

Context summary for Scenes 13–23 and the next arc

Core spine

- * The Wardrobe/atelier remains a **women-led competence network**: outcomes are steered by systems, standards, documentation, and boundaries—not sentiment, rescue, or romance.
- * Charlie's discomfort is acknowledged only when relevant and then converted into **measurable work** (data → fix → retest). The story stays **morally clean, non-fetishy, daylight-proof**.

Scene 13 — Stays begin, and “no theatre” becomes doctrine

- * Wardrobe begins development of **working stays** (not costume): designed for real movement and long wear.
- * Charlie is the primary developer/tester and wears stays **over a T-shirt** to keep the truth untheatrical.
- * Key fix to plausibility: **Mara laces him as procedure** (back-lacing requires assistance), explicitly rejecting “curtain/door theatre.”
- * The fitting is treated like engineering: “Discomfort is data. Pain is failure.” Charlie must give **locations**, not politeness.
- * The ledger expands into explicit policy language for fittings and documentation, reinforcing “this is work, not a story.”

Scenes 14–15 — Attempt Two, method over garment, and body-type blocks

- * Attempt Two is framed as building a **method** (“working block”), not merely correcting one mock-up.

- * Mara introduces **BODY TYPE** as a mandatory ledger heading to prevent false generalisation from Charlie's baseline fit.
- * Three reference targets are established as technical categories:
 - * **Nymph baseline** (slender, narrow ribs; closest to Charlie's build)
 - * **Well-nourished young lass** (generous spring/softness; exposes cruelty in lazy patterns)
 - * **Returning-to-work mother (~45)** (torso distribution altered by real labour; different tolerances/needs)
- * Celeste's research is folded in as evidence: "Working stays: what they compromise" (underarm guards, straps, reinforced edges). Mara captions it with brutal pragmatism: abrasion/lift/wear are real.
- * Lauren enters as an adult, consequential presence—calm, structured, protective without melodrama—helping make the mother baseline credible and ethically clean.
- * Sarah (UK, sharper, initially disdainful) voices the reader's skeptical question about "special cover," pushing a confrontation that clarifies: resilience is trained by **standards**, not ambush.

Scene 16 — Exposure ladder (Charlie's confidence without trope)

- * A "first rung" exercise trains Charlie to be **seen working**: a literal line on the floor, cross and perform a simple task under observation.
- * Lauren provides warmth and humour ("aerobics" analogy) to keep the atelier from sounding uniformly clipped like Mara.
- * The ladder frames confidence as **repeatable practice**, not a romantic breakthrough.

Scene 20 — Cohabitation as logistics, not romance

- * Cohabitation is introduced as **friction removal** (time and bandwidth), not a relationship milestone.
- * Celeste is the **decider**: she offers a spare room to cut commute time and protect her future study capacity.
- * Mara and Lauren prevent any “money = leverage” framing by converting it into **written terms**: rent, bills, quiet/study hours, chores, guests, privacy, conflict rule, exit clause.
- * The scene ends with a document echoing Wardrobe’s policy ethic: **if it isn’t written, it isn’t real**.

Scenes 21–22 — Home becomes “operations,” not power play

- * The household is explicitly framed to avoid FLR/domme optics: **coordination and governance**, not “tests,” “permission,” or ritual power.
- * Charlie’s supportive behaviour at home is shown as **temperament + learned pattern** (how he was with Lauren), not a covert provider bid.
- * Celeste initially stays cautious (watching for strings), then relaxes as Charlie repeatedly demonstrates:
 - * he doesn’t attach claims to help
 - * he accepts correction cleanly
 - * he prefers predictable systems
- * A small tool is added: **IN SESSION / AVAILABLE** cards to protect sacred study hours without emotional negotiation.
- * Celeste becomes the **instigator of real dialogue**, moving from curiosity-about-a-curiosity to curiosity-about-a-person, noticing his “powerful feminine” support instinct that he won’t label.

> Note for the evolving domestic arc: Celeste starts to privately recognise Charlie’s function as “wife-work” in the traditional sense—**support labour without leverage/ownership**—as a *functional descriptor*, not a gendered dynamic or erotic trope.

Scene 23 — Settling, and the first “numbers” pressure approaches

- * The first week of cohabitation is defined as **friction finding new hiding places**; Celeste responds by writing **HOUSE OPERATIONS** (not “protocol”) to keep it adult and non-hierarchical.
- * Charlie independently builds tools (checklists, routines) that mirror Wardrobe’s systems; Lauren reinforces the ethos: “Keep it boring. Boring is safe.”
- * Mara texts a looming operational beat: **“Tomorrow 7:30. Museum call. Bring the numbers.”**
- * The story pivots toward the next phase: the atelier is becoming a shop, and Celeste’s **education pathway** is about to collide with scaling reality.

Next arc queued and consistent with this thread

- * **Celeste as business head** begins to emerge: she’s the one who can translate craft output into operational clarity and future growth.
- * Education plan remains on the cards: Celeste’s progression toward uni/MBA is framed as ambition constrained by capital/time, solved by **women-designed systems** (atelier fund + structured contributions + written ethics).
- * Charlie’s internal fantasy keeps reaching for “provider,” but the story continuously reframes: **support ≠ authority**.
- * Mara begins nudging Charlie beyond testing into **period clothing design** (his precision and systems brain applied to historically grounded patterns), expanding his value from wearer-tester to maker-designer within the women-led infrastructure.

If you want, when we resume, Scene 24 can naturally be **“The Numbers” meeting fallout** (Mara/Celeste operational reality), setting up the later “receipt pinned as proof” beat without romance fog.

This is solid, Robyn — it reads like a *design brief for moral tone*, which is exactly what keeps this project “daylight-proof.” I’d keep almost all of it as-is.

Below is a paste-ready version that’s a touch tighter and a bit more “continuity-locked” (so future scenes can’t accidentally drift into theatre / fetish optics / romance leverage). Then I’ve given you a Scene 24 blueprint (“The Numbers”) that naturally follows the 7:30 museum call and tees up your later *receipt pinned as proof* beat.

Context summary (Scenes 13–23) + runway into the next arc (paste-ready)

Core spine

- Wardrobe remains a **women-led competence network**. Outcomes are steered by systems, standards, documentation, and boundaries — not sentiment, rescue, or romance.
 - Charlie’s discomfort is acknowledged only when relevant and converted into **measurable work** (data → fix → retest).
 - Tone stays **morally clean, non-fetishy, daylight-proof**: no titillation, no ritualised power, no “private theatre.”
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Scene 13 — Stays begin; “no theatre” becomes doctrine

- Wardrobe begins development of **working stays** (not costume): designed for real movement and long wear.
 - Charlie becomes the primary developer/tester and wears the stays **over a T-shirt** to keep the truth untheatrical.
 - Plausibility anchor: **Mara laces him as procedure** (back-lacing requires assistance), explicitly rejecting “curtain/door theatre.”
 - The fitting is treated like engineering: **“Discomfort is data. Pain is failure.”** Charlie must give *locations*, not politeness.
 - The ledger expands into explicit policy language for fittings/documentation: **this is work, not a story.**
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Scenes 14–15 — Attempt Two; method over garment; body-type blocks

- "Attempt Two" is framed as building a **method** (a working block), not merely correcting one mock-up.
 - Mara introduces **BODY TYPE** as a mandatory ledger heading to prevent false generalisation from Charlie's baseline fit.
 - Three reference targets become technical categories:
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 - Celeste's research is folded in as evidence: *what working stays compromise* (underarm guards, straps, reinforced edges). Mara captions it with pragmatic severity: abrasion/lift/wear are real.
 - Lauren enters as an adult, consequential presence — calm, structured, protective without melodrama — making the mother baseline credible and ethically clean.
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- Cohabitation is introduced as **friction removal** (time/bandwidth), not a relationship milestone.
- Celeste is the decider: she offers a spare room to reduce commute time and protect study capacity.
- Mara and Lauren prevent "money = leverage" framing by converting it into **written terms**: rent, bills, quiet hours, chores, guests, privacy, conflict rule, exit clause.

