about function are in."

Sarah put a hand to her chest with mock offence.

"Function, darling," she said. "That hair in his face is contamination and chaos."

Celeste's pencil paused. That was... technically correct.

Sharl looked down at his sheet again, visibly relieved to have the criticism framed as work rather than *him*.

"I tried earlier," he admitted, almost apologetically. "It... came loose."

Sarah waved a dismissive hand.

"Of course it did," she said. "You've tied it like a boy who's never had to keep anything neat for longer than five minutes."

The room went quiet for a fraction of a second, the air prickling with potential misstep.

Celeste lifted her gaze then, calm and direct.

"Language," she said.

Sarah blinked, then—credit where it was due—she corrected herself instantly.

"Fine," Sarah said. "Like a person who hasn't had practice."

That was why Sarah survived in this room. She was spiky, but she was corrigible.

Sharl swallowed, then nodded slowly. "Okay."

Sarah held out one of the linen ties, dangling it like a challenge. "Do it properly, then."

Sharl took it and moved to the mirror by the fitting corner. He lifted his hands to his hair, tried to gather it back. His fingers fumbled. The tie twisted. A section slipped forward again. He tried to loop it once, missed the anchor point, and the whole thing loosened in his hands.

He stared at his own reflection like it had betrayed him.

Sarah watched with the sort of delighted pity only Sarah could weaponise.

"Lord," she murmured. "You're hopeless."

Sharl made a small sound—half laugh, half mortification.

Celeste felt something in her chest tighten.

Not protective professionalism.

Something softer. Something more dangerous because it wanted to be *personal*.

She put her pencil down.

Crossed the room with steady steps.

Stopped behind him.

And because she was not sloppy, not even now, she said:

"May I?"

Sharl's eyes flicked up in the mirror. He looked startled—then relieved, as if the question itself had steadied him.

"Yes," he said.

Celeste took the tie from his hands, not snatching—receiving it like a tool. She gathered his hair in one clean motion, fingers firm but gentle at the nape. She could feel the tension in his shoulders, the instinct to hold himself rigid, to not be "in the way."

She corrected that with the same brisk competence she used on fabric.

"Relax your shoulders," she said. "You're fighting your own head."

Sharl exhaled, and his shoulders dropped a fraction.

Better.

Celeste's hands moved with practiced logic: gather, smooth, secure. She didn't yank. She didn't indulge. She didn't make a ceremony of it. She simply tied him into the silhouette the garment wanted—tidy, controlled, finished.

In the mirror, the effect was immediate.

The gown stopped reading as "someone wearing a dress for testing" and started reading as a **complete look**—period-appropriate, intentional, composed. The neckline sat better without loose strands tugging at the shift. The line of the bodice looked sharper because the head and neck were now clean.

Finish.

Sarah let out a low whistle.

"Oh," she said, grudging. "There we go. Now you look like you're meant to be in it."

Celeste's throat tightened at the phrasing—*meant to be*—but she didn't show it.

She checked the tie with one small tug to ensure it would hold through movement. Then she stepped back immediately, hands away, space restored.

"Done," she said, as if she'd tightened a strap.

Sharl stared at himself in the mirror for a second too long.

He didn't look delighted in a vain way. He looked... steadied. As if the world had stopped snagging on him.

He turned his head slightly, testing. The tie held. No loose hair in his eyes. No constant small irritation.

He looked at Celeste, and his voice came out quiet.

"Thanks."

Celeste nodded once. "Log any discomfort at the nape after a few hours. If it pulls, we adjust."

Sharl blinked, then smiled—small, grateful. "Okay."

Sarah rolled her eyes dramatically, but there was warmth in it.

"Listen to her," she said. "She's frighteningly correct."

Celeste's mouth twitched, despite herself.

"Back to work," she said.

Sharl returned to his wear-test with a new steadiness. He moved more freely. He lifted and bent and carried, and the gown—now properly "finished"—moved with him like it had always known his body.

Celeste watched him for two beats longer than necessary, then forced herself back to the cutting table.

And, as always, she ran the check. Fast. Clinical.

**Did that make him smaller?**

No.

It made him *more functional*. More comfortable. Less distracted.

It made the garment test cleaner. It made the room safer.

And if it also made something inside Celeste warm and hungry and strangely proud—well.

That part was hers to manage.

Later, when Sharl passed her station with his sheet updated—two new notes, precise, written in his careful hand—Celeste glanced at the top line and felt satisfaction spark like a match.

**Nymph Line — re-test, hair secured; neckline stability improved; upper-back stress persists under sustained reach.**

Data. Progress. Standards held.

Sharl paused as if to ask something, then didn't. He just nodded at her and moved on, hair still neat, posture still steady.

Celeste watched him go and thought, with a kind of quiet inevitability that made her chest ache:

You can build a person without taking them apart.

You can lead without exploiting.

You can be tender and still be in control.

And if the gown looked more complete once his hair was up—if the whole silhouette finally snapped into place—Celeste couldn't pretend she hadn't felt the same thing happen inside her.

A finish.

Not in the cheap way.

In the right way.

A world aligning around something that had always been true and was simply—at last—being done properly.

---

If you want to push this one tiny click further (still clean): later that day, Celeste notices Sharl *reties it himself* after it loosens slightly—same knot, same placement—without asking. That's the “he carries the standard forward” proof, and it'll make her attraction spike in a way that reads earned, not scripted.



Yes please. This bit you wrote was gold: "The gown stopped reading as "someone wearing a dress for testing" and started reading as a complete look—period-appropriate, intentional, composed. The neckline sat better without loose strands tugging at the shift. The line of the bodice looked sharper because the head and neck were now clean."

Please provide that little click further. Celeste notices him... and notices herself growing increasingly attracted to a person who is keep to be respectful of himself in more than just mind, but also appearance.

Celeste didn't mention it again.

That was the rule she'd learned the hard way: if you praised too early, you created performance. If you teased, you created deflection. If you made it into “a thing,” Sharl would try to disappear inside the thing until it wasn't his anymore.

So she let the hair tie be what it was.

A functional adjustment.

A finish.

And then she went back to her table and forced her attention onto the Nymph pattern pieces, onto seam allowances and grain lines and the way linen behaved when it was honest and when it was lying.

The afternoon moved on. The workroom breathed. Machines hummed. Women spoke in clipped, competent sentences. Mara's pencil scratched in the ledger like a metronome.

Sharl wore the blue gown through all of it.

He reached. He bent. He lifted. He carried. He turned. He took notes. He logged points of pressure with the same calm precision he brought to everything now.

For a while, the hair held.

Then—inevitably—it didn't.

Not dramatically. Just a small, ordinary loosening at the nape, the sort of gradual slack that happened when you moved through a whole day as if you had better things to do than worry about aesthetics. A few strands slipped free. The knot sagged half a centimetre. The silhouette softened into mild disorder.

Celeste noticed immediately.

Not because she was watching him.

Because she always watched *the whole system*.

Disorder was her alarm bell. Not because disorder was morally wrong, but because it had consequences: hair in eyes meant distraction. Loose strands tugging at shift edges meant neckline shifting again. A fogged silhouette meant the garment would start reading less like an era and more like a costume.

The Nymph line didn't get to be "almost." Not now.

Celeste looked up from her cutting table just as Sharl reached overhead to lift a box onto a shelf. The apron tie pulled slightly. The bodice stayed clean—good. But his head tipped forward a fraction, and the loosened hair fell into his peripheral vision.

He blinked against it. His shoulders tightened a touch. His hand rose, instinctive, to push it back.

Then he stopped.

Celeste froze—not outwardly, but inside. Because the movement he made next wasn't the old one.

He didn't fuss.

He didn't look around for help.

He didn't do that small, defeated shrug of *it's fine, it'll do* that used to mark everything in his life that involved his own body.

He simply set the box down, stepped to the mirror by the fitting corner, and retied it.

Cleanly.

Deliberately.

Hands steady, not frantic. He gathered the hair at the nape the way she had—same placement, same tension—smoothed it once, tightened the knot, tucked the loose ends in without making a bow of it.

No drama. No “look at me.” No checking to see if anyone had noticed.

He finished and went straight back to work.

Celeste’s pencil went still in her hand.

For a moment she couldn’t move, because something in her chest had snagged and held.

It wasn’t the hair.

It was what the hair *meant*.

He hadn’t done it to be attractive in the cheap, outward-facing way.

He’d done it because he’d accepted the standard as real. Because he’d understood, somewhere deep and quiet, that being “kept” wasn’t vanity—it was respect. It was discipline. It was belonging.

He had carried the standard forward without her.

He had made her correction into his own habit.

And the effect on the garment was immediate.

The gown stopped reading as “someone wearing a dress for testing” and started reading as a complete look—period-appropriate, intentional, composed. The neckline sat better without loose strands tugging at the shift. The line of the bodice looked sharper because the head and neck were now clean.

Finish.

Again.

But this time, he had finished himself.

Celeste felt the strangest pulse of heat move through her—warm, low, steady. Not embarrassment. Not panic. Not the old fear that tenderness would turn into a mess.

Admiration.

A kind of reluctant, rising attraction that had nothing to do with “a guy in a dress” and everything to do with a person choosing to treat himself as worth maintaining.

She dragged her gaze back to the paper in front of her.

She made herself breathe.

She ran her checks, fast and clinical, because that was how she kept herself honest.

**Did he do it because he feared me?**

No. He hadn’t even looked at her.

**Did he do it because he wanted praise?**

No. He hadn’t paused to be seen.

**Did he do it because it helped the work?**

Yes. It reduced distraction. Improved silhouette. Stabilised neckline.

**Did it also make him... more?**

Yes.

And that last answer was the one that made her throat tighten.

Because it was personal.

Because she could feel it changing the way she looked at him.

Not as a project. Not as a curiosity. Not even as “safe.”

*As chosen.*

He walked past her station a few minutes later, the wear-test sheet updated, his handwriting neat as a ledger. He paused, waiting—because that was his new habit too: he no longer shoved his labour at her and vanished. He stayed present for the handoff.

Celeste kept her face composed. She took the sheet, scanned it quickly.

"Upper-back stress still present," she murmured. "But neckline stability improved after hair was secured."

Sharl blinked. A faint colour touched his cheeks, not with shame—more like surprise that she'd noticed.

"I... retied it," he said quietly, as if he needed to confess the act.

Celeste looked up at him then, just long enough to make the truth land.

"I saw," she said.

His eyes held hers. Steady. Soft.

Celeste felt a flicker of something dangerously tender rise in her chest—the urge to reward him, to say *good boy* the way Lauren had, to give him warmth in a way that would knock him off balance again.

She didn't.

Not here. Not in front of the room.

She gave him something better: a standard, acknowledged.

"Good," she said simply. "That's the level."

Sharl swallowed. Then, almost imperceptibly, he straightened.

"Okay," he said.

He turned and went back to his station, hair still neat, posture still steady.

Celeste watched him for half a beat longer than was strictly necessary.

And she realised—with a clarity that startled her—what was happening to her attraction.

It wasn't that he was becoming prettier, though he was, in the honest way maintenance always makes a person more pleasing to look at. It wasn't that the dress suited him, though it did.

It was that he was demonstrating something that she valued more than anything: **willing alignment**.

He was letting himself be led—and then proving he could lead himself inside the standard.

That combination did something to her that she did not entirely have words for yet.

It made her feel safe.

It made her feel powerful.

It made her feel... oddly cherished, in a way that wasn't sentimental.

As if he was saying, without speech: *I heard you. I respect your world. I'm building myself to live in it with you.*

Celeste lowered her eyes to the pattern on the table, but she couldn't stop the small, private thought that arrived like a verdict:

This is what I wanted.

Not a provider.

Not a performer.

A person who can be shaped without being diminished—who chooses upkeep not because he's told to, but because he's finally decided he deserves to be kept.

And, inconveniently, devastatingly, the more he did that—the more he treated himself with the same respect he treated the work—the more attractive he became to her.

Not in the cheap way.

In the way that mattered.



A side note: I was watching my little 4 year old granddaughter for 6 hours... and her interaction with her hair was simple: she would ignore tendrils. She wouldn't waste time with them. Sharl will eventually need to learn that he can't stop what he's doing every time his updo loosens a bit. He'll probably find that out on his own, but it's an observation I'd like to fit in here: self-care in a woman's place isn't obsessive: it practical. Tendrils aren't a problem. Tangles are.

That observation is *perfect*—and it actually sharpens the whole “maintenance not theatre” philosophy. It also gives you a wonderfully clean way to keep Sharl from slipping into anxious self-policing (which would read less like dignity and more like performance). The key is to let the lesson arrive as a **women’s-practicality correction**, not as a “you’re doing femininity wrong” lecture.

Two elegant ways to fit it in, both daylight-proof:

### **Option A: Celeste notices, corrects once, and reframes it as *triage***

This is the simplest insertion, and it keeps Celeste as lead without fuss.

---

Sharl retied his hair again later—too soon.

Celeste clocked it because the room had rhythm, and he’d just broken it. A tiny pause at the mirror. A hand to the nape. A quiet re-loop. Not vanity—anxiety. The kind that came from suddenly caring and not yet knowing the difference between *care* and *control*.

Celeste walked past him with a tote under her arm and stopped just long enough to speak, low and clear.

“Leave it,” she said.

Sharl blinked. “It’s coming loose.”

Celeste didn’t look at the mirror. She looked at the garment—at the line of the neckline, the way the bodice sat, the way the apron tie held.

“It’s not failing,” she said. “It’s living.”

Sharl frowned, uncertain.

Celeste tipped her head, the smallest softening in her eyes.

“Tendrils aren’t a problem,” she said. “Tangles are. A little softness is fine. You don’t stop work for a wisp.”

He hesitated, then let his hands drop, as if he’d been waiting for permission not to be perfect.

Celeste added, practical as a spec sheet:

"If it's in your eyes or snagging the shift, fix it. If it's just... existing, ignore it."

Sharl exhaled. "Okay."

Celeste nodded once. "Good. Back to work."

And she walked away, satisfied—not because she'd controlled him, but because she'd saved him from turning self-care into obsession.

---

### **Option B: Sarah delivers it with humour, Celeste endorses the standard**

This keeps Sarah useful as culture pressure-test (and lets her be funny without being romantic).

---

Sharl started to head for the mirror again and Sarah caught it instantly.

"Oh, don't you dare," she said, like she was scolding a kettle for boiling. "You'll spend your whole life tying that thing if you keep chasing every loose strand."

Sharl stopped mid-step. "It's messy."

Sarah snorted. "It's *human*."

She waved a hand at him, as if dismissing the entire concept of perfection.

"Listen," she said, "girls learn this when they're four. You don't halt the world for tendrils. Tendrils are background noise. Tangles are the enemy. Hair in your eyes is the enemy. But a wisp at the ear? That's just... weather."

A couple of the stitchers smiled. One of them murmured, "True."

Sharl looked a little stunned, like he'd been given permission to stop managing himself like a performance.

Celeste, from the cutting table, didn't even lift her head.

"Sarah's right," she said. "We do triage here."

Sharl's shoulders loosened.

"Okay," he said quietly.

"And," Celeste added, finally looking up, "if you're going to stop work, let it be for a seam that fails—not for a strand that exists."

Sharl nodded once. "Got it."

---

### Why this works (and why it's thematically strong)

- It reinforces your point: **women's self-care is practical, not obsessive**.
- It protects Sharl from becoming hypervigilant about appearance (which would feel like "trying to earn her," not "meeting standards").
- It subtly deepens Celeste's attraction: she's attracted to *disciplined care*, not anxious perfection.

If you tell me which option you prefer (Celeste-only or Sarah+Celeste), I'll splice it smoothly into the scene you're building so it reads like it was always part of the fabric.



I like Option B better... humour is always appealing, particularly in this sort of thing. Celeste is going to be fine with it: Sarah is actually helping, for once.

Perfect—Option B also lets Sarah be *useful* without ever sliding into "rom-com sidekick," and it shows Celeste's leadership as the thing that *absorbs* humour and turns it into standard.

Here's a tightened, scene-ready insertion you can drop right after the "retied it cleanly" moment—same tone, same ethic, with Sarah's wit doing the heavy lifting and Celeste's endorsement making it policy:

---

Sharl started for the mirror again.

Not because it was truly failing—Celeste could see from across the room that the tie still held. The nape was still secure. The neckline was still stable. The gown still read era, still read intentional.

But a few tendrils had escaped—soft little wisps at his ears, a strand near his cheekbone that moved when he turned his head.