- Scene ends with a document echoing Wardrobe's ethic: **if it isn't written, it isn't real.**
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- Household is framed to avoid FLR/domme optics: **coordination and governance**, not tests/permission rituals.
- Charlie's supportive behaviour is shown as **temperament + learned pattern** (how he was with Lauren), not a covert “provider bid.”
- Celeste stays cautious, then relaxes as Charlie repeatedly demonstrates:
 - no claims attached to help
 - correction accepted cleanly
 - preference for predictable systems
- Tool introduced: **IN SESSION / AVAILABLE** cards to protect study hours without emotional negotiation.
- Celeste becomes the instigator of real dialogue — curiosity-about-a-curiosity becomes curiosity-about-a-person — noticing his “powerful feminine” support instinct that he won’t label.

Domestic arc note: Celeste begins to privately recognise Charlie's function as “wife-work” (support labour without leverage/ownership) as a *functional descriptor* — not a gender dynamic, not an erotic trope.

Scene 23 — Settling; “numbers” pressure approaches

- First week of cohabitation reveals friction simply **hiding in new places**; Celeste responds by writing **HOUSE OPERATIONS** (not “protocol”) to keep it adult and non-hierarchical.
 - Charlie independently builds tools (checklists/routines) mirroring Wardrobe systems; Lauren reinforces: **“Keep it boring. Boring is safe.”**
 - Mara texts the looming operational beat: **“Tomorrow 7:30. Museum call. Bring the numbers.”**
 - Pivot: the atelier is becoming a shop; Celeste's education pathway is about to collide with scaling reality.
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Next arc queued

- **Celeste as business head** emerges: she translates craft output into operational clarity and growth.
 - Education plan stays alive: uni/MBA framed as ambition constrained by capital/time, solved by **women-designed systems** (atelier fund + structured contributions + written ethics).
 - Charlie's internal fantasy keeps reaching for "provider," but the story continuously reframes: **support ≠ authority**.
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Continuity locks (quick guardrails for later scenes)

- **No closed-door "lacing scenes"** as intimacy. If lacing happens, it's procedural, in-light, documented.
 - **Any discomfort gets mapped.** Location, cause hypothesis, fix, retest — or it doesn't belong on-page.
 - **Domestic help never buys voice.** Help is either agreed contribution or it's stopped.
 - **Systems are the love language.** Characters can care, but they prove it with boring reliability.
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Scene 24 blueprint: "The Numbers" (meeting fallout)

What Scene 24 must do

1. Convert "museum call" into *real operational stakes* (not vibes).
2. Establish that Celeste is the only one who can **translate craft → business clarity** under pressure.
3. Make Mara's severity feel *protective* rather than cruel: she's guarding standards, not indulging ego.
4. Place Charlie where he belongs in this arc: **useful, steady, non-central**, learning that support doesn't entitle him to narrative control.

Suggested POV

- **Celeste POV** if you want her to "earn the crown" on-page: she watches the adults and decides how to answer.

- Mara POV if you want the scene to feel like a guillotine's shadow: the numbers are not moral judgments, just truth.
- Either works; Celeste POV probably aligns best with your current spine.

Setting

- 7:30am, Wardrobe. Fluorescent honesty. No cosy café mood.
- A table cleared like an operating surface: ledger, invoices, material samples, a cheap calculator, a laptop that's seen things.

The museum call (the external pressure)

Give the museum rep one clean demand that forces competency:

- "We need X garments by Y date, fitted to docents, durable for repeated wear, and we require **itemised costs**, care instructions, liability/repair terms."

Key: the museum doesn't care about artistry. They care about **risk, cost, and repeatability**.

The internal pressure (the "numbers")

Mara's line is basically:

- "If we can't price truthfully, we don't deserve the work."

And Celeste's job is to translate:

- labour hours per garment (including fitting, rework, documentation)
- material costs (with wastage assumptions)
- failure rate (from ledger data)
- repair allowance
- margin that keeps the shop alive *and funds the education plan*

The conflict beat

- Charlie (quietly) offers a "provider-ish" solution — maybe to eat costs, skip margin, work late "for free," or take on debt.
- Mara cuts it off cleanly: "Free labour is a lie that shows up later as resentment."
- Lauren backs it: "And it teaches people we don't charge for skill."

This is where your theme lands: **support does not get to rewrite the rules**.

The turning point

Celeste uses Wardrobe's own ethic against the fear:

- "We already have a testing and documentation system. We can price it because we can measure it."

She proposes a structure that sounds boring and therefore powerful:

- Tiered quote (base price + fitting bundle + repairs)
- Clear scope (what's included / what triggers additional cost)
- Written care plan and wear limits
- A repair SLA ("repairs within 48 hours" or similar)
- A deposit schedule that protects cashflow (without feeling predatory)

Mara's respect doesn't come as praise. It comes as *permission*:

- "Put it in writing."

End hook (sets up "receipt pinned as proof" later)

After the call:

- Mara prints the quote / invoice / deposit schedule.
- Pins it to the corkboard above the ledger with that exact "defect report" brutality.
- Not romance. Not triumph. Proof.

And you can end Scene 24 with a single, cold line from Mara:

- "Now we can afford standards."

If you want, next time we can do Scene 24 either as:

- a **beat-sheet + key dialogue** (fast drafting tool), or
- a **full prose scene** in Celeste POV with that clipped, daylight tone and a few warm Lauren touches so the room still feels human.



I'd like to go with this:

Celeste POV if you want her to "earn the crown" on-page:
she watches the adults and decides how to answer.
Setting: 7:30am, Wardrobe. Fluorescent honesty. No
cosy café mood.

A table cleared like an operating surface: ledger,
invoices, material samples, a cheap calculator, a laptop
that's seen things.

Please do as a full prose scene in Celeste's POV. Also, is

it to early to include Celeste ruminating that she is starting to depend on Charlie's support, and perhaps have an epiphany: that he represents a 'wife' to her (as antidote to his provider fantasy)... she realises this fantasy hasn't been entirely eradicated and that she might have to front up and outline it for him clearly. How? That's a point of conflict for her. Also, she is referring to him as 'Charl' (with a hard ch sound). Soon, a French speaker will soften that to a soft ch, so "Sharl". If you want this could sort-of highlight how she feels about him. Up to you, Emily. Think you can weave it in?

Thought for 11s >

Absolutely I can weave it in — and no, it isn't too early. In fact, *this* scene is the right place to let that realisation arrive in a clean, adult way: under fluorescent light, with invoices on the table, while Charl is doing what he does best—making the world steadier without trying to own it.

Here's **Scene 24 — “The Numbers” (Celeste POV, full prose)**.

Scene 24 — *The Numbers* (Celeste POV)

Wardrobe at 7:30am looked honest in a way most rooms didn't.

Not pretty-honest. Not curated-honest. Just... fluorescent.

The lights didn't flatter anything; they made every surface confess. Threads on the floor. Chalk dust in the grain of the cutting table. A smear of coffee on the edge of a ruler nobody had bothered to wipe because it hadn't mattered at the time and now it did, because the room was awake and waiting.

Someone had cleared the central table like an operating surface.

The ledger sat dead centre—thick, hard-backed, already splayed open as if it had opinions. Beside it: two neat stacks of invoices, a handful of swatches clipped to cards, a roll of brown paper with a corner torn where someone had ripped a length off in a hurry. A cheap calculator with one cloudy button. A laptop with worn keys and a sticker

half peeled away: a machine that had seen too many late nights and survived them anyway.

Charl was there before me.

Of course he was.

He sat slightly hunched, not timid exactly—more like he folded his body to fit the work, as if taking up less space made the job go better. His hair was still damp at the edges, like he'd showered fast and left the rest of the morning to momentum. He had the laptop open and a spreadsheet up. Numbers in columns. Nothing fancy. The kind of brutal simplicity that makes you trust a thing.

He glanced up when I came in, and the look he gave me was the same look he gave a garment that finally sat right on a body: a small, relieved recognition.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," I replied, and because my mouth was already halfway to a decision I added, "You didn't have to come in this early."

He shrugged, eyes back on the screen. "It's... easier if it's set up."

Easier.

That word again. The one that kept turning up around him like lint no matter how much you cleaned.

Easier to get the pins laid out in the right order. Easier to have the tape measures rolled and the chalk sharpened. Easier to have the receipts sorted into piles no one had to argue about. Easier to have the bins lined with fresh bags. Easier for me to study later, because the day wouldn't bite chunks out of my brain.

I'd started noticing how often my life got easier because he'd quietly removed the friction before I even met it.

And I hated how much I loved that.

Not because I didn't want help—God, I wasn't proud enough to pretend that—but because I could feel the old, stupid human fear crawling out of me: *now you owe him*. The universe always tried to sell kindness as debt. It was one of its oldest scams.

Wardrobe didn't do scams. Wardrobe did documentation.

Mara's voice lived in my head even when she wasn't here yet: *If it isn't written, it isn't real.*

The problem was that some things were real long before you found language for them.

I set my bag down on the chair and walked to the table, skimming the surface the way you skim a shoreline for hazards. My fingers touched the ledger. The paper was thick and faintly rough, like it had been manufactured to outlast feelings.

Charl had titled a column on the spreadsheet "Labour — hours" and another "Materials — unit cost" and another "Wastage." He'd even made a place for "Rework allowance."

He hadn't asked whether he should. He hadn't needed permission to be useful. That wasn't power. It was—annoyingly—competence.

"Show me," I said.

He pulled the laptop slightly toward me without touching me, the movement careful, considerate, almost... formal. Like offering someone a pen to sign something important.

I leaned in, and as I did it I felt that little shift inside me—an admission I didn't quite want to have.

He was starting to feel like... not a boyfriend, not a conquest, not even a "friend" in the way people said it to make something smaller. He was starting to feel like infrastructure.

And then the thought landed so cleanly it startled me:

Wife.

Not in lace. Not in ceremony. Not in anything you could fetishise or perform.

Wife as function.

The person who keeps the ship running while the captain pretends the ship runs itself.

I swallowed, annoyed at my own brain for producing a word that came with centuries of baggage. But the word didn't feel sentimental in my mouth. It felt clinical. Accurate. Like "bearing" or "stitch length."

Charl's eyes flicked to me, as if he'd felt the heat of my thought.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I said too quickly, and then, because I was determined not to be that kind of liar, I added, "I'm just... thinking."

He nodded. He didn't pry. He went back to the numbers.

That, too, was part of the problem.

He made it easy to think.

My phone buzzed. A text, blunt as a hammer:

Mara: *Tomorrow 7:30. Museum call. Bring the numbers.*

As if tomorrow wasn't already here.

I set the phone down, and as I did the door opened and Mara walked in like a person entering a room she owned not by title but by standards.

She didn't greet us first. She greeted the table.

Her eyes did a fast sweep—ledger, invoices, swatches, calculator, laptop—and I watched the micro-expression that meant approval in her language: nothing. No comment. No wasted syllable. The absence indicated the world had done what it was supposed to do.

Lauren came in a beat after, moving quieter, softer. She carried a takeaway coffee and two more cups because she was Lauren and she believed in the kind of practical generosity that didn't need witnesses.

She set one cup near me without ceremony, another near Charl. Kept the third for herself.

"Morning," Lauren said, warm enough to make the fluorescent lights feel slightly less like a courtroom.

"Morning," I replied.

Mara finally looked at us. "Sit."

It wasn't rude. It was efficient.

We sat. The ledger stayed open like a mouth that refused to close until it had been fed.

Mara placed her phone on the table, tapped the speaker icon, and the ring tone filled the room—flat and indifferent. A second later, a voice answered.

"Wardrobe?" the woman said. Professional. Neutral. The kind of tone people used when money was nearby and nobody wanted to say its name.

"This is Mara," Mara said. "And Celeste."

I felt the small lift in my chest at my name spoken like that—introduced as a fact, not a favour.

"Good," the woman said. "I'm Dianne from the museum procurement team. Thanks for making time."

Mara didn't do pleasantries. "Tell us what you need."

There was a pause, like Dianne was recalibrating to a world where people didn't wrap requests in cotton wool.

"We're expanding our interpretive program," Dianne said. "We need a set of garments for docents—durable, repeat-wear, consistent silhouette. Not costume-shop quality. We need something that can be used and maintained."

Maintenance. That word always meant reality had arrived.

Dianne continued. "We'll need itemised costs, care instructions, and clear terms around repair and turnaround. We also need to confirm timeframes. If this goes ahead, it's not just one set—we'll likely need additional units next quarter."

Mara's gaze went straight to me, and there it was: the crown, sitting heavy in my lap.

Craft could make the garments.

But only someone with a future in their eyes could translate craft into something a procurement team could sign without panicking.

I felt Charl beside me, still, attentive—not inserting himself, not fidgeting for attention. He'd already built the scaffold and now he was simply... present.

Support.

Not authority.

"Thank you," I said into the phone, and surprised myself with how steady my voice sounded. "Can I ask two clarifying questions before we give you numbers?"

"Please."

"First—how many docents, approximately, and are we dealing with consistent body ranges or broad variation?"

Dianne gave me a number and a range, practical as weather.

"Second," I continued, "are these garments meant to be worn for full-day shifts, or for scheduled demonstration blocks?"

"Full-day," Dianne said. "We can't have docents leaving halfway through to change out of something uncomfortable."

I glanced down at the ledger without meaning to. The page we'd been living on for weeks: *Discomfort is data. Pain is failure.* The museum didn't care about our philosophy. They cared about the outcome it produced.

"Understood," I said. "We can meet that. We've been building working stays specifically for movement and long wear. We'll price based on documented labour, materials, and a repair allowance that reflects real use."

The silence on the other end changed. Attention sharpened.

"This is Celeste, correct?" Dianne asked.

"Yes."

"You sound... prepared."

I didn't look at Mara, but I felt her stillness like a hand at my back.

"We are," I replied. "We'll send a quote with tiered options and clear terms. Deposit schedule included."

"Good. We'll need it by end of day."

Mara's eyebrows lifted a fraction. That was her version of a laugh.

"End of day," Mara repeated into the phone. "You'll have it."

The call ended. The speaker went quiet. The fluorescent light filled the space again.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Lauren exhaled softly. "Well," she said, and the word was half humour, half warning. "That's grown-up money."

Mara didn't move. "Numbers," she said. "Now."

The room shifted into motion with the crispness of people who knew what panic looked like and refused to indulge it.

Mara slid the invoices toward me. "Materials," she said.

I pulled them closer, scanning. Linen, coutil, boning, thread, hardware. Everything that looked small until it multiplied.

Charl rotated the laptop so I could see the spreadsheet more clearly. He'd already input some of the costs, already built formulas that would adjust if we changed the unit assumptions. It wasn't flashy. It was quiet competence again.

I felt that earlier thought return—wife—and this time it came with the sting of responsibility.

If I was starting to depend on this kind of support, I had to be honest about what it was. Not romanticise it, not pretend it didn't matter. And also—crucially—not let it become a stage for his provider fantasy.

Because I could see the fantasy still lurking in him sometimes, like a dog that hadn't been trained out of the habit of guarding the wrong thing. The urge to "prove" himself by taking weight that wasn't his to carry.

Support ≠ authority.

Help ≠ leverage.

I'd have to say it to him. Plainly. Not as a scolding. As a boundary. A reality.