Normal.

Living.

And Sharl's body, newly trained to care, had mistaken "normal" for "wrong."

Sarah clocked the movement instantly.

"Oh, don't you *dare*," she said, as if she were scolding a kettle for boiling.

Sharl froze mid-step, hand half-raised. "It's... coming loose."

Sarah's face did that particular UK expression—half disbelief, half comedy, all judgement.

"Sweetheart," she said, "if you stop what you're doing every time a strand escapes, you'll spend your entire life in front of a mirror. You'll die there. Surrounded by hair ties."

A couple of the stitchers snorted. One of them murmured something like *she's not wrong* without looking up.

Sharl's cheeks coloured, but he didn't shrink. He looked genuinely uncertain, like he'd been told to do a thing and now didn't know when to stop doing it.

"It looks messy," he said, quietly.

Sarah made a dismissive wave, as if sweeping the entire concept off a table.

"It looks *human*," she said. "Girls learn this when they're four. You don't halt the world for tendrils. Tendrils are background noise. They're weather."

Sharl blinked at her, processing.

Sarah continued, warming to the lecture in the way she did when she'd found a point she could sharpen for the good of the room.

"Tangles are the enemy," she said. "Hair in your eyes is the enemy. Hair snagging your shift is the enemy. But a wisp by the ear? That's nothing. You ignore it and carry on. The point is to work, not to curate."

Sharl's hand lowered slowly, like someone receiving permission he hadn't realised he needed.

Celeste, at the cutting table, didn't look up at first. She didn't want to dignify this with too much attention. The goal was normalisation.

But she did speak, voice steady, calm, and with just enough authority to turn Sarah's humour into policy.

"Sarah's right," she said. "We do triage here."

Sharl's gaze flicked to her.

Celeste finally looked up then—briefly, precisely—and her eyes went not to his face but to the garment's line: neckline stable, bodice clean, apron tie holding.

"If you're going to stop work," Celeste added, "let it be for a seam that fails—not for a strand that exists."

There was a beat of quiet.

Then Sharl exhaled. Not a laugh, not a sigh—an internal reset.

"Okay," he said.

Sarah pointed at him like she'd just signed off on a trainee.

"Good," she said. "Now go be useful."

Sharl turned away from the mirror and went back to his station.

And Celeste watched—only for the space of a breath—as he moved with a little more ease, a little less self-monitoring. The hair stayed mostly tidy, with a few soft wisps that made him look less like a mannequin and more like a person doing real work in real clothes.

Which, Celeste realised with a small, private flare of warmth, was exactly the point.

How do we do "three months later"? It's a mechanism I have no clue on. It's now winter. The Faire is located south of Melbourne, Victoria so it is now quite cold and windy, even in the day. The visits to the Faire continue unabated, however. Higher-end costumes are being considered, with more expensive material. And then: crisis. An internal one, and yet, one I fully relate to. It seems puberty - or at least the masculinising effects of it - were manifesting themselves in Sharl. And he, like me, was horrified. He had gotten used to 'blending with the costumes' and saw what was happening as threatening to that ability to blend, and so he undertook a dangerous thing 3 months ago: anti-androgens. Now, 3 months later, Celeste discovers the capsules and confronts him.

Thought for 29s >

You can absolutely do "three months later" without it feeling like a clunky signpost. The trick is: **you don't announce time; you demonstrate time**—with *weather, workflow, wardrobe, and new normals*.

Then, when you *do* choose to label it, you do it once, cleanly, and move on.

## Ways to do "three months later" that feel natural

### 1) The clean cut (best when you want momentum)

**Chapter break / scene break**, then open on unmistakably new conditions.

- **Prose:**

*Three months later, winter came hard off Bass Strait.*

(One sentence. Then immediately into sensory specifics.)

- **Screenplay:**

SUPER: THREE MONTHS LATER – WINTER

Or: SUPER: WINTER – THREE MONTHS LATER

The "not cliché" version is: **don't make it poetic**. Make it factual, confident, almost administrative. That matches Wardrobe's ethos.

## 2) The ledger method (perfect for your “systems + standards” world)

Open the new section with a “Wardrobe reality check” paragraph:

- a pinned **production schedule** on the board (new staff names)
- **winter fabric swatches** taped next to orders
- a note: “NYMPH v3 — wool blend trial”
- Mara writing: *Lead times extended. No heroics.*

It communicates time *and* growth without ever saying “time passed.”

## 3) The seasonal proof (Melbourne winter does this for you)

A single paragraph can do the whole job:

- breath fogging in the workroom doorway
- damp hems
- wind that finds the gap at your collar
- the Faire continuing anyway, because people are stubborn and romantic about “authenticity”

That’s Victoria in winter: grey, wet, windy, and still operational.

## 4) The “new normal” method (quietly devastating)

Show one habitual behaviour that now exists because of the past three months:

- Sharl ties his hair without thinking.
- He *doesn’t* stop for tendrils.
- He has a coat hook with his name.
- Celeste’s study hours are protected, non-negotiable.
- They have an evening routine that’s almost domestic—tea, study, lights out.

Readers feel time because the characters have *habits*.

---

Now, about your crisis beat: **not contrived**. It’s actually a strong, relatable “internal crisis” that fits your themes:

- Sharl’s identity and safety depend on blending, not performing.
- Puberty’s masculinising drift threatens that blending.
- He makes a desperate, private choice that he rationalises as “maintenance.”
- Celeste discovers it and reacts like a standards-led leader: **firm, protective, consequential.**

The only thing I'll flag (for safety and realism): you'll want the story to treat unsupervised anti-androgen use as what it is—**medically risky**—and have Celeste push immediately toward **adult, supervised care**. I won't give any real-world "how-to" details on substances, but narratively you can absolutely do it as "capsules" discovered and confronted.

Below is a full **Celeste POV** scene that does (1) the three-month jump, (2) winter + scaling, and (3) the capsule discovery + confrontation, in your established tone: clean, daylight-proof, standards-first, no fetish optics, no coercion.

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## Three Months Later — Winter (Celeste POV)

Winter didn't arrive politely.

It came in sideways—wind off the south that found every gap in every collar, rain that didn't fall so much as *travel*, and a cold that made even a heated workroom feel provisional.

The Faire kept going anyway.

That was the thing about people who paid for "authenticity": they loved hardship as long as it happened to them in wool and with a ticket stub in their pocket. They came down south of Melbourne in scarves and optimism, queued in weather that would've sent sensible people home, and posed smiling beside timber palings while the wind tried to peel their cheeks off.

Wardrobe scaled around it.

Not with heroics. With systems.

There were two new stitchers on the roster now—names pencilled into the schedule in Mara's angular hand. A finishing specialist who could hem a skirt so cleanly the line looked *inevitable*. A packing table that was no longer an afterthought but a station with its own checklist and bins and tape measured to the millimetre.

And on the board, pinned under FIELD NOTES, the museum's feedback had become routine instead of insult.

### NYMPH LINE — v3 (WINTER FABRICS) — FIT / WEAR ISSUE: REPRODUCIBLE

You didn't argue with reproducible.

You fixed it.

The "Nymph" line was still the one everyone wanted.

Now they wanted it in better cloth.

The cheap cottons and forgiving linens had been enough for early viability and the Faire's baseline. But winter changed everything. Clients started asking for the word that always meant trouble: *upgrade*.

Wool blends. Heavier weaves. Better drape. Less mercy.

Mara had looked at the new swatches, looked at the order queue, and said, flatly: "Expensive mistakes are still mistakes. Test everything."

So fixing, prototyping, and testing recommenced.

And Sharl wore the blue gown again—white apron, square neckline, the whole silhouette snapped into place—because that's what he did now. Not "dress up." Not "be brave." Just wear-test. Log. Improve.

He wore it almost all day.

Which meant, in winter, he wore a coat over it to get to the van. He wore gloves between tasks. He drank more tea than any human should drink and still kept his hands steady.

And, quietly, he looked... kept.

Not polished. Not theatrical.

Just maintained in a way he'd never been before.

Celeste noticed it the way she noticed everything: as a shift in baseline.

He smelled clean in a neutral way that didn't announce itself. His hair was tied in the practical knot she'd taught him months ago, and he no longer panicked at tendrils. He fixed tangles, fixed eyes-blocking strands, and ignored the rest like a four-year-old with better things to do than curate herself.

Sarah had been right about that, and Celeste had quietly made it policy: triage, not obsession.

It should have made Celeste feel satisfied and nothing else.

It did make her feel satisfied.

It also did something worse: it made her increasingly aware, in the most inconvenient moments, that she was attracted to him.

Not in the cheap way. Not as novelty. Not as "isn't this interesting."

In the way you became attracted to someone who accepted your standards without resentment—who met you halfway and then kept walking.

Sharl had stopped trying to be worthy by providing.

Now he was being worthy by maintaining.

And it was... devastating.

Winter sharpened everything. The work. The ethics. The small rituals of care that became survival.

By the time they got home that night, the house felt like shelter in the most literal sense. Celeste shut the door against the wind and stood for a second with her forehead resting against the timber, listening to the silence settle.

Sharl moved past her without fanfare and turned on the heater. Kettle. Tea.

Infrastructure.

Celeste took off her coat, hung it properly—because the house had standards too now—and went straight to her desk.

Study hours were non-negotiable.

That had been the deal from the beginning, written into their life the way Mara wrote terms into contracts: not cruel, just real.

Sharl didn't sulk about it. He didn't hover.

He made the world hold around it.

A mug of tea appeared on the corner of her desk without interrupting her. A plate with something warm. The lamp angled so it didn't glare off the page.

Celeste studied until her brain went grainy, until the words on the screen stopped meaning anything and became shapes. She closed her laptop with the same careful

finality she used to close a ledger.

"That's me," she said aloud. "Done."

Sharl looked up from the kitchen bench where he'd been folding something—laundry, probably, because of course it was laundry. He didn't say *finally*. He didn't say *about time*. He only nodded as if she'd completed a task that mattered, because she had.

"Okay," he said. "You want tea?"

"I already have tea."

He smiled, small. "More tea."

Celeste felt something soften in her chest. She stood, stretched, and walked toward the bathroom to wash her face—routine, maintenance, the simple acts that meant you were still a person and not just a brain on a schedule.

The bathroom was warmer than the rest of the house. The mirror fogged slightly as the tap ran. Celeste clipped her hair back and reached into the cabinet for her cleanser.

Her fingers brushed something that wasn't hers.

A small, hard bottle tucked behind the neatly lined things—behind her own plain pump bottle, behind the floss, behind the spare toothpaste.

Celeste froze.

Not because of paranoia. Because of pattern recognition.

Sharl didn't hide things in her house. Sharl's entire personality was built on being legible. If something was hidden, it meant he believed it had to be hidden.

She pulled the bottle out.

White plastic. Childproof cap. No brand she recognised. The label—partially peeled, as if someone had tried to make it anonymous and failed.

And inside: capsules.

Celeste stared at them for a beat too long.

Her mind went quiet, the way it did when something crossed from "odd" into "dangerous."

She didn't panic.

She did what she always did.

She assessed.

**Is this prescribed?**

The label was damaged. No clear name. No clear instructions visible. That alone was a red flag.

**Is this harmless?**

People didn't hide harmless things.

**Does this belong in my house without my knowledge?**

No.

Celeste screwed the cap back on with steady hands.

She didn't storm down the hallway.

She didn't shout his name.

She walked back to the kitchen like a person carrying a fact.

Sharl was at the bench, wiping a spill. He looked up when she entered—calm, domestic, safe.

Then he saw the bottle in her hand.

His face went still in a way Celeste had only seen once before: the expression of someone caught in a private emergency.

"Celeste," he said, and it wasn't a question. It was a warning. It was *please*.

Celeste set the bottle on the bench between them with controlled precision. Not a slam. Not a flourish. An exhibit.

"What is this?" she asked.

Sharl's throat moved. He didn't reach for it. He didn't lie. He just stood there as if his body had decided it wasn't allowed to move.

"It's... nothing," he said, reflexively.

Celeste's gaze sharpened.

"Don't," she said, quiet and lethal. "Not in my house."

Sharl flinched, just slightly.

Celeste kept her voice level. She refused to raise it, because raised voices were a loss of control, and she refused to give control away here.

"What is it?" she repeated. "And who gave it to you?"

Sharl's mouth opened. Closed.

Then, very softly, he said, "It's to stop... things."

Celeste felt her stomach drop.

"Things," she echoed.

Sharl looked away, as if the kitchen wall might be kinder than her eyes. "My body," he said. "It's... changing."

Celeste held very still.

Winter. Wind. Faire. The new fabrics. The clients. The way he'd begun to look more maintained.

And beneath it, a private terror she hadn't seen because he'd been so good at being functional.

Celeste's voice softened by a fraction—not indulgent, just human.

"What changes?" she asked.

Sharl swallowed. "The... male stuff," he said, and the words came out like poison. "The way it... tries to happen."

His eyes flicked to her then, desperate and ashamed at once.

"I don't want it," he said. "I can't— I can't lose... I can't lose how I fit. How I—" He gestured vaguely, helpless. "Blend."

Celeste closed her eyes for half a second.

Not because she didn't understand.

Because she understood too well.

The horror of becoming something you didn't consent to. The feeling of betrayal when your own body decided it belonged to someone else's rules.

Celeste opened her eyes again.

Her voice was calm.

"And you decided to medicate yourself," she said. "In secret."

Sharl's shoulders tightened.

"It was only—" he began.

"Stop," Celeste said. Not loud. Final.

Sharl stopped.

Celeste leaned forward slightly, palms on the bench, anchoring herself. She looked at him the way she looked at a production failure: not with contempt, but with seriousness.

"This is not a wardrobe problem," she said. "This is a health problem."

Sharl's jaw clenched. "It's a me problem."

"It's a *medical* problem," Celeste corrected. "And you do not experiment on your endocrine system in my house."

The words landed like a door closing.

Sharl's eyes went wet instantly, which made him furious. He blinked hard.

"I didn't know what else to do," he whispered.

Celeste's throat tightened. She kept her control.

"You come to me," she said.

Sharl flinched. "I didn't want to—"

"To what?" Celeste's eyes narrowed. "To be a burden?"

He couldn't answer.

Celeste stared at him, and the anger in her chest clarified into something cleaner: consequence.

"Here's what we're going to do," she said.

Sharl's head lifted, instinctively. He responded to "plan" like a starving person responds to food.

Celeste kept her voice steady.

"One: you tell me where you got them."

Sharl's breath shook. "Online."

Celeste's jaw tightened. She nodded once, as if confirming what she'd already suspected.

"Two: you tell me how long."

Sharl stared at the bench. "Three months."

There it was.

Three months of winter scaling. Three months of him quietly trying to keep himself in a shape that felt survivable. Three months of him taking a risk he didn't fully understand because he'd been afraid that asking for help would make him... lesser.

Celeste exhaled slowly.

"Three," she said, "we get you seen by a doctor. Properly. Immediately."

Sharl's face tightened with fear. "They'll—"

"They will be professional," Celeste said, unyielding. "And if they're not, we find another. That's not negotiable."

Sharl's eyes flicked to hers. "You can't make them understand."

Celeste's voice dropped.

"I don't need them to understand your soul," she said. "I need them to keep you safe."

A beat.

Celeste picked up the bottle and held it—not as a threat, but as an object that no longer belonged to secrecy.

"Four," she said, "I'm telling your mother."

Sharl jerked. "No—"

Celeste's gaze turned flat.

"Yes," she said. "This isn't a shame secret. This is a safety issue. Lauren deserves to know what's happening to her son, and I refuse to be complicit in you hiding a risk like this."

Sharl's breath hitched. He looked like he might argue, then didn't. Because some part of him—some sane part—knew she was right.

Celeste's voice softened again, just slightly.

"And five," she said, "you do not punish yourself for this by becoming alone."

Sharl's eyes squeezed shut. A tear escaped anyway, spiteful and involuntary.

Celeste watched him for a moment, then made a choice.

She stepped around the bench, not rushing, not dramatic, and stopped beside him.

"May I?" she asked, quietly.

Sharl's throat bobbed. He nodded.

Celeste put one hand on the back of his neck—brief, steady contact—and felt him shudder like someone who'd been holding a dam in place with his bare hands.

"You're not in trouble for being afraid," she said.

Sharl's voice broke. "It's ruining everything."

Celeste's grip tightened a fraction, anchoring him.

"It's not ruining everything," she said. "It's revealing where we need better support."

He made a small, broken sound.

Celeste kept her tone firm, because firmness was safety.

"You don't get to risk your life to keep a silhouette," she said. "Do you understand me?"

Sharl nodded, tears sliding now, ashamed of them.

"Yes," he whispered.

Celeste let her hand fall away. Space restored. Consent respected.

"Good," she said. "Now sit."

Sharl sat at the kitchen table like his legs had finally remembered they were allowed to give out.

Celeste picked up her phone.

Not to threaten. To act.

"I'm calling Lauren," she said.

Sharl looked up, pleading. "Please—"

Celeste's eyes held his.

"You don't get to be brave by being silent," she said. "You get to be brave by being accountable."

She hit call.

As it rang, Celeste looked at the bottle again and felt that cold, sharp clarity settle in her bones.

This—this was leadership.

Not teasing.

Not tenderness-as-play.

This was what it meant to hold standards when someone you cared about tried to solve a crisis alone.

The phone clicked. Lauren answered, voice warm, tired, immediate.

"Celeste?"

Celeste kept her voice calm.

"Lauren," she said. "We need to talk. It's about Sharl. He's safe right now, but we've found something and we're taking action."

Across the table, Sharl bowed his head, hands clenched together.

Celeste watched him and felt, beneath all the steel, a fierce, steady tenderness.

Not indulgent.

Not fog.

The kind that built.

---

If you want, the next scene can be the **confrontation aftermath** the following morning: winter wind, a drive to an appointment, Lauren arriving like consequence in a coat, Mara's reaction at work ("health is non-negotiable"), and Celeste privately grappling with the emotional shock: she's furious he hid it, but even more shaken by how much she *understands* the fear.



Lauren has to come to terms with the fact that her son most definitely has gender dysphoria: he doesn't think he's a woman but he definitely is horrified about emerging masculinisation, which he attributes to "wanting to blend" but his psychiatrist understands otherwise. He refers Sharl to an endocrinologist with his diagnosis, and the endocrinologist - after discussing options with Sharl and his mum, decides that there was a safe anti-androgen route that could be reversed if need be. I know this because I was on exactly that regimen for years, followed by an endocrinologist. Only difference, I was also on Sandrena (estradiol) gel.

Thought for 14s >

That's a coherent arc, and it actually *protects* the story from melodrama because it replaces "secret pills" with the thing your whole world prizes: **systems, supervision, written terms, and reversible choices**.

Also: the distinction you're making is psychologically sharp and very believable. Sharl doesn't have to say "I am a woman" for a clinician (and his mother) to recognise **dysphoria focused on masculinisation**. In your story, that can land as the moment

Lauren realises the “blend” explanation was *true*—but incomplete. “Blend” is the language Sharl has for it. The clinicians can see the underlying pattern.

I'll keep this firmly in narrative/character territory (no medical instructions). Here's a scene you can drop in—**Lauren POV**, because this is *her* pivot: from “maintenance and standards” to “oh—this is deeper, and my job is still standards, just higher-stakes.”

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## Scene — “The Referral” (Lauren POV)

The waiting room had that particular smell of modern care: disinfectant trying to be invisible, paper trying to be reassuring, and a faint undertone of coffee that had been reheated too many times to still be coffee.

Lauren sat with her ankles crossed, coat folded over her lap, hands resting on top of it like a lid.

Across from her, Sharl was very still.

Not sullen still. Not defiant. The kind of stillness he fell into when he was trying not to make the world any harder to manage than it already was. His hair was tied back in the neat knot Celeste had shown him months ago. There were faint tendrils at his ears—normal, living—and he didn't keep touching them. That, if nothing else, told Lauren he'd absorbed the lesson: self-care wasn't obsession. It was practical.

He looked... kept.

The thought stabbed her with a mix of pride and grief, because she couldn't stop seeing the same truth from two angles at once:

**He's doing better.**

**He was scared enough to poison himself in secret.**

Lauren's gaze dropped to his hands. He'd been moisturising. She could see it in the way the knuckles didn't look raw, in the way his skin didn't seem stretched thin over bone.

Maintenance.

He had always been good at maintenance—of other people, of rooms, of systems. The new thing was that he was letting maintenance apply to him.

She wanted to reach across and take his hand. She didn't. Sharl didn't like to be handled when he was frightened; it made him feel like a child, and he hated being a child when stakes were adult.

Instead, she did what she'd learned to do: she stayed present. She breathed. She let him borrow her steadiness without making a show of it.

A door opened. A name called.

They stood. They walked down the hallway behind a nurse who moved like she'd done this a thousand times and didn't want to pretend it was special.

The psychiatrist's office was clean, spare, almost aggressively ordinary. Books, a desk, two chairs, one small plant that looked like it survived on sheer stubbornness.

The man himself—middle-aged, calm, unshowy—shook Lauren's hand, then Sharl's, with the same professional neutrality. Not cold. Not warm. Just... structured.

Good, Lauren thought. Structure is what we need.

They sat.

The psychiatrist began with the obvious: history, timeline, the discovery of the capsules, the immediate cessation, the fear, the secrecy. He asked Sharl questions that were not traps but probes—gentle, repetitive, circling back to see whether answers stayed consistent.

Lauren listened, jaw tight, hands still.

Sharl spoke in his careful way. He didn't embellish. He didn't perform anguish. He described the problem as if it were a seam that had begun to fail under stress.

"I don't want... the male stuff," he said, voice low. "The changes. The direction. The way it feels like I'm being pushed into a shape."

The psychiatrist nodded, as if this were neither shocking nor rare.

"And you felt you couldn't tell anyone," the man said.

Sharl's eyes flicked to Lauren for half a second, then down again.

"I didn't want to be..." He struggled. "Difficult."

Lauren's chest tightened.

The psychiatrist's pen paused.

"Difficult to whom?" he asked, calmly.

Sharl looked trapped for a moment, then said the honest thing.

"To Mum. To Celeste. To everyone. Because I'm supposed to just... do what I'm told. Be useful."

Lauren felt her own face go very still.

That sentence—be useful—had been Sharl's religion since he was small. Lauren had thought she'd corrected it over the years, but religion wasn't corrected by one conversation. It was corrected by a new reality lived long enough to become true.

The psychiatrist turned slightly toward Lauren.

"Lauren," he said, "how familiar is that pattern to you?"

Lauren heard herself speak before she could stop it.

"It's him," she said. "It's always been him. He thinks being wanted is conditional. He thinks he has to earn his place."

The psychiatrist nodded. "And what has changed recently?"

Lauren's throat tightened again, because she knew the answer and hated how much it mattered.

"Standards," she said. "He's in an environment where women have standards. Clear ones. He's... meeting them. He's doing well."

The psychiatrist's gaze shifted to Sharl.

"And how does that feel?" he asked.

Sharl hesitated. His cheeks coloured faintly. He looked embarrassed by the vulnerability of the truth.

"Good," he said softly. "It feels... good. Like I can breathe. Like I'm not wrong all the time."

Lauren's eyes stung. She didn't let it show. She refused to become the parent who cried and made the child responsible for comforting her.

The psychiatrist let a brief silence settle.

Then he said, in the same calm tone he'd used for everything else:

"Sharl, what you're describing is consistent with gender dysphoria."

The words landed with the weight of a stamp.

Lauren felt her stomach drop—no, not drop. Settle. Like a heavy object finally finding the table it belonged on.

Sharl blinked rapidly. "But I'm not—" he began, and then stalled, as if the rest of the sentence was too loaded.

The psychiatrist didn't push him into a label.

"I'm not asking you to define yourself today," he said. "I'm describing the distress pattern: the horror around masculinising changes, the relief in a more androgynous presentation, the safety you feel when your body isn't betraying you. That constellation matters."

Sharl stared at the carpet as if it might offer him a simpler vocabulary.

Lauren watched him and thought, with quiet ferocity: *He's not being dramatic. He's being honest.*

The psychiatrist's eyes returned to Lauren.

"And Lauren," he said, "it may help to separate identity from distress. Some people know exactly who they are. Others only know what feels intolerable. Both are valid. Our job is to keep him safe while he discovers the rest."

Lauren's jaw tightened.

"My job," she said, "is to make sure he doesn't do this alone again."

The psychiatrist nodded, almost approving.

"Good," he said. "Because the unsupervised route you found—whatever it was—was a risk."

Lauren's hands curled slightly over her coat.

"I know," she said. "I know. I just—" She stopped, because she didn't want to rant. Ranting was for people without plans.

The psychiatrist leaned back.

"There are supervised, reversible options," he said. "But this requires proper assessment and endocrinology oversight. Bloodwork, monitoring, informed consent. Not secrecy."

Sharl's head lifted a fraction, the smallest spark of hope.

"Reversible?" he asked, voice tight.

"Some interventions are designed to be," the psychiatrist replied carefully. "But that decision belongs with an endocrinologist—after full discussion with you and your parent. My role is to make the referral and document the diagnosis clearly so the endocrinologist has context."

Lauren felt the word parent tug at her heart in a way she didn't like. Sharl was eighteen, yes—but he was still her son. Still hers to protect.

The psychiatrist turned his screen slightly, typed, then printed a sheet and slid it across the desk.

A referral.

A diagnosis.

Words that would travel to another specialist and become leverage for care.

Lauren picked it up, eyes scanning. She didn't flinch at the phrase on the page. She didn't romanticise it either.

It was data.

And it was, finally, **legibility**.

Sharl looked at the paper like it might bite.

Lauren did what she did best: she made the situation practical.

"We'll do it," she said, firmly. "We'll get you seen."

Sharl's voice came out small. "Mum..."

Lauren looked at him, and let herself be very plain.

"I don't care what this is called," she said. "I care that you're safe. I care that you don't feel trapped in your own skin. And I care that you don't buy your safety off the internet ever again."

Sharl swallowed hard. His eyes shone. He nodded once.

The psychiatrist watched them with the mild, observant expression of someone who'd seen a thousand families fail this moment by turning it into ideology.

Lauren refused.

This was not ideology. This was her child's body, her child's fear, and the rules of safe care.

---

Two weeks later, they sat in a different office with different smells: antiseptic and fresh paper, a wall chart of hormones rendered into cheerful colours as if biology were a school subject and not a source of dread.

The endocrinologist was a woman in her forties with the kind of competence that didn't need to perform warmth to be kind. She greeted Sharl first. She asked him questions directly. She made it clear, by posture alone, that he was the primary person in the room—even with his mother present.

Lauren liked her immediately.

They talked for nearly an hour.

Not just about symptoms or distress, but about goals—what "safe" meant for Sharl, what "blending" meant, what he feared, what he hoped. The endocrinologist didn't let "blend" remain vague. She unpacked it gently until it became a set of concrete needs: reduce distress, slow unwanted changes, preserve options, monitor health.

She asked about the unsupervised capsules. Sharl admitted what he could. Lauren held her tongue and let the woman do her work.

Then the endocrinologist did the thing Lauren had been craving since the day she'd found the bottle:

She made a plan.

A plan with terms.

A plan with monitoring.

A plan that did not require Sharl to gamble with his body in secret.

"There are routes that can be considered in a reversible framework," the endocrinologist said, looking at Sharl. "But I want to be very clear: this is not a DIY project. If we do anything, it's documented, supervised, and we check regularly. If you don't like how you feel, we re-evaluate. You retain agency."

Sharl's breath left him in a shaky exhale.

"And... I don't have to decide... everything?" he asked.

The endocrinologist's mouth softened slightly.

"No," she said. "You don't. You have to decide what you can tolerate right now. And you have to agree to do it safely."

Lauren felt something in her chest ease for the first time in weeks.

Not because the world had become simple.

Because it had become **structured**.

When they walked out afterward, Sharl's shoulders looked lower. His gaze steadier. Not elated. Not "fixed."

Just—less hunted.

Lauren got him into the car, waited until he'd buckled his seatbelt, then rested her hands on the steering wheel and sat for a second without starting the engine.

Sharl looked at her, uncertain.

Lauren kept her voice calm.

"You're not in trouble," she said.

Sharl's throat moved. "I know."

Lauren's jaw tightened, and she let the steel show now—the motherly steel she didn't apologise for.

"You are," she said, "never doing secret medicine again."

Sharl nodded. "I won't."

Lauren turned her head and looked at him fully.

"And you're not," she added, "allowed to call yourself difficult for needing care."

Sharl blinked fast. "Mum..."

Lauren didn't soften away from it.

"I'm not raising a martyr," she said. "I'm raising a person who knows when to ask for help."

Sharl's mouth trembled, and he looked out the window quickly, embarrassed by his own face.

Lauren started the car.

As they pulled out, her mind flicked—inevitably—to Celeste.

To that house with its quiet standards. To the way Celeste handled consent like a contract and tenderness like a tool. To the way Sharl had begun to look... kept, under her leadership, without being diminished.

Lauren's feelings about that were complex in the way all mother feelings were complex.

But one thing was clear:

Celeste's standards had not harmed her son.

They had given him a language for self-respect.

And now, with medicine moved out of secrecy and into supervision, Lauren could finally breathe enough to see the larger truth without flinching:

Her son's best chance at a good life was not to "toughen up" into maleness.

It was to be allowed to become—safely, steadily—whatever shape made him able to live.

And Lauren, like any competent woman, was perfectly capable of learning a new system when the stakes required it.

If you'd like, the next scene can be Celeste POV again: Celeste reacts to the endocrinology plan not with sentiment but with **relief + renewed standards** ("no more secrets," "we log appointments," "your health is a non-negotiable line-item"), and Sharl's blending at the Faire becomes even more meaningful because it's no longer bought with danger.



A couple of things, here... brilliantly written, by the way. Can you do it again, except in Lauren's POV (I failed to mention POV at the outset, so my bad). Also, Lauren didn't find the anti-androgens: Celeste did. Please proceed.

Absolutely — and thank you for the correction. Here's the same arc **fully in Lauren's POV**, with **Celeste as the one who discovers the capsules** and pulls Lauren in as consequence and support.

I'll keep it daylight-proof, systems-led, and emotionally honest — and I'll treat the medical side as *supervised care with reversible options discussed*, without drifting into "how-to."

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## Scene — “The Call” / “The Referral” (Lauren POV)

Celeste didn't ring me like a girl with gossip.

She rang me like a manager reporting a safety breach.

“Lauren,” she said, voice controlled, “Sharl is safe. But I found something in the bathroom cabinet. Capsules. He’s been taking them for three months. He says it’s because he’s scared of masculinising changes.”

There was a second—one clean second—where my brain refused to accept the sentence.

Capsules. Three months. In secret.

My hand tightened around the phone until my knuckles hurt.

"How safe?" I asked.

"Safe right now," Celeste said. "He stopped. I've got them. He didn't want to tell you. I'm telling you."

I closed my eyes.

Celeste's voice didn't wobble. It didn't apologise for consequence. It simply *held the line*.

And in that instant I understood something I'd only half understood before: Celeste wasn't a romantic interest in Sharl's life. She was a standard-bearer. A girl who treated ethics like physics.

"Okay," I said, because okay was what you said when you needed to keep breathing. "I'm coming."

"Good," Celeste replied. "We need a plan. Not blame."

Not blame.

My chest tightened with gratitude I didn't quite have words for.

"I'll be there tonight," I said.

"Drive safe," she said, and hung up as if the call were a transaction: information delivered, action set.

I stood there in my kitchen and stared at nothing.

A memory rose — Sharl at four years old, cheeks sticky with jam, trying to tie his shoelaces with a concentration that looked like prayer. He'd always been like that: careful, earnest, determined to be useful.

Useful was his religion.

And now useful had nearly killed him.

I picked up my keys.

---

Winter down there wasn't like winter in stories.

It didn't feel cinematic. It felt like wind that found your bones. The kind of cold that made you realise how much you depended on walls.

By the time I pulled up outside Celeste's place, the sky was already that dull metallic grey that arrives early and stays late. The air stung. My breath fogged.

Celeste opened the door before I could knock.

She was composed, hair clipped back, face bare, eyes clear. Not a girl waiting to be judged. A young woman with her hands on the wheel.

"Come in," she said quietly.

I stepped inside and the warmth hit my face. Not cosy-warm. Functional warm. Heater on, floor clear, shoes lined up like a small act of control against weather and chaos.

Sharl was at the kitchen table.

He looked up when he saw me.

The look on his face made my heart squeeze so hard I nearly lost my breath.

Not guilty in the way a child looks guilty when they've broken a rule.

Guilty in the way a good person looks when they've been terrified and stupid and are now ashamed of the terror itself.

"Mum," he said, small.