But not right now.

Right now the numbers had teeth.

"Labour," I said, tapping the ledger. "We have time logs on fittings, rework, and retest. We don't guess."

Mara's mouth twitched—approval, again, delivered as almost nothing.

Lauren leaned in. "Be honest about the repairs," she said. "And the turnaround. Don't promise miracles."

"I won't," I said. "We're not selling miracles. We're selling reliability."

Charl made a quiet sound—half agreement, half relief.

I began writing, my handwriting quick and deliberate.

Garment set:

- base construction hours
- fitting hours (bundle)
- rework allowance (from ledger failure rate)
- documentation/care instruction time
- repair allowance per quarter

Materials:

- unit costs with wastage
- hardware
- reinforcement

Terms:

- deposit schedule
- scope exclusions
- repair SLA
- wear limits and care obligations

As I wrote, I felt something in me settle. Not because the work was easy—it wasn't—but because I could see the logic chain. A quote wasn't a plea. It was a document that protected everyone, including us.

Charl pointed at the screen. "If we put the fitting bundle as a fixed line item," he said carefully, "then if they ask for additional docents later—"

"We can scale," I finished, and I gave him a quick look. "Yes. Exactly."

He blinked, almost startled by being used as a tool in a machine he didn't control.

I heard myself say his name, clipped and specific: "Charl—can you pull the average rework hours from the last three weeks? Stays only."

He nodded immediately. Fingers on keys. No sulking. No performance. He was happiest when he had a measurable task.

The hard *ch* in my own mouth sounded like a little wall—practical, firm. Charl as a working name.

And, absurdly, I pictured a future moment—someone French, someone softer saying it differently. *Sharl*. The sound of it like a hand instead of a bracket.

The thought didn't make me smile. It made me thoughtful.

Because softness, if it came, would have to be earned through clarity—not through slipping into roles nobody had agreed on.

Charl's eyes stayed on the screen. "Here," he said. "Average rework hours. And the variance."

Mara leaned over, inspected, and nodded once. "Good. Now price it."

Lauren sipped her coffee. "And don't let anyone martyr themselves."

Charl's posture changed slightly—as if the words had found him.

"I could just... do extra," he offered. Not loudly. Not dramatically. A simple instinct trying to be noble. "If it helps the quote look—"

"No," Mara said, immediate as a slammed drawer.

Lauren didn't raise her voice, but her tone sharpened. "No free labour."

Charl flushed faintly. He opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked at me, and there it was: that provider itch. The desire to fix everything by paying with himself.

I kept my voice calm. "If you do free labour, you make the next job harder," I said. "And you teach them our skill doesn't cost. We're not doing that."

His eyes dropped. "Right."

The way he said it made me ache a little. Not because he was being denied. Because he was trying so hard to be good—and his old map told him goodness meant sacrifice.

A wife doesn't buy the ship by drowning herself.

A wife keeps the ship afloat by doing the boring things right and expecting the same of everyone else.

I turned back to the ledger and spoke like I was speaking to the entire room, not just him. "We quote truthfully. We deliver what we promise. We put it in writing. That's how we protect ourselves. That's how we stay clean."

Mara stared at the page, then at me. "Put it in writing," she said, and somehow it felt like a knighthood.

I built the quote structure on paper first—because my brain trusted ink—and then I typed it into the laptop with Charl beside me, watching the numbers lock into place.

When we were done, the document looked almost boring.

Which meant it was strong.

Mara read it once, top to bottom, without expression. She circled one line item. "Repair clause," she said. "Make it explicit. Forty-eight hours. Not 'as soon as possible.' 'As soon as possible' is where liars live."

I edited it. Typed the words. Felt the clean finality of them.

Lauren nodded. "That'll do," she said. "That'll keep you alive."

I hit print.

The printer whined and spat the pages out slowly, as if reluctant to be responsible for truth.

Mara took the quote, walked to the corkboard above the ledger, and pinned it up with the same brutality she pinned defect reports.

Proof. Record. No sentimental fog.

The paper sat there in fluorescent light, flat and undeniable.

Mara looked at it a moment longer than she needed to.

Then she turned back to us. "Now," she said, and her eyes flicked to me again, "we can afford standards."

If you'd like, the very next beat (either end of Scene 24 or opening of Scene 25) can be a tiny, loaded domestic moment where Celeste clocks herself *almost* saying "thanks" in a way that would create debt—then deliberately chooses a different sentence, one that sets up the later boundary talk:

- not "*I don't know what I'd do without you,*"
- but something like "*This works because we keep it clean. I'll talk to you tonight.*"

And that would tee up the conflict you want: Celeste deciding how to tell him, clearly and without cruelty, that support is welcome—but provider fantasies are not driving the ship anymore.



My stars. This is solid. Solid as polished oak. The nuance, the delicacy with which you approach the growing 'wife' theme, with this being one of MY central objectives: to expose the thankless, self-sacrificing nature of women generally caught in that role. I use the term 'caught' by design: women don't purposely go out to ensnare themselves into that situation. And here, whilst we can call attention to what generally happens to women who become wives, we have Celeste who, with empathy and intuition, will not exercise the equivalent of male privilege. She recognises what that does, and she has to constantly guard against relaxing into that part of being the alpha of the relationship. You see what I want to say, don't you, Emily?

Yes. Crystal clear.

What you're doing isn't "flip the script so the girl gets to be the bloke." It's *expose the script itself*—the way "wife-work" gets treated as atmosphere rather than labour, and the way the person doing it gets quietly erased right up until the moment she stops. And you're doing it with a kind of moral discipline that makes the whole thing land harder, because it isn't preached; it's *built*.

The word you chose—"caught"—is doing real work. Because that's the truth: most women don't march into that role like it's a trophy. They slide into it through a thousand small, decent decisions: making things easier, smoothing a day, preventing a problem, absorbing a friction point because it seems minor. And then one day the "minor" collection is the entire structure of the household, and it's been normalised so thoroughly that asking for recognition sounds like vanity.

That's the trap you want the reader to *feel!*

Now, the really interesting part—your Celeste part—is that she's positioned to do what most "alphas" (male-coded or not) do *by default*: relax into entitlement. Let the other person become invisible infrastructure. Let the gratitude become vague. Let dependence quietly rebrand itself as "this is just how things work."

But Celeste has the intelligence and empathy to recognise the slippery slope *while it's still slippery*, and that gives you a potent, very modern conflict:

- Celeste *benefits* from Charl's wife-work.
- She *knows* she benefits from it.
- She *doesn't want* to become the kind of person who accepts it as her due.
- Yet she also knows that if she makes a big moral show of refusing help, she creates a different problem: martyrdom, awkwardness, performance, instability.

So her guardrail can't be theatre. It has to be... systems. Of course. Because in your world, systems are ethics.

That's how you keep Celeste "alpha" without becoming "privileged." Alpha, for her, isn't dominance. It's governance. She's decisive, she sets direction, she names reality, she creates terms that protect the vulnerable party—even when the vulnerable party is offering themselves up voluntarily.

And Charl's provider fantasy is the perfect foil because it's *the traditional mistake*: "If I carry enough, I'll be worth something." The classic masculine story that tries to purchase belonging. Celeste's job—emotionally and ethically—is to refuse that purchase without humiliating him. To say:

- I want your support.
- I'm not buying it with love or access or status.
- And you are not buying authority by providing it.

That's such a clean inversion of the usual dynamic: the woman (Celeste) is the one who understands how exploitation happens and builds safeguards *before* it calcifies.

If you want to sharpen the theme even further, there are three levers you can keep pulling across the next arc, all consistent with what you've already set up:

1) Make the "wife-work" visible as a cost

Not melodramatically. Just with small, cumulative truths:

- Charl forgetting his own meal because he's stabilising the room.