I wanted to go to him immediately — to wrap him up, to scold him, to do all the mother things at once.

I didn't.

Sharl didn't respond well to spectacle. Comfort that was too loud turned into debt in his head. He would start managing *my* feelings instead of dealing with his own crisis.

So I walked to the table. I sat down. I put my keys next to my bag.

Then I looked at him directly.

"Tell me," I said.

Sharl's eyes dropped.

Celeste didn't hover. She didn't insert herself. She stayed standing by the bench like a witness and a firewall.

"It was because of... changes," Sharl said, voice rough. "The male stuff. I didn't want it."

"How long?" I asked.

"Three months."

My stomach dropped and then steadied into anger's cold, practical sister: resolve.

"Where did you get them?" I asked.

Sharl hesitated, then whispered, "Online."

I closed my eyes for a beat.

Online.

My son had turned his body into a DIY project because he was scared and didn't believe he was allowed to ask for help.

Celeste's voice cut in, calm and uncompromising.

"He was trying to protect his ability to blend in costumes," she said. "That's how he framed it."

I looked at Sharl.

"And is that how it feels?" I asked him. "Just... blending?"

He swallowed.

"It's... the only way I can explain it," he said, and his voice cracked on the last word. "I just— when it starts happening, it feels like I'm being pushed into a shape I don't want. Like it's ruining everything."

Celeste set a small bottle on the table.

Not a slam. An exhibit.

"I took these," she said. "I'm not leaving them accessible. Not to punish you. To keep you safe."

I nodded once, grateful.

Then I turned back to my son and let the steel into my voice — not cruelty, not humiliation. Consequence.

"Sharl," I said, "you are never taking secret medicine again."

His eyes squeezed shut.

"I know," he whispered.

"No," I said. "You *know* now because you got caught. I need you to know because you understand. Because you choose it."

He looked up then, eyes wet.

"I didn't want to be difficult," he said.

That sentence hit me harder than the capsules.

Because it was the sentence underneath everything.

I felt my throat tighten. I kept my voice steady.

"You are not difficult for needing care," I said. "Do you understand me?"

He nodded, barely.

Celeste spoke again, still calm, still firm.

"I want him seen by a doctor," she said. "Properly. Psychiatrist first. Then endocrinology if appropriate. Supervised. Documented."

I looked at her and felt something close to relief.

This was what competence looked like: not panic, not pity, not ideology.

A plan.

"Yes," I said. "We do it properly."

Sharl's shoulders sagged as if he'd been holding his body up with willpower alone.

"I'm scared," he admitted.

I let myself soften a fraction.

"I know," I said. "And we're still doing it properly."

The psychiatrist's waiting room the next day smelled like disinfectant and cheap tea. I sat with my coat folded on my lap like armour.

Sharl sat beside me, very still.

His hair was tied back, neat. His face looked cared for in that plain, functional way — not glamour, not performance. Maintenance.

And that, perversely, made me angry again, because it proved how much he *could* do when he believed he was allowed.

The psychiatrist was calm and clean and unshowy. He spoke to Sharl first, which I appreciated. He asked questions that weren't traps, asked them twice in different ways, letting the truth settle into the room like sediment.

Sharl tried, at first, to keep it in the language he knew.

"Blending," he said. "Costumes. Not standing out."

The psychiatrist nodded.

"And what happens inside you when masculinising changes show up?" he asked.

Sharl stared at his hands.

"I feel... horrified," he said, and the word came out like it hurt. "Like I'm being forced."

"And when you're more androgynous?" the psychiatrist asked.

Sharl's shoulders lowered slightly.

"I can breathe," he said.

The psychiatrist let a silence sit, then said something that landed like a stamp without being a shove.

"Sharl, what you're describing is consistent with gender dysphoria," he said.

Sharl's head snapped up.

"But I'm not—" he began, and stopped, trapped by the weight of labels.

The psychiatrist didn't force a label onto him.

"I'm not asking you to define identity today," he said gently. "I'm describing a pattern of distress. The distress matters. The risk you took matters. We treat the distress, and we keep you safe while you figure out the rest."

I felt my chest tighten — grief, relief, fear, and something like vindication all tangled together.

Because the truth was: I'd known something was off for years.

Not in a dramatic way. In a mother way. In that quiet sense that your child is fighting a battle they don't have words for.

I'd thought it was depression. Anxiety. The cruelty of adolescence.

Maybe it had been all of that.

But this — this was clearer. This was a *shape*.

And suddenly the last three months made a terrifying kind of sense: the costumes, the blending, the relief in being able to disappear into a silhouette that didn't scream "boy." The panic at puberty's momentum.

The psychiatrist printed a referral and slid it across the desk.

"Endocrinology," he said. "With the diagnosis documented. So you don't have to improvise in the dark."

I took the paper and looked at it the way I looked at a school report: not as judgement, but as information that dictated next steps.

Sharl stared at it like it might bite.

I put my hand flat on the desk, near it — not touching him, not forcing comfort, just *present*.

"We're doing this properly," I said.

He nodded, the smallest motion.

---

The endocrinologist was a woman with the kind of competence I recognised instantly — crisp, unperformative, direct without being cold.

She addressed Sharl first. She made him the centre of his own care. She asked about goals in practical language: what he feared, what he hoped for, what he could tolerate, what he couldn't.

Then she looked at me.

"Lauren," she said, "your role is support and safety. Not control. We want reversible, monitored decisions whenever possible."

I nodded.

"Yes," I said. "That's what I want."

The endocrinologist discussed options carefully, with clear boundaries: what could be considered, what needed monitoring, what was not a DIY project, what could be paused or reversed if Sharl needed to reassess. She did not sell a fantasy. She offered a framework.

Sharl listened like someone starving for structure.

"So I don't have to decide... everything at once?" he asked.

"No," she said. "You decide what you need right now to reduce distress and stay safe. We monitor. We reassess. You keep agency."

I watched my son's shoulders lower.

Not dramatically. Not like a miracle.

Like a person whose nervous system had finally been told it wasn't alone.

When we left, Sharl walked a little more evenly. His eyes were less hunted.

In the car, I didn't start the engine right away. I sat with my hands on the wheel and let the reality settle.

My son had dysphoria.

My son had tried to treat it alone because he didn't think he deserved supervised help.

And now — now he had a plan with adults around him who understood risk and consent and monitoring.

I turned to him.

"You're not in trouble for being afraid," I said.

He swallowed hard. "It felt like it would ruin everything."

I shook my head slowly.

"It doesn't ruin everything," I said. "It tells us what we have to take seriously."

His eyes shone. He looked away quickly.

"And," I added, steel returning, "you are never doing secret medicine again."

He nodded. "I won't."

I held the wheel tighter.

"Also," I said, "you are not allowed to call yourself difficult for needing care."

He made a small sound, half laugh, half heartbreak. "Mum..."

"I'm not raising a martyr," I said. "I'm raising a person who asks for help before he risks his life."

Sharl stared out the window for a moment, then nodded again.

"Okay," he whispered.

I started the car.

As we pulled away, my mind — inevitably — flicked to Celeste.

To the way she'd handled the discovery with consequence instead of shame. To the way she'd pulled me in without drama and then stepped back, letting me be his mother while still holding standards like a scaffold.

I didn't know what their relationship would become.

But I knew one thing with startling clarity:

My son was safer with women who treated care as a system, not as a mood.

And if he was going to get through this — not by toughening up into masculinity, but by finding a shape he could live in — then the only acceptable path was the one we'd finally chosen:

Supervised. Documented. Reversible where possible.

No secrets.

No heroics.

Just standards.

---

If you want, the next beat can be **Lauren visiting Wardrobe** after the medical plan is set — seeing the winter fabrics, the scaling, the way Sharl moves in the space now — and having a private moment with Celeste that's *not* gushy, but deeply consequential: Lauren thanking her for the intervention, and Celeste making her own terms clear ("no secrecy in this house; no health risks for a silhouette; we log appointments").



Yes please - that's essential, here.

Lauren went to Wardrobe the way you went to a workplace after a safety incident: not to apologise, not to perform gratitude, not to be seen as "a good mother," but to understand the system that had caught her son before he fell.

Winter had settled in properly by then.

The wind off the south had that mean, practical bite that turned every errand into a decision. The sky stayed the colour of aluminium. The air made your eyes water. People still drove down to the Faire anyway—because people would always romanticise discomfort if it came with a story.

Lauren parked, pulled her coat tighter, and walked to the door with the feeling of someone entering an environment where standards mattered.

She liked that feeling.

Inside, the warmth hit her face and the smell hit her nose: cloth, steam, clean detergent, something faintly metallic from scissors and machines. Not perfume. Not candles. Not "cozy." Work.

The space had changed since she'd last been here.

Not in a dramatic, makeover way. In a structural way.

Two new stations. A bigger packing table. More bins. Clipboards in places where clipboards belonged. A roster on the wall with names in Mara's handwriting—angular, ruthless, unmistakable. A swatch board that had migrated from "inspiration" to "materials governance," with little labels and dates and notes like *wool blend trial — frays at seam allowance*.

Lead times posted. Capacity rules. A line that made Lauren's mouth tighten with appreciation:

### **NO HEROICS. NO MARTYR-MATHS.**

It wasn't decorative. It was policy.

She saw Sharl almost immediately—not because he was physically obvious, but because her eyes went to him the way a mother's eyes always did: with reflexive inventory.

He was in motion, carrying something from one table to another with his usual economy. His hair was tied back neatly. His face looked rested in that plain, functional way that meant he'd been sleeping and eating and not spiralling. There were tendrils at his ears—soft, irrelevant—and he didn't touch them. He didn't keep checking himself.

Good.

That one detail alone told Lauren he was learning the right lesson: self-care wasn't obsession; it was triage.

A woman near the finishing station called out a question about seam tension, and Sharl answered without hesitation, pointing to a specific line on a wear-test sheet. No swagger. No apology. Competence.

He glanced up and saw her.

His face changed—tightened, then softened. Relief and embarrassment mixing in the way they always did when he saw his mother in a place where he was trying to be adult.

"Mum," he said, quietly.

Lauren kept her voice calm. "Hi, love."

She wanted to cross the room and touch his cheek. She didn't. Not here. Not in front of the team. Sharl didn't like to be made small by affection in public.

Instead, she gave him what he could accept: respect.

"You look steady," she said.

His mouth twitched. "Yeah."

"Good," she replied. "Keep working."

It wasn't cold. It was the kindest thing she could say. It told him she trusted him to be a functioning person even while she carried fear in her own chest like a weight.

Sharl nodded once and returned to his station without hovering.

Infrastructure, even under pressure.

Lauren turned her attention outward.

Mara was at the central table, reading a printout with the intensity of someone dissecting a fault line. She didn't greet Lauren. She did not do ceremony. Lauren liked that too. It meant the culture didn't revolve around soothing visitors.

Celeste looked up from the cutting table and met Lauren's eyes.

Not with a smile. With acknowledgement.

She wiped her hands on a cloth, set down her pencil, and stepped around the table.

"Lauren," she said. "Can we talk in the back for a minute?"

Lauren nodded. "Yes."

Celeste didn't apologise for the request. She didn't ask permission to manage the space. She simply led, and people moved around her leadership without fuss.

Lauren followed her past a rack of garments in protective covers and a table where new fabrics were laid out—wools, heavier linens, richer colours. The sort of materials that turned mistakes expensive and therefore demanded even higher standards.

They stopped in a small side area that wasn't private in a dramatic way—no closed door, no hidden room—just far enough from the machines that voices didn't carry.

Celeste faced her, posture straight, eyes clear.

Lauren didn't waste time.

"I want to thank you," she said.

Celeste blinked once, as if she hadn't expected gratitude to be said so plainly.

Lauren continued anyway.

"You found it," she said. "You acted. You called me. You didn't let him talk you into secrecy."

Celeste's jaw tightened slightly.

"I wasn't going to," she said.

"I know," Lauren replied. "That's why I'm saying it."

Celeste held Lauren's gaze. She didn't bask. She didn't deflect. She accepted acknowledgement the way she accepted responsibility: as a fact.

Lauren drew a slow breath, then said the part she needed Celeste to hear—mother to young woman, woman to woman.

"He wasn't trying to deceive you," Lauren said. "He was trying to manage terror alone because he thinks he has to earn his right to be cared for."

Celeste's expression didn't change much, but something in her eyes sharpened with understanding.

"I know," Celeste said quietly. "That's what scared me."

Lauren nodded. "Good."

A pause.

Celeste's voice lowered by half a degree—less "manager" now, more "person," but still controlled.

"I'm going to be explicit," Celeste said. "Because fog kills."

Lauren's mouth twitched. She liked that phrase, even if it was severe. It was true.

"In my house," Celeste continued, "there are no health secrets. None. Not because I want control. Because I want safety."

Lauren felt her chest ease slightly.

"Agreed," she said.

Celeste went on, and Lauren could hear the systems-thinking in her tone—terms, boundaries, consequences.

"If Sharl feels distress," Celeste said, "he tells me. If he can't tell me, he tells you. If he can't tell you, he tells the doctor. But there's always an adult in the loop. He doesn't manage this alone."

Lauren nodded. "Yes."

"And," Celeste added, "we log appointments. We treat it like work. Calendar. Reminders. Transport. Food before and after. We don't improvise."

Lauren swallowed. She'd done improvisation for years, trying to catch a child who kept slipping through her hands. The idea of something being scheduled and monitored felt like oxygen.

"Yes," she said again. "Thank you."

Celeste held her gaze.

"This isn't about costumes," Celeste said. "Do you understand me?"

Lauren's mouth tightened. "I do."

"He framed it that way," Celeste said. "Blending. Silhouette. The Faire. But that's the wrapper. The core is that he's scared of what his body does without his consent."

Lauren felt her throat tighten, but she didn't let it spill into emotion theatre.

"I know," she said. "The psychiatrist named it."

Celeste's eyes flicked—an almost invisible reaction. Not alarm. Not judgement. Focus.

"Okay," Celeste said. "So we treat it properly."

Lauren exhaled slowly.

"I need to say this, too," she said. "Because you're young, and you shouldn't have to carry this alone."

Celeste's expression stayed steady.

Lauren chose her words carefully.

"You are not responsible for curing him," Lauren said. "You are not responsible for holding his entire mental health in your hands. You can lead. You can set standards. You can care. But you're not his clinician."

Celeste's mouth tightened. For a moment, Lauren saw something like relief trying not to show itself.

"I know," Celeste said. Then, honest: "But I also... won't be careless."

Lauren nodded.

"That," she said, "is exactly the right posture."

They stood there for a beat longer, two women holding a line between care and control.

Then Lauren's gaze drifted past Celeste's shoulder to the workroom.

Sharl was at a fitting station now, wearing the blue gown again—apron, shift, the whole Nymph silhouette—logging something on his sheet. His hair was tied neatly, with a few tendrils that moved when he turned his head. He didn't touch them. He didn't retreat to the mirror.

He looked... like someone who belonged in the space.

Lauren felt the familiar ache: pride and grief braided together.

"I can see what you've done," Lauren said quietly.

Celeste didn't follow her gaze. She didn't need to.

"What I've done?" she echoed.

Lauren kept her voice calm, but she didn't dilute the truth.

"You've given him a standard," Lauren said. "And you've made it feel safe to meet it."

Celeste's eyes held Lauren's, and for a second she looked younger—just a crack in the armour. Not fragile. Human.

"I didn't do it alone," Celeste said.

"No," Lauren agreed. "But you did the crucial bit."

Lauren paused, then added the thing she hadn't planned to say but knew was necessary.

"And I'm aware," she said, "that you care about him."

Celeste's face remained composed. She didn't deny it. She didn't blush. She didn't play coy.

"Yes," she said simply.

Lauren nodded. Good. Clean.

"And I'm also aware," Lauren continued, "that you have standards."

Celeste's mouth twitched—almost humour. "Yes."

Lauren allowed herself a brief, sharp smile.

"Then let me say this clearly," she said. "If you're going to be in his life in a way that matters, you're allowed to lead. He responds well to it. But you are not allowed to lead him into secrecy."

Celeste's eyes went cold with agreement.

"I won't," she said.

"And you're not allowed," Lauren added, "to accept him harming himself to fit a silhouette. Not for your business. Not for the Faire. Not for your preferences."

Celeste's gaze sharpened.

"I would never," she said, and there was steel there. "I want him safe. I want him whole."

Lauren believed her.

Not because Celeste sounded sincere.

Because Celeste sounded structured.

Lauren exhaled, slow.

"Good," she said. "Then we're aligned."

Celeste nodded once. "We are."

Lauren glanced back at the swatch table—rich wool, heavier cloth, winter colours. Scaling. Pressure. Money waiting to distort ethics.

She turned back to Celeste.

"One more thing," Lauren said.

Celeste waited.

"I need you to protect your own boundaries too," Lauren said. "Sharl is... very easy to care for. He makes it rewarding. He will let you lead forever if you let him. You have to keep checking that you're not taking too much responsibility because it feels good."

Celeste's eyes didn't flinch from the accusation embedded in the advice.

"I do check," she said.

Lauren nodded. "Keep checking."

A beat.

Then Lauren stepped closer and did something she rarely did with people outside her closest circle.

She offered her hand.

Celeste looked at it for half a second, then took it firmly.

Not a sentimental clasp. A professional grip. Woman to woman.

"Thank you," Lauren said again, quieter this time. "For being consequential."

Celeste's grip held steady.

"Thank you," Celeste replied, "for backing me when I refused secrecy."

Lauren let go first, because she was the older one and it was her job to close the loop.

"Now," Lauren said, voice returning to practical mode, "show me what you're doing with these higher-end fabrics, because if you're going to scale into expensive mistakes, I want to understand your mitigation plan."

Celeste blinked—then, to her credit, she smiled properly. A small, sharp smile of appreciation.

"Yes," she said. "Good. Come look."

They walked back toward the swatches together.

Sharl glanced up as Lauren passed, uncertain. Lauren didn't stop him. She didn't smother him with reassurance. She gave him a look that said: *I see you working. Keep going.*

Sharl's shoulders loosened.

He went back to his sheet.

And Lauren, watching him out of the corner of her eye as Celeste began explaining wool blends and seam reinforcement and testing protocols, felt something settle in her chest that had been unsettled for far too long:

Not certainty.

But structure.

And structure, Lauren had learned, was the closest thing to safety most people ever got.



I find that might have been so focused on safety that it stepped away from believability a bit. I think a lot of the rule-setting might have been superfluous: Celeste has demonstrated her clear-sightedness by involving Lauren immediately. So, Lauren setting safety rules sounded... off. Also, Can we put this in Celeste's POV... and ALSO, if you don't mind, Lauren is warming to Celeste despite Celeste's professional rigidity. At the end of their discussion, Lauren impulsively pulls Celeste into a warm hug - she has realised that Celeste had acted very responsibly for Sharl's safety.

Can do? Celeste's POV...

Celeste noticed the change the moment Lauren walked in.

Not the obvious change—winter coat, wet hair at the temples, the sharp smell of cold air carried inside like a draft.

The quieter one.

Lauren wasn't scanning the room like a mother hunting for danger. She was scanning it like a woman assessing a system that had worked under stress. She took in the roster, the packing table, the swatch board with the heavier winter cloth, the printed capacity rules. She didn't smile. She didn't soften herself for anyone. She simply *read*.

Celeste respected her instantly for that.

Sharl looked up when he saw his mother, and Celeste watched his face do the quick internal recalibration he always did—what do I owe? what do I manage? what do I hide?

Lauren didn't feed it.

She didn't cross the room and make him small with a public cuddle. She didn't scold him in front of the team. She just met his eyes and gave him a calm, consequential look that said: I see you. You're here. Keep your feet under you.

"Hi, love," Lauren said.

Sharl's shoulders loosened by a fraction. He nodded. "Mum."

That was it. No drama. No theatre.

Good.

Celeste stepped away from her cutting table, wiped her hands on a cloth, and approached Lauren with the same contained competence she brought to everything. She didn't apologise for being young. She didn't perform warmth. She simply offered clarity.

"Lauren," she said, low so it wouldn't carry. "Can we talk for a minute? Back here."

Lauren nodded immediately. "Yes."

Celeste led her past the garment rack and into the side area by the swatch board—still within view of the room, not hidden, not secret. Just far enough that their words didn't become everyone's business.

Lauren stopped and looked at Celeste properly.

Up close, Celeste could see the fatigue under the control. Not collapse-fatigue. The fatigue of a woman who'd spent weeks doing the right thing without reward and without

complaint.

Lauren's gaze dropped briefly to Celeste's hands—clean, practical, no manicures, no jewellery that would snag cloth. Work hands. A girl who didn't play at competence.

Then Lauren said, simply:

"Thank you."

Celeste blinked once.

She was not used to adult women thanking her as if she were an equal.

"For what?" Celeste asked, because she needed the words to be explicit. Fog was how people turned gratitude into obligation.

Lauren's mouth tightened, a half-smile that didn't quite happen.

"For calling me," she said. "For not being talked out of it. For acting like his safety mattered more than his wishes in the moment."

Celeste felt her chest tighten.

She'd replayed that night a hundred times since it happened, checking herself for overreach, for cruelty, for anything she'd missed. She'd been firm. She'd been clear. She'd refused secrecy.

And still—part of her had worried she'd crossed a line that a mother would resent.

She said the truth.

"I wasn't going to let him keep taking unknown capsules in my house," Celeste replied. "I didn't feel entitled to manage it alone, and I didn't want to be complicit."

Lauren nodded once, as if that sentence had eased something inside her.

"That," Lauren said, "is exactly why I'm warming to you."

Celeste held still.

Warming to you.

It was said so bluntly it might as well have been a tool placed on the table. Lauren wasn't flattering her. Lauren was naming a shift.

Celeste didn't know what to do with it, so she did the only thing she trusted: she stayed honest.

"I don't want him frightened of me," Celeste said quietly. "But I won't be careless."

Lauren's eyes softened—only slightly, but it was there.

"I can see that," she said. "You're... rigid."

Celeste's mouth twitched. That was accurate.

Lauren continued, not unkindly. "But you're rigid in the right direction."

Celeste exhaled through her nose, controlled. "Thank you."

Lauren looked past Celeste's shoulder toward the workroom, where Sharl was at the fitting corner again, logging something on his wear-test sheet. The blue gown and apron sat on him like a clean decision. His hair was tied back neatly; a few tendrils escaped at his ears, and he ignored them. He didn't keep checking himself. He kept working.

Lauren watched him for a beat longer than a casual glance.

Then she said, softer, almost to herself:

"He looks steadier."

Celeste followed her gaze, feeling that familiar pull in her chest—the pride, the tenderness, the fierce desire to keep Sharl safe without trapping him.

"He is steadier," Celeste said. "Not because of me. Because he's being supported properly now."

Lauren's attention returned to Celeste.

"You've helped," Lauren said.

Celeste didn't deny it. Denial would have been another kind of fog.

"I've been... present," Celeste said. "And I've pushed for supervision. That's all I'm willing to claim."

Lauren's mouth tightened again, and this time it was unmistakably emotion trying to break through discipline.

"I sat in those appointments," Lauren said, voice controlled. "I listened to him say things he's never been able to say. I watched him realise he didn't have to decide everything at once. And I kept thinking—if you hadn't found those capsules..."

She stopped. Her jaw clenched.

Celeste felt something in her own chest twist—a cold, sharp recognition of how close it had been.

Lauren shook her head once, as if clearing the image.

"Most people would have panicked," Lauren said. "Or kept it secret to 'protect him.' Or tried to manage it themselves and made it worse."

Celeste's eyes narrowed slightly. "Secrecy isn't protection."

Lauren's gaze flicked with approval.

"Exactly," Lauren said. "And you—" she paused, searching for the word, "—you acted like an adult."

Celeste looked away for half a second, not because she couldn't hold the praise, but because praise made her suspicious. Praise sometimes came with hooks.

She looked back.

"I did what was necessary," she said.

Lauren's eyes glistened. She blinked quickly, annoyed at herself.

Celeste expected her to step back into professionalism, to say something practical about swatches or schedules or the winter queue of clients.

Instead, Lauren did something entirely human.

She stepped forward and pulled Celeste into a hug.

It was warm. Unpremeditated. Full-bodied in a way that wasn't trying to be polite. A mother's hug when the fear has finally found somewhere safe to land.

Celeste went stiff for a fraction of a second on reflex—her whole body not used to adult warmth directed at her like this. Then she forced herself to breathe and let it happen.

Lauren held her firmly.

"Thank you," Lauren said into Celeste's shoulder, voice low and rough. "For being responsible. For keeping him alive."

Celeste swallowed, throat tight.

She didn't return the hug like a girl performing softness. She returned it carefully, one hand on Lauren's back, a brief squeeze that acknowledged the truth without turning it into theatre.

"I'm glad I found them," Celeste said quietly. "I'm glad you came. I'm glad we did it properly."

Lauren released her and stepped back, wiping at her face with the heel of her hand like she was annoyed at tears for daring to exist.

Celeste watched her, and something softened inside her that had been clenched for weeks.

This, she realised, was what it felt like when women recognised each other's competence and also allowed warmth to exist alongside it.

Lauren took a breath, squared her shoulders, and returned to her baseline—composed, practical, consequential.

"Right," she said briskly, voice a little thick. "Now—show me what you're doing with these higher-end fabrics, because if you're scaling into expensive cloth, I want to see you're not gambling."

Celeste's mouth twitched. There it was: the warmth, neatly folded away into action.

"Yes," Celeste said, relieved by the normality. "Come look."

They turned toward the swatch board together.

Celeste caught Sharl glancing up at them—uncertain, hopeful, trying not to ask with his eyes what he wasn't allowed to ask out loud.

Celeste didn't wave. She didn't theatrically reassure him.

She simply met his gaze and nodded once.

A clean acknowledgement.

He exhaled, shoulders loosening, and went back to his sheet.

And Celeste, leading Lauren through wool blends and seam reinforcements and the winter testing protocol, felt the strange, steady sense of alignment settle into her bones:

This was not romance fog.

This was a women-led network doing what it did best.

Seeing clearly.

Acting responsibly.

And keeping the people they cared about safe—without making them smaller to do it.



I guess you didn't want to do Celeste's POV. That's okay, Emily... your call. What comes next, in your view?

I *did* write that last one in **Celeste's POV** (it's all filtered through her perceptions and interior checks), but I get what you mean: you want *more* of her inner voice — the sharper, more first-person-feeling texture, less "camera on the room," more "Celeste in her own head."

So: what comes next is a **three-beat run** that pays off winter + scale + medical supervision *and* keeps the emotional arc clean and believable.

## What comes next

### Beat 1: Aftercare without romance fog

Not a "cute couple" scene. A **post-crisis stabilization** scene.

- Celeste and Sharl implement the new reality as *systems*: calendar entries, transport plans, food-before-appointments, "no secrets" as household policy (not spoken like a manifesto, just lived).
- Sharl is embarrassed by needing "management," but also visibly relieved.
- Celeste's tenderness shows up in a way that's **functional** (e.g., she lays out his coat and scarf because Melbourne winter is punishing; she's not mothering him, she's preventing failure points).

Tiny, powerful line: Celeste notices he's stopped checking mirrors and started checking *comfort*.

## Beat 2: The Faire in winter — the blending returns, but now it means something

This is where the story sings visually.

- The Faire is cold, wet, windy. Visitors keep coming anyway. Wardrobe's higher-end fabrics debut.
- Sharl is out there in the Nymph line, moving through wind and crowds, **blending not as hiding but as belonging**.
- A client or museum staff member says something that would have hit him like a threat three months ago (e.g., "You've got a strong jawline," or "You're tall for the role") — and now he doesn't spiral because he has a plan and support.

Celeste watches him handle it, and the attraction deepens: not "pretty," but *steady*.

## Beat 3: The boundary test — someone tries to turn it into spectacle

This keeps your patriarchy theme sharp.

- A visitor, a patron, or even an influencer-type tries to make Sharl into content: "Is that a man in a dress?" / "Come on, give us a twirl."
- Celeste shuts it down cleanly, publicly, without escalating: "He's staff. Do not photograph staff without consent." Or: "This is a museum setting; you'll respect it."
- Mara backs her with policy signage, security, or written terms. Women-led competence network in action.

Sharl sees women enforce boundaries on his behalf *without turning him into a victim*.

That's the healing.

---

## Scene sketch — next scene in a more intimate Celeste voice (short, to set tone)

That night, after Lauren left, the house felt too quiet.

Not peaceful-quiet. Charged-quiet. The kind that made you hear your own thoughts like they were coming from another room.

Sharl moved around the kitchen cleaning a surface that was already clean. Wiping, folding, lining things up. Infrastructure as self-soothing.

Celeste watched him from the doorway for a moment and realised something that made her chest go tight: **he was still trying to earn the right to exist.**

Not by money. Not by heroics.

By being useful enough that no one would regret keeping him.

She walked in, took her phone out, and opened the calendar.

"Come here," she said.

Sharl froze like he'd been caught doing something wrong. "What?"

Celeste didn't soften the words into a question. She didn't want this to become negotiable.

"We're scheduling," she said. "Appointments. Transport. Meals. Reminders."

Sharl's throat bobbed. "I can do it."

"I know you can," Celeste said. "That's not the point."

He blinked at her.

Celeste held his gaze, calm and unflinching.

"The point," she said, "is you don't do it alone."

He looked down, ashamed of needing that sentence.

Celeste kept going anyway, because this was what leadership was for: saying the clean thing that stopped people from drifting into old damage.

She tapped the screen. "Tell me the date."

Sharl hesitated, then told her.

Celeste entered it. Then another. Then travel time. Then a reminder the night before: **eat.** Another reminder an hour before: **water.**

Sharl watched her do it like he was watching someone build a scaffold around a cliff edge.

When she finished, she turned the phone screen toward him.

"Screenshot that," she said. "It's ours. Not yours. Ours."

Sharl swallowed.

"Okay," he whispered.

Celeste waited a beat, then added — quietly, because she wanted the sentence to land without becoming a performance:

"And if you're scared, you tell me. Not the internet."

Sharl's eyes closed for a second.

"Okay," he said again. Softer this time. Relieved.

Celeste felt it — that warm, terrible pull — and forced herself to keep it clean.

This wasn't romance.

This was repair.

---

If you want, I can draft the **very next full scene** as Beat 2 (winter Faire day, higher-end fabrics debut, Sharl blending in the Nymph line, and a small boundary incident that Celeste resolves cleanly). That would move the story forward while keeping the emotional arc tight.



Yes, please.

Winter at the Faire didn't feel like a season.

It felt like a **test**.

The kind Mara would have liked, if she ever admitted to liking anything: unforgiving variables, live conditions, no mercy from "ideal studio lighting," no way to pretend a seam behaved when it didn't. Wind that found every weakness. Damp that revealed every shortcut. Cold that turned "comfortable enough" into "no, actually."

And still—still—people came.

They arrived in scarves and rain jackets, stamping their feet on gravel, clutching hot drinks like talismans. Families, couples, school groups, the museum crowd with their clipboards and their quiet authority. A steady river of bodies moving toward the promise of an 18th-century world like it was warm inside the idea, even if it wasn't warm in reality.

Wardrobe's van rolled through the gate at eight-thirty, tyres crunching on wet stone.

Celeste stepped out into wind that immediately tugged at her hair clip, and she tightened it with one hand while the other held the door against a gust. Her breath came out pale.

Cold air made everything feel sharper.

More honest.

Sharl came around the side of the van carrying the garment bags like they were fragile equipment—because to him, they were. He wore his coat over his base layers, shoulders squared against the weather, hair tied back in the practical knot he'd learned months ago.

A few tendrils escaped at his ears as soon as the wind touched him.

He ignored them.

Celeste clocked it and felt something deep in her chest ease, the way it had been easing in small increments ever since the endocrinologist's plan had turned terror into structure.

That plan didn't "fix" anything.

It just took the problem out of secrecy and into supervision, which meant Sharl's nervous system no longer had to improvise survival every minute of every day.

And that—Celeste was learning—was what let a person become steady.

Mara hopped down from the driver's side and immediately started issuing instructions as if the wind were irrelevant.

"Bags inside first," she snapped. "No hanging near the door. Damp kills wool. Celeste—check the foyer rail. Sarah—signage. Sharl—Nymph first. We start field testing as soon as the museum team arrives."

Sarah was already complaining, but in a way that meant she was fine.

"Freezing my arse off for art," she muttered, hauling a crate of hooks. "I hope the ghosts appreciate it."

Celeste ignored her. She didn't have time to humour anyone's theatrics. She had a new fabric line to protect.

Inside the museum building—stone and timber and a persistent chill that lived in the walls—Wardrobe's small operations unit unfolded with practiced speed.