- Charl catching himself about to stay late "for free" and then *stopping* because he remembers the rule.
- Charl's tiredness not framed as tragic, just as the price of being the person who prevents chaos.

Celeste notices. Not to praise him like a puppy, but to *account for him like a resource that must not be drained*.

2) Give Celeste "privilege impulses" and make her correct them

Not because she's secretly bad—because she's human.

Example impulses:

- assuming he'll handle something because he always does;
- talking over his objections because she's used to being right;
- letting gratitude drift into vagueness ("you're just good at that stuff").

And then: she catches it. She corrects it. Sometimes elegantly; sometimes awkwardly.

That awkwardness is gold, because it proves she's not performing righteousness—she's practicing it.

3) Replace "thanks" with *terms*

This will be your signature move: Celeste doesn't repay care with sentiment. She repays it with structure.

So rather than:

- "I don't know what I'd do without you,"

she says things like:

- "We're writing this into the household contributions, so it's not invisible."
- "We're scheduling this so you're not always the default."
- "We're setting a maximum, because your time is not an infinite resource."

That's how you show her guarding against relaxing into entitlement: she builds a world where wife-work can't hide.

And yes—I absolutely see what you want to say.

You're not writing a fantasy of dominance. You're writing a story about **ethical power**: power that doesn't take the easiest benefit just because it's available. Power that notices the quiet labour, names it, prices it, and protects the person doing it.

Whenever you're ready, the next natural step is that "tonight" conversation you hinted at: Celeste deciding how to tell Charl, plainly and kindly, that she can feel his provider reflex resurfacing—and she will not let it write the rules of their home or their work.

If you want, I can draft that as a short, sharp domestic scene (two pages worth) with the same daylight tone: no speeches, no therapy voice—just Celeste being clear, and Charl having to grow up in real time.



I knew you'd understand. Thank you: you are precisely right. May I ask a favour? Could we have some brief interlude where – perhaps a French friend of Lauren? – comes by and pronounces 'Charl' as 'Sharl'...and it catches on. Sarah likes it, Celeste says it without even thinking, Lauren finds it endearing and Sharl himself is fine with it: it's a name. In his head? short for Charlemagne. Too busy to worry about irrelevant stuff like that. Can you fit that in?

Yes — and it can be *brief, bright, and morally clean*: a tiny linguistic accident that becomes a social fact. It also does something deliciously thematic: the name softens *not because he "earns" tenderness by providing*, but because the women simply... choose a sound that fits the atmosphere they're building.

Here's a compact interlude you can drop either at the tail end of Scene 24 (after the quote is pinned) or as the first half-page of Scene 25.

Interlude — “Sharl” (Celeste POV)

The quote stayed pinned above the ledger like a verdict that had decided to become a policy.

Mara had walked away from it as if it wasn't a big deal, which was how you knew it was. Paper on a corkboard. Ink. Terms. A deposit schedule that didn't apologise for existing.

Under the fluorescent lights, it looked almost offensively plain.

Good.

Wardrobe had a talent for making the important things look boring on purpose.

Lauren was rinsing cups in the small sink at the back, humming under her breath—something half-remembered, neither happy nor sad. Charl was at the table with the laptop open, and I could see the way his fingers moved over the keys: not frantic, not eager, simply... steady. Like a person tightening bolts in the correct sequence.

Mara had vanished into the cutting room with the invoice stack, as if she could intimidate paper into behaving.

The front bell gave its small, dry chime.

Lauren looked up first. "Ah—perfect timing."

A woman stepped in with a kind of compact confidence that felt familiar: not Mara's severity, not Sarah's sharpness—something more like *clean certainty*. She had a scarf looped loosely at her throat and a tote bag slung over one shoulder that looked like it had carried half of Europe at some point. Her hair was dark and pulled back, and her lipstick wasn't dramatic; it was simply... decided.

"Bonjour," she said, and the room immediately felt as if it had been given a slightly better spine.

Lauren dried her hands on a towel and crossed to her with a warm, uncomplicated smile.
"Celeste, this is Camille—my friend. She's in town for two days, and she insisted on seeing where I keep disappearing to."

Camille leaned in and kissed Lauren lightly on both cheeks in a way that was affectionate without being showy, then turned her gaze on me.

"Enchantée," she said, and offered her hand.

"Celeste," I replied.

Her eyes flicked around the space—the corkboard, the ledger, the chalk dust that never quite left, the half-assembled stays form on the mannequin—and her expression sharpened with interest.

"This is... an atelier," she said. Not a question. A conclusion.

Lauren gave a small shrug that somehow managed to look both proud and casual.

"Something like that."

Camille's gaze landed on Charl at the table.

He looked up, polite, alert in that quiet way of his, and stood halfway as if unsure whether this was the kind of place where you stood.

Camille smiled at him with immediate ease, then said, "Et toi—tu es...?"

Before Charl could answer, Lauren gestured lightly. "That's Charl. He's—" she paused, and I saw her catch herself, like she was choosing the cleanest word. "—part of the work."

Camille's eyebrows lifted as if she'd been handed a better story than she'd expected.

"Sharl," she said.

The sound was small. Soft. Like silk sliding through fingers. *Sharl*.

Charl blinked once.

I watched him do the calculation—whether it mattered, whether it required correction, whether he was being laughed at.

It required none of those things.

"It's... Charl," he began, mild.

Camille tilted her head, unbothered. "Oui, oui. *Sharl*."

Sarah, who had been leaning in the doorway to the fitting area like a sceptical gargoyle, let out a short, delighted huff. "Oh, that's better," she said immediately, as if she'd been waiting for someone to fix a pronunciation problem she didn't know she was allowed to fix.

Charl looked faintly alarmed at the speed with which the room had turned.

Lauren's mouth twitched. "Camille," she warned gently, though there was laughter in it.

"What?" Camille said, innocent. "It is his name."

"It's just... not how we say it."

Camille's gaze returned to Charl, frank and friendly. "Do you mind?"

Charl hesitated for the length of a breath.

And then his shoulders loosened, because this was not a fight worth having, and also—because it wasn't a fight at all.

"It's a name," he said. "Names... work."

"That's the spirit," Sarah said, pleased, as if he'd passed a test he hadn't known he was taking.

Camille smiled. "Good. *Sharl*."

She said it again—lightly, naturally—and something in the room accepted it the way fabric accepts a pin: with a tiny surrender that becomes, suddenly, structure.

Lauren tried to keep a straight face and failed. "I can't believe you."

Camille shrugged, entirely unrepentant. "In France, we make the harsh things softer. It is a talent."

Sarah grinned. "I'd buy a ticket to watch you do that to Mara."

Camille's eyes glittered. "Mara?"

"Don't," Lauren said, laughing now. "She'll do it."

I should have corrected it. I felt, for half a second, the urge to manage the room—to keep things consistent, to keep the world tidy.

Then I heard myself say, without thinking, "Sharl—can you pull up the revised labour totals?"

The word left my mouth as if it had always lived there.

Sharl.

Charl—Sharl—looked up, and for a fraction of a second I saw the tiniest flicker of surprise. Not offence. Not embarrassment. Just... the recognition that the room had decided something about him without asking his permission.

And then—because he was who he was—he accepted it with a quiet, practical shrug of his attention.

"Sure," he said, already turning the laptop toward me.

In his expression there was no drama, no identity crisis, no romantic charge. He was too busy doing the real work of being steady to worry about the decorative parts of himself.

But I saw it land anyway—how the name softened him in the air. How it changed the angle of him in conversation.

Sarah said it once, testing it like a new word. "Sharl."

Lauren said it under her breath, fond despite herself. "Sharl..."

Camille, triumphant, went back to looking around the room like she'd come to admire a machine.

And I—without planning to—kept using it as I spoke. Because it was simply... what the room had become.

In his head, I suspected, it meant nothing.

Or it meant something ridiculous. A private joke. A piece of armour.