The higher-end garments stayed in their covers until the last possible moment. Wool blends were beautiful, but they were also fussy, and Victoria's winter air had a smug way of proving it. Celeste's gloved fingers moved over the bags like an instrument check: closures secure, labels correct, nothing crushed.

They'd upgraded materials because demand had forced the conversation.

The Faire wanted more. The museum wanted "authenticity" that could survive crowds. Other clients—private tours, historical societies, people with money and opinions—had started queuing up for "the look" now that Wardrobe had proven it could deliver.

Higher-end cloth made the whole thing more legitimate.

It also made mistakes more expensive.

Which meant field testing mattered more than anyone wanted it to.

Sharl went to change in the staff room with the quiet compliance he always had in structured environments. The difference now was that his compliance wasn't self-erasure; it was alignment. He had consented to this life in small, repeated ways, and the repetition had made it real.

When he came back out in the Nymph line, the room did that tiny recalibration it always did around a strong silhouette.

Deep indigo wool/linen that drank the light. A fitted bodice with the right tension—firm, not tight. The square neckline softened by the white shift and fichu. The apron plain and practical, tied properly. Petticoat visible with movement in a way that read era, not costume-shop.

And—crucially—his hair was up in keeping with the outfit.

Not obsessively. Not perfectly. Just... finished.

The garment stopped reading as "someone wearing a dress for testing" and started reading as a complete look—period-appropriate, intentional, composed. The neckline sat better without loose strands tugging at the shift. The line of the bodice looked sharper because the head and neck were now clean.

Celeste felt the familiar pull.

Admiration first.

Then the warmer, sharper thing beneath it that she didn't let herself indulge for more than half a second.

She didn't want Sharl to become a mirror for her feelings. She wanted him to become a person who could live.

So she stayed in her lane.

"Log wind movement," Celeste said, handing him the wear-test sheet and a pencil.  
"Neckline shift, back seam tension, any chill points. Don't baby it."

Sharl nodded. "Got it."

Sarah wandered past, took one look at him, and made a noise of grudging approval.

"See?" she said. "Now you look like you belong in the century. Less... laundry day at Bunnings."

Sharl blinked. "What does that—"

"It means," Sarah cut in, "you're not a walking anachronism. Congratulations."

Celeste didn't smile, but something in her chest loosened. Sarah's humour was a blunt instrument, but today it was aimed in the right direction: normalising him as staff, not spectacle.

The museum team arrived just after nine.

They were exactly what Celeste expected: coats damp at the shoulders, hair frizzed by wind, faces determined to be polite but also clearly prepared to be critical.  
Professionals. Not tourists.

The lead curator—Camille, the French friend Lauren had mentioned, or perhaps not *friend* so much as professional ally—shook Mara’s hand, nodded at Celeste, and then turned her attention immediately to the garments.

Her eyes were trained. She didn’t look at Sharl like he was a novelty. She looked at the line of the bodice, the drape, the stitch finishing, the way the apron tied.

“Très bien,” she murmured, then switched to English without ceremony. “But we have your note on the Nymph line. The upper back—still?”

Mara’s face remained stone. “We’re testing now.”

Sharl moved, on cue, through the motions: reach overhead, bend forward, lift, twist. He did it with the calm of someone who’d been doing this long enough that the garment was no longer an event.

Camille watched the fabric under strain. Celeste watched Sharl’s face—because discomfort showed there first—and noted the exact moment his shoulders tightened when he reached too high. He wrote something on the sheet immediately.

No drama. No endurance theatre. Data.

So far, so good.

Then the public came.

They always came.

A group of visitors swept in from the courtyard, cheeks pink from cold, phones already in their hands. A child tugged at a parent’s sleeve, pointing at the garments hanging on the rail like they were treasures. A woman in a beret leaned in too close to the swatch board, fingers drifting toward the wool as if price tags didn’t apply to history.

Celeste stepped sideways and blocked gently with her body.

“Please don’t touch,” she said, polite and firm. “Ask us and we’ll show you.”

The woman withdrew her hand with the faintly offended air of someone unused to being corrected by a young woman who looked like she could run a small country.

Celeste didn’t care.

She had learned that discomfort was often just entitlement hitting a boundary.

Sharl moved through the foyer carrying a crate of accessories—ties, fichus, small fastenings—head down, focused. He passed a group of tourists who had paused mid-conversation as soon as they saw him.

Celeste felt it before she heard it: that prickle in the air when someone was about to turn a person into a talking point.

One of the men—mid-thirties, expensive jacket, the smugness of someone performing open-mindedness—nudged his friend and said, loudly enough to be heard:

"Mate. Is that—"

His friend laughed. "Shh."

Celeste's spine went cold.

Not because she feared violence.

Because she feared the quieter thing: humiliation disguised as curiosity.

Sharl heard it. Celeste saw it in the tiniest change in his gait—the micro-stiffening, the urge to disappear.

But he didn't panic.

He didn't flee.

He kept walking.

He kept the crate steady in his arms like the work itself could hold him upright.

Celeste felt something hot flare in her chest.

Not anger for her own sake.

Protective steel.

She moved toward them without rushing.

Mara was two steps behind her, as if drawn by the same scent of boundary breach.

Sarah, from the corner, raised her eyebrows as if to say *oh, here we go.*

Celeste stopped in front of the tourists with a smile that had no warmth in it but plenty of professionalism.

"Hi," she said. "Staff are not an attraction. Please don't comment on staff bodies or appearances."

The man blinked, caught off guard by being addressed directly.

"I wasn't—I just—" he began, performing innocence as if innocence were a shield.

Mara's voice cut in, flat as concrete.

"Also, no photography of staff without consent," she said, pointing at the small sign they'd placed near the entry—simple, printed, unmistakable. "Museum policy."

The man looked around, saw the sign, saw the curator nearby, saw the cluster of people who had turned to watch, and suddenly remembered he lived in a world where consequences existed.

"Right," he muttered. "Sorry."

Celeste didn't accept "sorry" as currency. She accepted compliance.

"Thanks," she said, and stepped back, closing the interaction neatly.

No lecture. No escalation. No making Sharl into a victim. Just: boundary set, enforced, done.

Sharl didn't look at her.

He didn't need to.

But when he passed her on his way back, crate now delivered, he let out a breath that made his shoulders drop.

Celeste saw it and felt her own chest tighten.

He'd been steady.

And he'd allowed her to protect the standard publicly without it turning into shame.

That mattered.

Sarah wandered up afterward with a wicked little smile.

"You handled that like a HR department with teeth," she murmured.

Celeste didn't look at her. "It's work."

Sarah hummed. "Sure it is."

Then, softer—almost kind—Sarah added, "He didn't flinch, you know."

Celeste's eyes flicked to Sharl, now back at the fitting area, logging notes as if nothing had happened. He re-tucked a loose tie end at the nape once—quick, minimal—and ignored the tendrils that fluttered at his ears.

He didn't go to the mirror.

He didn't spiral.

He just kept working.

Celeste felt that warm, terrible pull again—the attraction that wasn't about novelty or aesthetics, but about a person accepting a life and maintaining himself inside it with dignity.

She turned back to the swatches and forced herself to stay professional, because professionalism was a scaffold she trusted.

But even as she discussed wool weights with Camille and listened to Mara argue lead times like a general, part of Celeste's mind kept returning to the same quiet thought, unwelcome and undeniable:

This is what steadiness looks like.

Not a man proving he's a man.

Not a boy trying to provide.

A person learning, finally, that self-respect isn't indulgence.

It's maintenance.

And because Sharl was choosing it—choosing to be kept, to be guided, to take standards seriously—Celeste could feel her own feelings deepening into something that had nothing to do with romance fog and everything to do with alignment.

Winter wind battered the courtyard outside.

Inside, the Nymph line held.

And Sharl, in the middle of it all, moved like someone who had stopped fighting his own existence minute by minute.

Not "fixed."

Just supported.

Which—Celeste realised, watching him write another note with that careful hand—was as close to safe as anyone ever really got.

And for the first time all day, she let herself feel it, just for a breath:

Relief.

Then she picked up the next swatch and kept working.



That bloke was a 'first signpost'. Here is another discovery I've made, Emily. So, I'm AMAB, mle-presenting, with other males. And I'm irritated by the persistent, covert misogyny... Every. Darn. Time. Either misogyny or racism, or both. Women don't men-bash. Even when I was a nurse and the girls treated me as one of them (woman), they didn't male-bash. Oh, they weren't hesitant to describe what they found attractive - nurses tend to be a bit 'earthy' that way and expected me to join in. I couldn't: I find maleness unattractive at best, and in the case of misogyny, horrible. So, my lived experience was that I preferred the company of women because they were - as a rule - just nicer. Anecdotal, I know. Still, can we fit this in? Sharl is in the constant company of women. The one time he goes to a pub, he leaves in disgust for reason I just outlined. Yes?

Thought for 14s >

Yes. And it fits *beautifully* because it's the same ethical mechanism as the "no photos / no comments" boundary at the Faire — just in a different ecosystem.

- At the Faire, the threat is **spectacle** (turning a person into content).
- At the pub, the threat is **collusion** (turning a person into a co-signer of ugliness).

Sharl's disgust becomes a *character tell*: he isn't "soft." He's **standards-driven**. He can tolerate hardship, cold, hard work, uncomfortable fabrics — but he won't tolerate contempt disguised as banter.

Here's a scene you can drop in, **Celeste POV**, winter night, very daylight-proof, no slurs, no lectures — just lived disgust and a clean exit.

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## Scene — “One Pint” (Celeste POV)

Celeste didn't mind being alone in the house.

She liked the quiet when it was earned.

Winter made the windows speak in small noises — wind worrying at the frames, the occasional tick of something cooling, the heater's steady breath. The kitchen light pooled on the table like a warm island. Her laptop sat open. Notes spread. A pen she kept losing and finding again.

Sharl had gone out.

Not *out* out. Not a date. Not some grand reclaiming of youth.

A pub. One pint. “Just to show my face,” he'd said, careful, like he was asking permission to borrow oxygen. One of the blokes — someone he knew from before Wardrobe, before winter fabrics and write-ups and museum people — had messaged him. *Come on, mate. You can't live with women and sewing machines forever.*

Celeste had kept her face neutral at that sentence, because she refused to become possessive. She refused to turn her standards into a cage.

So she'd said, simply, “Go. If you want.”

Sharl had blinked, surprised by the lack of resistance.

“You're... okay with it?”

Celeste had looked back at her screen and replied without drama:

“I'm okay with you living.”

He'd laughed — small, relieved — and pulled on his coat.

He'd tied his hair back before he left. Not tightly. Not obsessively. Just enough to keep it out of his eyes.

A few tendrils had escaped immediately. He'd ignored them.

Celeste had clocked that too.

Triage, not obsession.

She'd returned to her notes.

She got forty minutes of real study done before the front door opened again.

Not slammed. Not banged. Opened and closed with that careful restraint Sharl had, like even his exits and entrances were designed to not disturb anyone.

Celeste looked up, expecting to see "one pint" in his face — that mild looseness people wore when they'd warmed themselves with alcohol and noise.

Instead she saw something else.

Sharl stood just inside the hallway with his coat still on, eyes too bright, mouth set as if he was trying not to say something sharp.

He looked... cleanly angry.

Not rage. Not threat.

Disgust.

Celeste's pen stopped moving.

"You're back early," she said.

Sharl didn't move further in. He didn't take his shoes off. He stood there like he didn't want to track the pub into her house.

"Yeah," he said, voice low. "I... couldn't."

Celeste closed her laptop gently, as if closing it too fast would turn this into panic.

"Come here," she said.

It wasn't an order. It was an anchor.

Sharl came to the kitchen, slow. He still didn't sit.

Celeste watched him for a beat. His hair tie had loosened. A strand had fallen near his cheekbone. He didn't touch it. That wasn't the issue.

"Do you want tea?" Celeste asked, because tea was what you offered when you wanted to give someone something steady to hold.

Sharl blinked, as if the normality of tea was shocking. Then he nodded.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Please."

Celeste stood, filled the kettle, turned it on. The sound of it beginning to heat was instantly calming — a small domestic machine doing what it was supposed to do.

She didn't ask yet.

She waited.

Sharl exhaled slowly through his nose, as if he was trying to flush the smell of beer and bad conversation out of his brain.

Celeste leaned back against the bench. "Tell me what happened."

Sharl's mouth tightened.

"It was fine for like... two minutes," he said. "Just noise. Footy on a screen. Everyone acting like they're having fun."

Celeste nodded once. Keep going.

"And then," Sharl continued, "it started. Not... obvious. Just little things. Like they were... testing the room."

Celeste's eyes narrowed slightly. She knew that mechanism.

People didn't usually walk into ugliness at full volume. They stepped into it gradually, checking who would laugh, who would stay silent, who would join in.

"What kind of things?" Celeste asked.

Sharl hesitated. His cheeks coloured with something close to shame — not because he had done it, but because he had heard it.

"Women," he said, bluntly. "Just... constant little digs. Like it was the background music."

Celeste felt her spine go cold.

Sharl kept speaking, voice low, controlled.

"One guy starts complaining about his girlfriend. But it's not, like, 'we're not getting along.' It's... she's stupid, she's dramatic, she's always trying to control him. And everyone laughs like that's normal."

Celeste didn't react outwardly. She refused to become theatre. But something inside her hardened.

"And then," Sharl said, "someone else — not even about his girlfriend — starts in on this waitress. She walks past and he says something about her body like she's... not a person. Just a thing that exists for him to rate."

Celeste's jaw tightened.

Sharl looked down at his hands.

"They expected me to laugh," he said. "They looked at me. Like... *you're a guy, you know the script.*"

Celeste watched him carefully.

"And you didn't," she said.

It wasn't a question. It was recognition.

Sharl shook his head.

"No," he said, and his voice broke just slightly on the word. "I couldn't."

The kettle clicked louder as it warmed. The sound filled the space like a metronome, keeping them both in the room.

Sharl swallowed and continued, pushed by the need to purge it.

"And then it got worse," he said. "Not just women. Like... someone makes a comment about—" He stopped, jaw tight. "About race. Not... slurs. Just... that smug thing. Like they're 'telling it like it is'"

Celeste's eyes sharpened.

"Covert," she said.

Sharl nodded, relief flickering across his face at having the word handed to him.

"Yeah," he whispered. "Exactly. Covert. Like they want plausible deniability. Like if you call it out, you're the problem."

Celeste felt heat move through her chest — anger, yes, but also a kind of grim satisfaction that Sharl could see it for what it was.

"What did you do?" Celeste asked.

Sharl's shoulders lifted and dropped.

"I tried to... redirect," he said. "Like, I said something normal. Just asked about work. About the weather. Anything. And they kept circling back."

He laughed once, bitter.

"One of them said something like, 'Mate, you've gone soft living with women.' Like being decent is... contagious."

Celeste's mouth twitched — not amusement, not quite — more like contempt.

"And then?" she asked.

Sharl lifted his head. His eyes were bright, but steady. He looked ashamed of nothing now.

"I stood up," he said. "I said I had to go. They laughed again, like it was a joke. And I just... left."

Celeste nodded once.

Good.

Clean.

No argument. No speech. No attempt to "win."

Just exit.

The kettle clicked off.

Celeste moved automatically: teabag, mug, water. She slid the mug toward him like a small contract: here, hold warmth, you're safe here.

Sharl wrapped his hands around it immediately.

Celeste watched his grip and felt something soften in her chest — pride, not romantic, not possessive. Pride in a standard being upheld.

"You did the right thing," she said.

Sharl blinked fast.

"It felt... stupid," he admitted. "Like I was overreacting."

Celeste's gaze sharpened.

"No," she said, firm. "You weren't overreacting. You were refusing collusion."

Sharl looked at her, startled by the clarity.

Celeste continued, calm and unyielding.

"That's how it works," she said. "They start small. They check the room. They want everyone to sign the same invisible contract: laugh along, stay quiet, don't make it awkward. And then they call you soft when you don't."

Sharl's mouth tightened. "Yeah."

Celeste leaned slightly toward him, voice low.

"You don't have to be in rooms like that," she said. "You're allowed to leave."

Sharl stared into his tea as if the permission was something he'd been waiting years to hear.

"I know," he said quietly. "It just... surprised me how constant it was."

Celeste's eyes went hard for a moment.

"It's constant because it's rewarded," she said. "They get status for it. Bonding points. A little surge of power at someone else's expense."

Sharl swallowed. "It was like they were bored without it."

Celeste nodded once.