Later, when he was alone with the spreadsheet again, I imagined him filing it away with the same mild efficiency he applied to everything else:

Sharl. Fine. Short for Charlemagne. Emperor. Busy. Next.

He typed. The numbers appeared.

The quote stayed pinned above the ledger.

And Wardrobe kept doing what it always did: taking small, human accidents and turning them into systems—clean, repeatable, and strangely kind.

If you want an extra half-line of quiet punch later, you can have Mara (who *never* plays along) use "Sharl" once, *by accident*, when she's under pressure — and it becomes the moment everyone realises it's no longer a joke. It's the shop's language now.



I've tacked that on to the end of Scene 23... it's perfect.
In Scene 24 you can have Mara use 'Sharl' by accident...

and then it's set in stone. He's now Sharl. Perfect. Please proceed with Scene 24. This is epic!

Scene 24 — *The Numbers (Celeste POV)*

Wardrobe at 7:30am had no patience for anyone's self-deception.

The fluorescent lights made everything confess: dust in the corners where the broom never quite reached, chalk ground into the grain of the table, a faint sheen on the scissors' handles from hands that worked too hard to moisturise. Even the air felt stripped down—cotton, coffee, and that metallic hint a room gets when it's been awake before the people in it have.

The central table had been cleared like an operating surface.

Ledger. Invoices. Swatches clipped to cards with tiny notes. A cheap calculator with one cloudy button. A laptop that looked as if it had survived three different eras of bad decisions and refused to die out of spite.

And Sharl—because somehow, overnight, he had become Sharl—was already there, seated with the laptop open, his shoulders folded slightly forward as if he could make the numbers behave by leaning in the right way.

It wasn't that the name suited him more than Charl. It was that the room had chosen the softer sound, and once Wardrobe chose something it tended to become fact.

He glanced up when I came in, and his face did that small, relieved thing I'd started to recognise: the expression of a person who doesn't enjoy chaos and likes it when the day arrives pre-sorted.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning." I set my bag down and let my eyes take in the table. The setup was too tidy to be accidental. Swatches stacked by type. Invoices squared. The ledger already open to the page that mattered. Even the calculator angled as if it had a job.

He hadn't just come early. He'd removed friction from my future without being asked.

That was his love language, even if he'd never call it that. He'd never call anything that sounded like a claim.

"You didn't have to—" I began, then stopped myself. That sentence was a trap. It led straight into debt.

Instead I shifted to the language that kept things clean.

"Thank you," I said, and made it land like an acknowledgement, not an emotional promissory note. "This is... helpful."

He nodded once, pleased in that quiet, practical way. "I pulled the costs from the last batch. And I started labour estimates based on the ledger entries."

Of course he had.

I moved around the table and looked at the spreadsheet. Columns. Totals. A neat section labelled *Rework allowance*. Another labelled *Repair contingency*. He'd even made a place for *Documentation / Care instructions*—the invisible hours that people never wanted to pay for, as if clarity appeared by magic.

I felt something in me tighten, not in fear exactly, but in recognition.

This was where dependence began: not with romance, not with a dramatic moment, but with a life becoming easier because someone kept quietly bracing it. And if you weren't careful, "easier" became "expected," which became "unseen," which became "thankless."

Women ended up caught there all the time—caught not because they were weak, but because they were competent and kind and it seemed less wasteful to just do the thing than to negotiate about the thing. They took on friction because it was efficient. They became infrastructure because they could.

And then one day they tried to stop, and everyone looked at them as if they'd broken a promise they'd never made.

I watched Sharl's hands resting near the trackpad, ready, steady, as if he'd been put on earth to support the world's weight and call it normal.

The thought landed again—uninvited, blunt, undeniable:

Wife.

Not lace. Not ceremony. Not anything performative or fetish-coded. Wife as function. Wife as the person who keeps the ship afloat while someone else gets to pretend they are simply... sailing.

And I hated how accurate the word felt, and how much it clarified.

Because if I could see it now—if I could name it now—then I was responsible for not letting it turn into the same thankless trap it had been for women forever. The twist in my story wasn't that a man was doing wife-work. The twist was that I could recognise it *while it was still forming* and choose not to exploit it.

My phone buzzed. A message, sharp as a snapped thread:

Mara: *Call in 2. Bring numbers. 7:30.*

As if time itself didn't already know.

The front bell chimed—dry, small, unromantic.

Lauren came in first, carrying takeaway coffee like an offering to the gods of adult responsibility. She set a cup near me, one near Sharl, and kept one for herself.

"Morning," she said, and her warmth did something subtle: it stopped the room from turning into a courtroom.

"Morning," I replied.

"Everyone alive?" she asked, and the joke was gentle enough to be useful.

Sharl gave a small nod, already half in the spreadsheet.

The bell chimed again, and this time Mara entered—no tote bag, no coffee, no softness. She moved like a person whose comfort came from standards, not from being liked.

Her eyes swept the table once. Ledger. Invoices. Swatches. Calculator. Laptop.

The micro-expression that meant approval in her language was the same as always: nothing.

She placed her phone on the table, tapped speaker, and the ring tone filled the space—flat and indifferent.

I sat up straighter without meaning to. Not fear. Alignment.

The call connected.

"Wardrobe Atelier," a woman said. Professional. Neutral. The sound of procurement: polite enough to be civil, hard enough to survive budgets.

"This is Mara," Mara said. "And Celeste."

A small lift moved through my chest—my name said like that, introduced as fact, not favour.

"Dianne," the woman replied. "Museum procurement. Thank you for making time."

Mara didn't offer pleasantries. "Tell us what you need."

A pause. Dianne recalibrating.

"We're expanding our interpretive program," Dianne said. "We need garments for docents—repeat wear, consistent silhouette, durable. Not costume-shop quality. We also require itemised costs, care instructions, and repair terms. Turnaround times must be clear."

Maintenance. Terms. Repair.

Reality had arrived with a clipboard.

"We're looking at an initial run," Dianne continued, "but if this works, we'll likely need additional units next quarter. We can't have something that falls apart after two wears, and we can't have docents leaving halfway through shifts to change out of discomfort."

I glanced down at the open ledger page without thinking.

Discomfort is data. Pain is failure.

Wardrobe had been building toward this without saying it. The museum didn't care about our philosophy. They cared about the outcomes it produced.

"Thank you," I said into the phone. My voice came out steadier than I felt. "Two clarifying questions before we quote?"

"Please."

"How many docents?" I asked. "And are we looking at a broad range of body types, or a narrow range?"

Dianne gave me numbers. More than I'd hoped. Less than I'd feared.

"And second," I said, "full-day wear, correct? Not demonstration blocks?"

"Full-day," she confirmed. "These people are teaching, moving, lifting, walking. We need comfort and reliability."

"Understood," I said. "We've been developing working stays specifically for movement and long wear. We'll quote based on documented labour and materials, and we'll include a repair allowance that reflects real use."

The silence on the other end sharpened.

"This is Celeste speaking?" Dianne asked.

"Yes."

"You sound prepared."

Because I was. Because I had a system behind me. Because Mara's severity had forced clean thinking. Because Lauren's steadiness kept us human. Because Sharl—quietly, relentlessly—made the infrastructure show up before anyone asked for it.

"We are," I replied. "We'll send a quote today with tiered options and clear terms. Deposit schedule included."

"End of day," Dianne said. Not a request. A deadline.

Mara's eyebrows lifted a fraction. In her language, that was laughter.

"End of day," Mara repeated. "You'll have it."

The call ended. The speaker went quiet. The fluorescent light settled back over the table like a lid.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Lauren exhaled softly. "Well," she said, and there was humour in it, but not denial. "That's grown-up money."

Mara didn't move. "Numbers," she said. "Now."

She slid the invoice stack toward me. "Materials and overhead."

Her finger tapped the ledger. "Labour. Use the ledger, not optimism."

Her eyes flicked to Sharl.

And then it happened—the smallest slip in the world, the kind that only mattered because of who made it.

"Sharl," Mara said, clipped and procedural. "Pull the rework average from the last three weeks. Stays only."

The room didn't react at first because we were all trained to keep moving.

Then Lauren's mouth twitched. Sarah—who'd been hovering in the doorway like a sceptical gargoyle, drawn by the smell of pressure—let out a short, delighted sound.

Mara realised what she'd said about half a second later. Her eyes narrowed—annoyed, not embarrassed. Annoyed that her own mouth had been influenced by something frivolous like other people.

She did not correct herself.

That was what made it permanent.

Sharl blinked once. The faint flush that sometimes rose in his face when attention found him appeared and then disappeared. He did what he always did when the world tried to make him a symbol: he refused to perform.

"Yep," he said. Fingers on keys. Useful. Quiet. Done.

Sarah grinned openly now. "Set in stone," she announced, as if she were a judge.

Mara gave her a look that could shear cloth.

Sarah lifted her hands in mock surrender, still smiling. "What? You said it."

Lauren sipped her coffee like she was enjoying the moment for what it was: not power, not teasing, just a small instance of the room becoming warmer without becoming sentimental.

My own chest did something strange—tightened and softened at the same time.

Because Mara, by accident, had confirmed something the rest of us already knew: Sharl wasn't a joke. He was part of the work. Part of the machine. Part of the infrastructure. And now the shop's language had made room for a little softness around him without making it theatre.

I turned back to the invoices before my thoughts could slide into anything messier.

"Okay," I said. "Materials first."

I pulled numbers out like splinters: linen, coutil, boning, thread, hardware. I wrote wastage as a percentage and then crossed it out and rewrote it as a fact based on what we'd actually cut last week. I built overhead as a line item not because I loved capitalism, but because I loved not dying of it.

Labour came next, and this was where Wardrobe was strongest.

We didn't guess. We didn't "feel." We had pages of entries: fitting time, rework time, retest time, failure points mapped with ruthless honesty. The ledger didn't flatter. It didn't forgive. It simply recorded.

And when you had record, you could price truth.

Lauren leaned in. "Don't forget documentation," she said. "Care instructions. Repair terms. That's labour too."

"I've got it," I said, and I felt that small satisfaction again—the pleasure of building something clean that could survive outside our little world.

Mara watched me write, eyes sharp, and I could feel the test without it being personal: *Can you keep your head when the room gets loud? Can you translate craft into terms that a museum can sign? Can you hold the crown without turning it into a tiara?*

Sharl spoke softly. "Rework average is here," he said, rotating the laptop slightly so I could see. He'd pulled the data cleanly: mean, variance, outliers. He'd even flagged which rework hours were caused by pattern issues versus which were caused by body-type mismatch.

It wasn't showy. It was responsible.

"Good," Mara said.

Lauren nodded. "That's how you keep a shop honest."

Sharl made the smallest sound of acknowledgement and went back to being quiet. He didn't swell with pride. He didn't try to claim the moment. He simply... continued.

And that was exactly the kind of labour that turned into wife-work when nobody was careful.

A thought slid into my mind, sharp and unwelcome:

If this were any other story, this is where the man would try to turn helpfulness into leverage. He would "provide" and then expect authority. Or he would provide and become resentful when authority didn't magically appear. Either way, the relationship would become a negotiation disguised as care.

Sharl wasn't doing that, not consciously. But I could see the provider fantasy still living in him like a stubborn reflex—offering itself up, trying to buy worth.

It appeared now, right on cue.

"If we keep the margin low," he said cautiously, "we could make it more—"

"No," Mara cut in, immediate as a slammed drawer.

Lauren's voice came softer but just as firm. "No free labour. No cheapening the work."

Sharl blinked. "I didn't mean free. I just meant—"

"I know what you meant," I said, and I kept my tone calm because this was not a scolding. This was maintenance.

I looked at him directly. "If we underquote, we teach them our skill doesn't cost. And then we drown later. We don't sell drowning."

His jaw tightened, not in anger—more like he was swallowing something old.

"I just..." he began, then stopped.

He looked at the spreadsheet as if it could give him an answer that didn't require him to change his instincts.

Lauren's eyes softened—not indulgent, just kind. "Sweetheart," she said, and with Lauren it didn't feel patronising, it felt like a hand on the shoulder. "Your job isn't to save everyone by sacrificing yourself. That's not noble. That's just... expensive."

Mara didn't add warmth. She added truth.

"Free labour becomes resentment," she said. "Resentment becomes failure. We don't do failure."

There was a silence where Sharl had to choose what to do with those words.

He could argue. He could sulk. He could perform shame.

Instead, he nodded once. Cleanly.

"Right," he said.

I felt something inside me unclench—relief, yes, but also something else: an uncomfortable admiration for his willingness to be corrected without making it about his dignity.

That was the other side of wife-work: the person doing it often accepts correction, accepts direction, accepts invisibility because it keeps the system running. It makes them easy to lean on.

And I was already leaning.

The knowledge sat in my throat like a small stone.

Not now, I told myself. Later, when it was just the two of us and the lights weren't so harsh. Later, when I could speak plainly and keep it clean.

Because I could see the next conflict forming like weather: I was going to have to tell him, clearly, that his support was welcome—and that it did not purchase authority, intimacy, or narrative control. That the provider fantasy was not going to steer this ship.

The hardest part wasn't saying it.

The hardest part was that part of me—some small, tired part—wanted to avoid conflict by simply letting the support continue without naming it.

That was exactly how women got caught.

Not because they were foolish, but because conflict cost energy and they were already spending their energy on everyone else.

I forced my mind back to the quote.

"Okay," I said briskly, as much to myself as to the room. "Structure. We need this in writing. Tiered options. Clear scope."

I started drafting out loud, because if I said it, it became real.

"Base price includes construction, one fitting, and standard documentation," I said.

"Fitting bundle is a fixed line item per docent. Additional fitting sessions beyond that are

charged. Repair allowance per quarter based on wear. Forty-eight-hour repair turnaround—explicit, not 'as soon as possible.'"

Mara nodded once. "Good."

Lauren leaned in. "Deposit schedule?"

"Deposit on acceptance," I said. "Second payment at first delivery. Final payment on completion."

Sharl typed as I spoke, turning my words into a document with clean edges.

Sarah had wandered closer, curiosity temporarily outranking scepticism. "God," she murmured, half amused, half impressed. "You lot make it sound like you're selling... boilers."

Mara looked at her. "We're selling reliability."

Lauren added, "And not dying."

I didn't look up from the text on the screen. "And staying clean."

That last one wasn't about money, not really. It was about ethics. About not building a shop on invisible sacrifice.

When the quote finally sat in front of us, it looked almost boring.

Which meant it was strong.

Mara read it once, top to bottom, face unreadable. She circled a line item with a pen so sharp it felt like a blade.

"Repair clause," she said. "Make the turnaround explicit. 'As soon as possible' is where liars live."

I edited it. Changed the words. Felt the clean finality land.

Lauren nodded. "That'll keep you alive," she said.

Alive. Clean. Reliable.

Sharl's hand hovered near the mouse, waiting. Not pushing. Not claiming. Just... ready.

"Print," Mara said.

The printer whined, then began to spit the pages out slowly, as if reluctant to be responsible for truth.

Mara took the quote without ceremony and walked to the corkboard above the ledger.

She pinned it up with the same brutality she pinned defect reports.

Proof. Record. No sentimental fog.

The paper sat there under fluorescent light, flat and undeniable.

I watched it for a second too long and felt the shape of the future press against the present.

This was what scaling looked like. Not glory. Not romance. Not a montage.

A document.

A deposit schedule.

A set of terms that would either protect us or expose us.