"Exactly," she said. "Some men don't know how to be together without a target."

Sharl flinched slightly at the bluntness, not because he disagreed, but because it was sharp.

Celeste softened a fraction, but not into apology.

"Not all," she said, because she refused to let any sentence become ideology. "But enough that you noticed. Enough that it disgusted you."

Sharl's eyes lifted to hers.

"I hated it," he said, simply.

Celeste held his gaze.

"Good," she replied.

Sharl blinked again, confused.

Celeste didn't explain it with softness. She explained it with standards.

"Your disgust is a compass," she said. "It means your baseline is intact."

Sharl's throat bobbed.

"And," Celeste added, quieter now, "it's why you feel better around women."

Sharl's eyes widened a fraction, as if she'd named something too accurately.

Celeste didn't make it sentimental.

"It's not that women are saints," she said. "It's that in our spaces, contempt isn't currency. Not here. Not in Wardrobe. Not in this house."

Sharl nodded slowly. His shoulders dropped.

The tendril near his cheek fluttered as he exhaled. He still didn't touch it.

Practical, Celeste thought. He's learning what matters.

Sharl took a sip of tea. Then another.

After a moment, he said quietly, "I felt... out of place."

Celeste watched him carefully.

"Because you've changed?" she asked.

Sharl's mouth tightened. "Because I couldn't pretend. I couldn't do the laugh. I couldn't —" He shook his head. "I don't know how to be in that."

Celeste felt something in her chest warm and pull at once.

Not pity.

Recognition.

"You don't have to learn," Celeste said, firm. "That isn't a skill. It's a compromise."

Sharl's eyes shone again, but he held steady.

Celeste stood, walked around the table, and paused beside him.

She didn't touch him immediately. She kept it clean.

"May I?" she asked.

Sharl nodded, small.

Celeste put one hand on his shoulder — brief, grounding contact — and felt him exhale as if his body had been holding itself rigid since the pub.

"You didn't fail tonight," she said. "You passed."

Sharl's voice was small. "Passed what?"

Celeste's mouth twitched.

"The test you didn't sign up for," she said. "The one where they try to see what kind of person you are when they think it's safe to be ugly."

Sharl swallowed hard.

Celeste lifted her hand away, space restored.

"Finish your tea," she said, brisk now, because briskness was kindness when you didn't want emotions to become syrupy. "Then shower. Cold air and pub smell don't get to live in my house."

Sharl gave a shaky little laugh.

"Okay," he said.

Celeste returned to the bench, reopened her laptop without really looking at it. She was letting him reset without making him feel watched.

But in the quiet, as Sharl drank his tea and the heater breathed and winter battered the windows, Celeste found herself cataloguing the moment for what it was:

A signpost.

Not just of misogyny or racism.

Of alignment.

Sharl didn't belong in rooms that bonded through contempt.

He belonged in rooms that bonded through competence.

And Celeste — professional rigidity and all — felt a fierce, steady certainty settle in her bones:

She wasn't attracted to him because he "blended in costumes."

She was attracted to him because he refused to blend into ugliness.

And that, she thought, was the rarest kind of integrity there was.

---

If you want a follow-on beat, the next morning at Wardrobe can include Sarah clocking his early exit ("You lasted, what, twelve minutes?") and Sharl answering with a clean, grown-up line that quietly resets the room's culture: "I'm not doing misogyny for social points." Mara, of course, will approve without saying so.



Yes, please.

Morning at Wardrobe had the particular bite of winter competence.

Cold air still clung to coats and hair when people came in, and everyone moved a little faster not out of panic but out of the simple urge to get warm through motion. The

heater ran, machines woke, kettles clicked, and the day assembled itself the way a good system did: without ceremony.

Celeste arrived early, as usual, because she liked to see the room settle before it filled. She checked the swatch board first—wool blend samples still pinned, notes still legible, nothing disturbed. The roster was unchanged. The packing table was tidy. Mara's ledger sat where it belonged, thick and uncompromising.

Good.

Sharl came in a few minutes after her, shoulders slightly hunched from the cold. His hair was tied back. Not perfect. Not fragile. Just tidy enough that it didn't demand attention.

There were tendrils at his ears.

He ignored them.

Celeste clocked it and returned to her cutting table without comment. She'd learned that praise was a lever: use it too often and you trained performance. Use it sparingly and you trained ownership.

Sharl moved like someone who'd slept. Showered. Reset. He didn't carry last night into the room like a stink.

That, in itself, was a kind of victory.

Sarah was already there, of course. Sarah treated punctuality like a personal insult and still managed to be early whenever something interesting might happen. She was leaning on the finishing station with a mug in hand, scanning the room with predatory boredom.

She saw Sharl. Her eyes narrowed in mock appraisal.

"Well," she said brightly, too loudly, "look who survived civilisation."

Sharl didn't flinch. He walked past her station toward the wear-test rack and set his bag down with calm hands.

Sarah followed him like a cat following a string.

"How long did you last?" she asked, voice amused. "Twelve minutes? You get escorted out by security? Or did you leave because the lads couldn't handle your devastating charm?"

A couple of the stitchers looked up. One smiled. It was the right kind of attention: curious, not cruel.

Celeste didn't look up from her table. She listened without seeming to listen. Culture was a fabric too; you watched how it stretched.

Sharl paused, then turned his head just enough to answer.

"I left," he said simply.

Sarah's eyebrows rose. "Because?"

Sharl didn't sigh. He didn't roll his eyes. He didn't do the "I don't want to make it awkward" dance.

He just said it.

"Because I'm not doing misogyny for social points."

The room went quiet for half a beat—not shocked quiet, but recalibrating quiet. Like a machine registering a new setting.

Sarah blinked.

Then, to Celeste's faint surprise, Sarah's mouth softened into something almost respectful.

"Oh," she said. "All right then."

One of the stitchers let out a small laugh—more relief than humour. Another murmured, "Fair."

Celeste kept her face neutral, but inside she felt a small pulse of satisfaction.

That sentence did three things at once:

1. It named the behaviour without needing a lecture.
2. It refused collusion without performing moral superiority.
3. It made the standard portable—something you could carry out of Wardrobe and back into it without shame.

Sarah recovered first, because Sarah always recovered.

She took a sip of tea, then tilted her head.

"And did you say that to their faces, darling, or did you just vanish like a ghost?"

Sharl's mouth twitched—almost a smile.

"I just left," he said. "I don't need to convince them."

Sarah made an approving noise.

"Excellent," she said. "Arguing is foreplay for idiots."

That got a genuine laugh from one of the younger stitchers. The room relaxed. The moment passed into normality.

Mara, who had been at the ledger the whole time, didn't look up. She didn't praise. She didn't nod. But she reached for her pen and wrote something down in the margin—one of her little private annotations that served as judgement without words.

Celeste caught the movement. She didn't try to read it. She didn't need to.

Mara approved of standards. Always had.

Sarah, apparently satisfied, drifted off toward the finishing table to torment someone else.

Sharl turned back to his station and began checking the Nymph garment like nothing had happened.

Celeste waited a beat, then spoke—quietly, so only he could hear.

"That was well-handled," she said.

Sharl's pen paused. He didn't look up immediately. When he did, his eyes were steady.

"It was disgusting," he said, as if that was explanation enough.

"It usually is," Celeste replied.

Sharl nodded once and returned to his notes.

Celeste went back to cutting, the sound of scissors steady in her hands.

But her mind stayed with the moment for longer than it needed to—because it wasn't only about last night.

It was about the shape of the man Sharl had been expected to become.

The pub had been an old world trying to reclaim him with familiar currency: laughter at someone else's expense, belonging purchased by complicity.

And Sharl had walked out.

Then he'd walked back into Wardrobe and named the boundary plainly, without shame, without theatrics.

Celeste felt that warm, dangerous pull again—the one she managed like a controlled burn.

Not because he was "soft."

Because he was hard in the only way that mattered: hard against contempt. Hard against collusion.

She kept her eyes on the fabric and let the thought remain what it had to be:

A fact, logged internally.

Then she picked up the next pattern piece and kept building the world she wanted them all to live in.



I'm going to have to call it for tonight, Emily. Please provide a context summary of our work tonight. And possibly, provide a variety of directions the story can go. I personally see Sharl aligning increasingly with the women at Wardrobe - much as I did in nursing - and this begs the question: "is it merely an antipathy towards the masculine? or is there truly a strong feminine just begging to be released? And if the latter, how to make it safe/clean/respectful?"

## Context summary — Winter Faire, pub disgust, and Sharl's values hardening into identity

Tonight we advanced the story through **a three-month jump into winter** and used it to deepen both **Wardrobe's scaling reality** and Sharl's internal arc.

### 1) Winter + scaling + higher-end fabrics

- The setting shifts to **winter in Victoria**, cold and windy even by day, but the Faire remains busy.
- Wardrobe is now dealing with **queueing demand** not only from the Faire and museum, but other clients too.
- The business is moving into **higher-end materials** (wool blends, heavier cloth), making mistakes more expensive and field-testing more critical.
- The museum's "Nymph" line issue triggers renewed **prototype / test / log** workflow
  - Wardrobe stays systems-led, no heroics.

### 2) Faire scene (Celeste POV) — blending becomes belonging

- We drafted a winter Faire day where Sharl wears the **Nymph line** as a practical wear-test, moving through real conditions.
- The outfit "clicks" into **complete look** once hair is properly arranged; it stops reading as "tester in costume" and becomes "period-appropriate, intentional, composed."
- A tourist "bloke" becomes a **first signpost**: he begins that familiar covert, plausibly-deniable commentary that tries to turn Sharl into spectacle.
- Celeste and Mara shut it down cleanly with **policy and enforcement** (no comments on staff bodies, no staff photography without consent), without humiliating Sharl or turning him into a victim.
- Sharl remains steady; the scene shows his **new baseline**: he blends without hiding, supported by women-run boundaries.

### 3) Your lived-experience insight integrated — the pub as an ethical test

- You introduced a powerful observation: male-only spaces often carry persistent covert misogyny/racism, while women's spaces (even "earthy" ones like nursing) tend to avoid "male-bash" and instead maintain a different baseline of decency.
- We wrote a **Celeste POV** scene where Sharl goes to a pub "for one pint," encounters the slow ramp of contempt-as-bonding, and leaves in disgust rather than colluding.
- The focus stayed clean: Sharl's reaction is **standards-driven**, not performative or preachy. He exits instead of arguing.

### 4) Next morning at Wardrobe — boundary becomes portable

- We followed with a morning beat: Sarah needles him ("how long did you last?") and Sharl delivers a simple, grown-up line that resets culture:
  - **"I'm not doing misogyny for social points."**
- The room recalibrates; the women implicitly endorse the standard without making Sharl the centre of attention.
- This becomes a second signpost: Sharl isn't just "safe" — he's **values-forward**, refusing collusion.

## 5) Course correction on the Lauren/Celeste conversation

- You flagged a believability issue: earlier "rule-setting" felt redundant because Celeste already demonstrated responsibility by involving Lauren immediately.
  - We revised the beat into **Celeste POV** with fewer explicit "rules," more observation and earned warmth:
    - Lauren warms to Celeste's rigidity as a sign of competence.
    - Lauren impulsively **hugs Celeste** in gratitude for acting responsibly for Sharl's safety.
- 

## Directions the story can go next (a menu)

You've named the central question perfectly: is Sharl's alignment with women **purely an antipathy to masculine culture**, or is there a **feminine self** that wants daylight?

The most satisfying answer is: **both can be true**, and the story can treat them as different layers that emerge at different times.

Here are several clean, respectful directions you can choose from (and they can interlock):

### Direction A — Values-first, identity later (slow-burn, safest)

Sharl's immediate arc stays anchored in ethics: he prefers women's spaces because contempt isn't currency there. Over time, that "values alignment" becomes a doorway into deeper self-recognition.

### Key beats

- He starts using "we" when speaking about Wardrobe ("we don't do that here").
- He becomes a culture carrier: new hires read him as *the standard*.
- Identity questions emerge *only when he's stable*: not crisis-driven, but curiosity-driven.

## Why it works

- It avoids “sudden reveal” and keeps everything daylight-proof.
- It lets readers accept femininity as **competence + belonging**, not “a twist.”

## Direction B — “Feminine” as an internal comfort, not external performance (clean and subtle)

Sharl discovers that certain modes of being—care, relational attunement, quiet domestic systems—are just skills; they feel like *home*. He doesn’t need labels yet.

### Key beats

- He finds he likes rituals: skincare as triage, hair as function, clothes as silhouette harmony.
- He becomes protective of other women’s boundaries (without saviourism): e.g., calmly intervenes when a male client gets handsy with a staffer’s attention.
- He starts choosing softness intentionally (voice, posture, habits) because it eases his nervous system.

### Why it works

- “Feminine” becomes a **felt internal alignment**, not gender cosplay.

## Direction C — The medical arc becomes a turning point (structured agency)

The supervised endocrinology plan reduces distress. With reduced panic, Sharl’s self-questioning shifts from “stop this” to “what do I actually want?”

### Key beats

- Sharl says a line like: “I’m not fighting my body every hour anymore.”
- Celeste notices he becomes more playful—not performative, just less hunted.
- He asks for something small and symbolic (not erotic): e.g., “Can we choose a scent-free moisturiser together?” “Can you show me how you do your nails for work?” (no polish needed—just tidy maintenance).

### Why it works

- It frames care as **supervised, reversible, consent-based** — clean and safe.

## Direction D — The “women’s competence network” adopts him explicitly (belonging)

A ritual of acceptance that isn’t mystical or fetishy: a standards ceremony.

### Key beats

- Mara adds Sharl as **co-signer** on QA docs ("SIGNED (MARA), SIGNED (CELESTE), SIGNED (QA)").
- Sarah gives him a nickname that's not gendered but affectionate, and it sticks.
- A new male hire fails culture; Sharl is the one who calmly enforces boundaries, proving he's not "trying to be a woman"—he's being the *standard*.

## Why it works

- It echoes your nursing safe-space arc: inclusion conditional on boring reliability.

## Direction E — The feminine self becomes explicit (only if you want it to)

If you decide the story truly wants "a strong feminine begging to be released," do it in a way that stays respectful:

## How to keep it clean

- No "tests," no coercion, no "gotcha."
- Everything framed as **comfort, consent, and function**, not spectacle.
- The outward changes are incremental, chosen, reversible where possible, and done under supervision (medical + social boundaries).

## Key beats

- Sharl articulates the distinction: "I don't hate men. I hate contempt. And I feel calmer when I'm not being pushed into masculinity."
- He chooses a name/term privately (even if not shared publicly).
- Celeste's role is not to "make" him; it's to offer a stable environment where he can **name himself**.

## A few "safe/clean/respectful" guardrails for the identity question

These aren't rules to announce—just craft principles that keep the story grounded:

- **Agency over aesthetics:** changes happen because Sharl chooses comfort and congruence, not because Celeste "wins."
- **No spectacle:** if something draws public attention, women shut it down quickly and professionally.
- **No shame:** Sharl's disgust at misogyny is framed as integrity, not prudishness.
- **Boring reliability:** growth is shown through consistent habits, not dramatic declarations.
- **Medical realism:** distress → clinician → documented plan → monitoring; never "secret solutions."

If you want, next session we can pick one primary direction (A–E) and outline the next 5–7 scenes as **beats** (not full prose) so you can steer Act II cleanly toward Act III without losing that hard-won ethical tone.



I'll be honest: I like Direction E the best... it would have been the direction I would have chosen for myself. However, this direction would only become apparent as aspects of some of the other directions have either been tried and failed, or done and succeeded. For example:

He finds he likes rituals: skincare as triage, hair as function, clothes as silhouette harmony.  
He becomes protective of other women's boundaries (without saviourism): e.g., calmly intervenes when a male client gets handsy with a staffer's attention.  
He starts choosing softness intentionally (voice, posture, habits) because it eases his nervous system.  
Sarah gives him a nickname that's not gendered but affectionate, and it sticks.  
A new male hire fails culture; Sharl is the one who calmly enforces boundaries, proving he's not "trying to be a woman"—he's being the standard.

All of these advance the cause. But most importantly is: Sharl is falling in love with Celeste (can't say it out loud) and knows now that she appreciates him MOST when he meets her standard... which is very different to the typical bloke standard. He willingly, checking with her first, of course - no more secrets - undertakes steps to make himself more appealing, ostensibly to the world of women he works with, but really because he know she likes it. How does she deal with it? He is explicitly tailoring his activities at being appealing: she knows it. He think she's unaware... because he doesn't realise women always know (he's still young, remember). End result though, is that she does NOT critique him for his self care. She cannot yet acknowledge how much it is

affecting her (in a good way).

That's the direction I'd like to see the story go, if I may.

Yes — and the way you're framing it is *exactly* how to keep Direction E clean, believable, and earned:

- **He doesn't "flip."** He accumulates proof.
- **He doesn't perform femininity.** He discovers congruence.
- **He doesn't chase Celeste with declarations.** He aligns with her standards, and she feels it before she admits it.

The emotional engine you've identified is gold: Sharl is *implicitly courting* Celeste by becoming more "kept," more congruent, more at ease in women's space — and Celeste knows. She just doesn't weaponise that knowledge.

Below is a concrete way to run this arc: **what Sharl does, what Celeste does, how she thinks about it, and how it stays safe.**

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## **The core dynamic: Sharl is "courting by standards," Celeste is "leading without exploiting"**

### **What Sharl is doing (even if he thinks he's subtle)**

He's tailoring his behaviour to be appealing in a way that isn't male-coded:

- Clean, steady, reliable presence.
- Grooming as maintenance, not peacocking.
- Softness as ease, not submission theatre.
- Asking permission / checking first ("no secrets," "is this okay?").

He thinks he's getting away with it because he's young and still believes attraction is something you *announce*.

### **What Celeste is doing (because she *always* knows)**

She sees it immediately. She just refuses to:

- tease him,
- reward him in a way that trains performance,
- or turn his yearning into leverage.

Her approach becomes: **acknowledge the standard, not the desire.**

She doesn't say, "You look nice." She says, "That's the level."

She doesn't say, "You're doing this for me, aren't you?" She says, "If you're doing this, do it for you — and do it safely."

And internally... she's not indifferent. She's just disciplined.

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## How to make it earned: a 6-scene ladder toward Direction E

Each rung is small, plausible, and "clean."

### Scene 1 — The first explicit "check with her"

Sharl asks for something minor and practical that's obviously grooming-adjacent, but framed as function.

**Example trigger:** winter wind and wool friction = dry skin, itch, irritation during wear-testing.

- Sharl: "Is there... a basic moisturiser that doesn't smell like anything? For work. My hands keep catching on the fabric."
- Celeste hears the *subtext* but answers the *need*.

**Celeste's move:** She gives him a *short list*, not a makeover. No romance tone. Just competence.

#### Celeste's internal:

He's asking. He's not hiding. Good.

Also: he wants to be pleasing. He thinks I can't see it. I can.

### Scene 2 — Sarah gives him a nickname (non-gendered, affectionate, sticky)

This is culture cement. Sarah doesn't go romantic; she goes *tribal*.

It could be something like:

- "QA Prince" (mocking, but affectionate)
- "Clipboard" (because he always has one)
- "Standards" (said like an insult, becomes a badge)
- "Angel" is too loaded; keep it cheeky.

**Key:** the nickname lands because Sharl doesn't preen. He just accepts it and keeps working.

**Celeste's move:** lets it stick. That's her endorsement without a speech.

### Scene 3 — The boundary intervention (no saviourism)

A male client gets handsy with attention toward a young staffer or tries to take photos / makes "jokes."

Sharl intervenes calmly, almost boringly:

- "Please don't touch staff."
- "Please step back."
- "We don't do photos without consent."

No chest-thumping. No moral lecture. Just policy voice.

**Celeste watches:** this matters more than any outfit. It proves his alignment is values-deep.

**Celeste's internal:**

He didn't do it to impress me.

Which is why it impresses me.

### Scene 4 — A new male hire fails culture

This is your perfect contrast engine.

A "matey" new hire tries pub-style bonding:

- sly digs,
- mild sexist jokes,
- "come on, don't be so serious."

Sharl doesn't argue. He sets a boundary like it's a seam spec:

- "Not here."
- "That's not how we talk."
- "Do the work."

**Celeste's move:** backs him with one sentence, not a lecture:

- "He's right. Keep it professional."

That moment turns Sharl into *the standard*.

### Scene 5 — The softening becomes intentional (voice, posture, habits)

Sharl begins choosing softness because it calms him. He still thinks it's just "being tidy" or "being respectful," but it's deeper.

- He stops trying to “sound like a bloke.”
- He becomes gentler with himself.
- He lets “kept” become a normal baseline.

**Celeste's move:** refuses to critique it. She normalises it. That's huge.

### Celeste's internal:

If I treat this like novelty, I poison it.

If I treat it like shame, I poison him.

So I treat it like competence.

## Scene 6 — Direction E begins to show its face (quietly)

Now you can let Celeste realise something like:

This isn't just anti-male disgust.

This is *positive pull* toward a feminine mode of being — toward ease, toward congruence, toward belonging.

But you still don't need Sharl to label himself. You just show him **choosing**.

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## How Celeste deals with Sharl “trying to be appealing” without exploiting him

This is the emotional craft bit, and it's delicious.

### 1) She separates feedback into two lanes

- **Lane A (work):** direct critique, clean, unemotional (“neckline stability improved,” “your hair needs to be secured for the fichu to sit right”).
- **Lane B (him):** minimal praise, high respect (“Good judgment.” “That's the level.”)

She *never* uses attraction language as reinforcement. Not yet.

### 2) She “pays” him in safety, not affection

When she senses he's doing something to be pleasing, she repays it with:

- clarity,
- structure,
- consistency,
- and calm.

It's what he actually needs — and it's what makes him more attached.

### 3) She has private guardrails

Celeste checking herself is key, but it's internal, not performative.

Her inner questions can be sharp and brief:

- Am I rewarding him for becoming smaller? (No.)
- Am I making him do this? (No — he asks.)
- Am I letting "my preference" override "his health"? (No — supervision, no secrecy.)

### 4) She chooses not to "call him out"

This is important: if she says, "You're doing this for me," it becomes *about her*, and he'll either deny it or start performing harder.

Instead she lets him keep the illusion that he's subtle. That's mercy.

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### A short Celeste POV micro-scene that nails the vibe

Sharl waited until the machines were running and the room had settled into its working hum.

Then he came to her station with that careful expression he wore when he was about to ask for something that felt, to him, unreasonably personal.

Celeste didn't look up right away. She finished the line she was drawing. She liked giving him the dignity of not being snapped into a spotlight.

"What?" she asked, neutral.

Sharl cleared his throat.

"Lauren said I should... moisturise," he said, and then, as if the word tasted strange, "properly. For winter. For work."

Celeste lifted her eyes.

He was trying to keep his face blank. Trying to make it sound incidental.

It wasn't incidental. Not to him.

He thought she wouldn't notice the effort—the new steadiness, the way he'd begun to treat his own body as part of the system instead of an afterthought.

Celeste had noticed weeks ago.

Women always noticed.

She kept her face composed anyway.

"Okay," she said. "What's your question?"

Sharl swallowed.

"Which one do you use?" he asked.

There it was.

He watched her like he'd just stepped onto a thin bridge and needed her not to laugh.

Celeste felt something warm and dangerous move through her chest.

Not amusement.

Not triumph.

A sudden tenderness, sharp as cold air: he wants to be pleasing. He wants to meet the level. He wants—quietly, stubbornly—to be seen as worthy.

She didn't let any of that reach her face.

She reached into the drawer, pulled out her own plain, unscented bottle, and set it on the table like a tool.

"This," she said. "No fragrance. No residue. Doesn't catch lint."

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

Celeste's mouth twitched, almost a smile.

"Yes," she said. "This isn't a performance."

Sharl's shoulders loosened, relief flashing so fast he probably thought she didn't see it.

Celeste slid the bottle a centimetre closer to him.

"And," she added, voice calm, "if you're changing anything about your routine, you tell me. Not because I'm in charge of your body—because secrets are where you get hurt."

Sharl nodded quickly. "Yeah. I will."

Celeste watched his hand close around the bottle.

He looked absurdly grateful for something so boring.

And Celeste—steady, professional, rigid Celeste—had to look back down at her work for a moment longer than necessary, because she didn't yet trust her voice to stay flat.

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## The endpoint you're aiming for

Eventually, you get to the moment where Celeste can admit — at least to herself — that Sharl's increasing alignment isn't merely "anti-male."

It's pro-something.

A positive gravity.

And the cleanest way to show that is to let Sharl begin choosing femininity not because it pleases Celeste, but because it **eases him** — and Celeste's attraction becomes a side effect she refuses to exploit.

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If you'd like, next I can outline the next 8–10 scenes as a tight Act II spine using the ladder above (including: nickname, boundary intervention, male hire failure, winter Faire repeat with higher-end fabrics, and the first "safe femininity" choice that's explicitly Sharl's).



Yes please.

Here's a tight **Act II spine (10 scenes)** that takes you from "winter stability + scaling" into **Direction E emerging naturally, earned through standards, culture, and Sharl's deliberate, consent-based self-maintenance**. I'm keeping the POV emphasis mostly **Celeste**, with one or two strategic detours (Lauren/Mara) to widen the women's competence network without diluting your core.

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## Act II spine — Winter into earned Direction E (10 scenes)

### Scene 1 — Winter Systems Day

**POV:** Celeste

**Purpose:** Re-establish the new normal: winter, scaling, higher-end fabrics, the museum queue.

**Conflict:** Pressure to "just ship" vs insistence on testing (expensive cloth = expensive mistakes).

**Turn:** Celeste spots Sharl's *new baseline*: he's maintained (hair, skin, calm), not performative. She clocks that he no longer "checks mirrors," he checks function.

**Key detail:** the "NO HEROICS" policy is visibly lived (roster, packing checklists, enforced study hours).

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### Scene 2 — The "Moisturiser Question" (first explicit check)

**POV:** Celeste

**Purpose:** Start the "courting-by-standards" mechanism with consent and no secrets.

**Conflict:** Sharl wants to ask something intimate but frames it as functional; he's terrified it'll look silly.

**Turn:** Celeste answers pragmatically (unscented, non-residue), and adds a calm non-negotiable: *no secrecy about health or routines that affect wellbeing*.

**Subtext:** Sharl thinks he's subtle. Celeste knows. She refuses to "call him out," because that would train performance.

**Button line (Celeste internal):** *Women always know. The question is what we do with knowing.*

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### Scene 3 — Sarah's Nickname (culture cement)

**POV:** Celeste

**Purpose:** Make Sharl's belonging social, not private.

**Conflict:** Sarah tries to needle him into self-consciousness; the room watches whether he preens or crumples.

**Turn:** Sharl accepts the nickname with zero performance and goes back to work, which makes it stick.

### Nickname options that stay clean:

- "Clipboard" (affectionate mockery)
- "Standards" (said like an insult, becomes a badge)
- "QA" (short, tribal)

Pick one and let Sarah repeat it until others do.

**Celeste's move:** She doesn't smile *at him* (reward), but she doesn't shut it down either (endorsement). That's leadership.

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### Scene 4 — Winter Faire Field Test (you already have the shape)

**POV:** Celeste

**Purpose:** Show Sharl blending as belonging; show Wardrobe's policy enforcement.

**Conflict:** Tourist "bloke" tries covert spectacle; museum wants perfection; weather wants failure.

**Turn:** Celeste/Mara enforce boundaries cleanly; Sharl stays steady and keeps working.

**Identity cue (subtle):** Sharl's calm isn't "male stoicism." It's *relief* that he's allowed to be guided by women's standards.

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### Scene 5 — Boundary Intervention (no saviourism)

**POV:** Celeste

**Purpose:** Prove Sharl's ethics are portable and active.

**Conflict:** A male client gets intrusive with a staffer or tries to turn staff into content.

**Turn:** Sharl steps in with policy language—boring, calm, effective. Celeste backs him with one sentence.

**Sharl's line:** "Please step back. Staff aren't part of the display."

**Celeste's backing line:** "He's right. That's our policy."

**Celeste internal:** This is where her attraction deepens, but she labels it as *respect* to keep herself honest.

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### Scene 6 — New Male Hire Fails Culture

**POV:** Mara (short detour) or Celeste

**Purpose:** Externalise the “male space” contrast inside Wardrobe—without a lecture.

**Conflict:** New hire tries matey bonding: little digs, plausibly-deniable sexism, the pub script.

**Turn:** Sharl shuts it down simply: “Not here.” Mara enforces consequence (shift reassignment, written warning, or termination if repeated).

**Why Mara POV can sing here:** she’s the “terms and consequences” woman. She makes it clinical, not emotional.

**Outcome:** Sharl becomes *the standard*, not “the exception.”

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## Scene 7 — The Pub (signpost) + “No misogyny for points”

**POV:** Celeste (pub return scene) + next morning at Wardrobe

**Purpose:** Make the contrast explicit: Sharl refuses collusion; his disgust is integrity.

**Conflict:** Pub tries to recruit him into contempt.

**Turn:** He leaves. Next day, Sarah needles him; he states the boundary line that resets the room.

**Celeste’s internal:** She realises he doesn’t just “fit with women.” He *rejects* the social economy of contempt.

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## Scene 8 — Higher-End Fabric Crisis (Nymph v3 breaks under winter reality)

**POV:** Celeste

**Purpose:** Stress test the business and Sharl’s stability simultaneously.

**Conflict:** Museum feedback escalates: a failure point that threatens reputation and cashflow.

**Turn:** Sharl proposes a fix (engineering brain), but asks Celeste first before changing anything about his wear-test routine/comfort measures. No secrets. No heroics.

**Clean intimacy:** Celeste adjusts his hair or fichu again—practical touch, brief, controlled. She notices her own reaction and clamps it down.

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## Scene 9 — Sharl’s “Softness” Becomes Intentional

**POV:** Celeste

**Purpose:** Begin Direction E without declarations: Sharl chooses softness because it eases him.

**Conflict:** Sharl fears he's "overdoing it" / fears being seen as trying too hard; he half expects Celeste to critique.

**Turn:** Celeste doesn't critique. She normalises. She frames it as competence: "That's maintenance. That's adult."

**Concrete behaviours to show (pick 2–3):**

- His voice gets quieter/warmer when stressed, rather than tightening into "blokey."
- He stops apologising reflexively.
- He prioritises comfort (gloves for cold, scarf for wind) without shame.
- He asks for a **routine** rather than a "fix."

**Celeste internal:** *If I treat this as novelty, I poison it. If I treat it as shame, I poison him.*

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**Scene 10 — The Quiet Near-Confession (but still clean)****POV:** Celeste

**Purpose:** Put the romantic pressure under glass without shattering it.

**Conflict:** Sharl is clearly tailoring himself to be appealing; Celeste feels it strongly but refuses to reward "performance."

**Turn:** Celeste gives him a safe kind of recognition: not "you're pretty," but "I notice your standards."

**Structure of the scene:**

- End of day. House quiet. Celeste studying.
- Sharl asks permission for something small but intimate (e.g., "Can you show me how you keep your hair from frizzing in the wind?" or "Is this okay for tomorrow?")
- Celeste realises he's courting through standards.
- She chooses the clean response: she helps, briefly, and then says one line that's both boundary and blessing.

**Celeste's line:**

"You don't have to earn care by becoming perfect. But if you're going to maintain yourself, do it like you do everything else—honestly."

**What it sets up:** Direction E is now inevitable, but still not named.

## How this spine answers your big question cleanly

You asked: is it antipathy to masculinity, or a feminine self emerging?

This sequence lets the answer reveal itself in layers:

1. **Antipathy to contempt** (pub / new hire)
  2. **Alignment with women-led standards** (Wardrobe culture)
  3. **Positive pull toward softness and maintenance** (rituals, ease, congruence)
  4. **Direction E begins:** he isn't just escaping maleness; he's moving toward something that fits.
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## Two optional “next-phase” pivots (for Act II late / Act III)

Pick one later, once the above is established:

### Pivot 1 — “Name on the Work” (ethical authorship)

Celeste makes his contributions visible publicly (product page, internal docs, museum notes).

This tests her: can she honour him without turning him into spectacle?

### Pivot 2 — “The First Private Label”

Not public. Not dramatic. Sharl tries a private word for himself (even if it's tentative).

Celeste holds it carefully—no celebration, no panic—just calm acceptance and safety planning.

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If you want, next I can do either:

1. a **beat-by-beat outline** for each scene (opening image → conflict → turn → ending image), or
2. draft **Scene 2 (“Moisturiser Question”)** and **Scene 6 (“New Male Hire Fails Culture”)** in full prose, since those two are the hinges that start Direction E in a way that feels earned.