Mara stepped back from the board. For a moment her gaze stayed on the pinned pages—quiet, still, almost reverent, though she'd never admit to reverence for anything that wasn't measurable.

Then she turned and looked at me.

"Now," she said, and if this were any other story it might have been triumphant. Here it was simply consequential. "Now we can afford standards."

Lauren lifted her cup toward me in a small salute. "Crown earned," she said lightly, making it a joke so I wouldn't turn it into a performance.

I let myself breathe once. A clean breath.

Sharl closed the laptop halfway, then opened it again, as if he couldn't quite stop working even when the immediate emergency was handled.

I looked at him and felt the conflict I'd been postponing rise again—quiet, persistent.

He had become support in my life so quickly it should have scared me more than it did.

It didn't scare me because he wasn't dangerous.

It scared me because he was easy to lean on.

And because I could already see how a person could get used to that and stop seeing it.

I would not be that kind of alpha. Not the kind who benefits and then forgets. Not the kind who confuses being cared for with being entitled.

I'd have to speak to him.

Not in front of Mara. Not in front of Lauren. Not in this fluorescent courtroom.

Tonight, I promised myself, and the promise was not romantic. It was operational.

Tonight I would outline it clearly: support is welcome, sacrifice is not a currency, and provider fantasies do not run our household or our work.

I turned back to the table and gathered the invoices into a neat stack, because that was what you did when you wanted the world to stay clean.

"Alright," I said, practical again. "Next step: we email the quote, we log the assumptions, and we open a new page in the ledger for 'Museum Run.'"

Mara nodded. "Good. New heading. New standards."

Lauren smiled. "And a new kind of pressure."

Sarah, still hovering, offered a grin sharp enough to count as affection. "Sharl," she said, testing the name again like a stitch to see if it would hold. "You ready for your empire?"

Sharl blinked at her, then looked back at the laptop.

"Sure," he said mildly. "It's... just work."

In his head, I could almost hear it—dry and unbothered:



That was how Wardrobe did it: small human accidents becoming systems, clean and repeatable, almost kind.

I looked once more at the quote pinned above the ledger.

Not flowers.

Not triumph.

A receipt waiting to happen.

Proof that somebody had done the boring thing correctly.

And in the fluorescent honesty of that room, I felt the story pivot—away from survival craft and toward scale, toward consequences, toward the kind of adulthood that didn't care whether anyone felt dramatic about it.

The shop had spoken.

Now we had to live up to it.



I do have a question, heree, Emily. Some of this seems a repeat of Scene 23. They'd had the phone call with the museum, didn't they? Weren't things meant to move on? Sorry, don't mean to seem critical: just puzzled.

Thought for 9s >

You're not being critical — you're being *accurate*, and I'm glad you flagged it.

Yes: in the way you've now arranged things (with the museum contact already happening by the end of Scene 23 / into your new "Sharl" tag-on), my Scene 24 draft accidentally **replayed the call** instead of treating it as the *pressure wave that's already hit*.

So Scene 24 should **start after the call has ended** and move straight into: *numbers* → *quote structure* → *anti-martyr correction* → *"Sharl" locked in stone* → *print/send* → *pin*.

Below is a **clean, forward-moving replacement Scene 24** (Celeste POV), with no repeated phone call — only the aftermath.

Scene 24 — *The Numbers* (Celeste POV, revised: after the museum call)

The speakerphone had gone quiet, but the room hadn't.

There was a particular kind of silence that arrived after a consequential call—not the relief kind, not the “we did it” kind. The kind where you can feel the future step into the doorway and start taking measurements.

Wardrobe at 7:30am didn't let you pretend you weren't afraid.

The fluorescent lights made everything tell the truth: chalk dust embedded in the table's grain, a scuff mark on the lino where someone had dragged a mannequin stand too fast, the faint ring of a mug that had been set down without a coaster because nobody had time for aesthetics when the day was trying to eat you.

The central table was cleared like an operating surface.

Ledger. Invoices. Swatches. A cheap calculator with one cloudy button. The laptop—worn keys, sticker half peeled—open to a spreadsheet that was already too tidy to be comforting.

Lauren exhaled softly, coffee cup held like a life raft. “Well,” she said, and her humour was a small mercy. “That's grown-up money.”

Mara didn't move. “Numbers,” she said. “Now.”

No celebration. No spiralling. Work.

She slid the invoice stack toward me as if she were sliding a scalpel across a tray.
“Materials. Hardware. Overhead.”

Then she tapped the ledger with one blunt finger. “Labour. Use the ledger. Not optimism.”

The ledger sat open to the doctrine we'd forced ourselves to live by:

Discomfort is data. Pain is failure.

I sat down, pulled the invoices closer, and made myself look at them the way a doctor looks at a chart: without flinching, without romance, without wishing the patient were someone else.

Across from me, Sharl was already seated, laptop angled so I could see. He didn't try to take the table over. He didn't speak unless he had something measurable. He simply... held the infrastructure steady, like that was what he was built for.

Which was, of course, exactly what made it dangerous.

Not dangerous in a melodramatic way—dangerous in the way women had been quietly damaged for generations: by being competent, by being useful, by making things smoother until “smoother” became expected and then became invisible.

I'd started to depend on that steadiness. Not emotionally—at least not in the sentimental way people meant when they said “depend.” In the practical way that mattered more. In the way my day ran better because he was there.

And the thought that kept visiting me—uninvited, clinically accurate—returned as I sorted invoices into piles:

Wife.

Not lace. Not performance. Wife as function. Wife as support labour that keeps the ship afloat while someone else gets to stand at the bow and talk about vision.

Only... in this story, I was the person with vision.

Which meant I had a responsibility that most people in power avoided: to notice support before it disappeared into habit, and to keep it from becoming a trap.

Lauren leaned in, voice warm but firm. “Don’t forget documentation time,” she said. “Care instructions. Repair terms. That’s labour too.”

“I won’t,” I said, and I wrote it down as a line item because that’s how we made invisibility illegal: we priced it.

Mara watched me write, her gaze sharp, not unkind—just uninterested in my feelings if they weren’t useful. Her severity was its own kind of protection. It didn’t allow exploitation to hide behind politeness.

I started speaking out loud because I could feel the room tightening, and naming the structure kept panic from turning into theatre.

“Okay,” I said. “We build a quote that can survive procurement.”

I made headings on a fresh page.

Materials:

- fabric, boning, thread, hardware

- wastage (based on actual cutting, not guesswork)

Labour:

- construction hours
- fitting bundle
- documentation/care instructions
- rework allowance (ledger-based)
- repair allowance (realistic wear)

Terms:

- deposit schedule
- scope inclusions/exclusions
- repair turnaround (explicit)
- wear/care obligations (written)

The moment I wrote *fitting bundle* I felt something inside me settle. This was the difference between "we'll work it out" and "we know what we're doing." Between craft and scale.

Sharl spoke softly, sliding the laptop a few centimetres closer. "I've got the rework averages from the last three weeks," he said. "Stays only. Broken down by cause."

He'd already separated pattern faults from body-type mismatch. He'd flagged outliers. He'd done it the way he did everything: as if precision was a form of respect.

Mara leaned over, scanned the numbers, and nodded once.

Then, without thinking—without ceremony—she said, clipped and procedural:

"Sharl. Put that variance figure into the allowance line. And add a note: body-type category."

The room went still for half a second.

Not because the work had stopped. Because **Mara** had said it.

Lauren's mouth twitched into a grin she tried to hide behind her coffee cup. Sarah, hovering near the doorway, made a small, delighted sound like a kettle beginning to sing.

Mara's eyes narrowed as she realised what she'd done—annoyed, not embarrassed. Annoyed as if her mouth had been influenced by something frivolous like other humans.

She did not correct herself.

That was what made it permanent.

Sharl blinked once. A faint flush rose, then faded. He didn't make it a moment. He just nodded and typed.

"Okay," he said mildly. "Done."

Sarah's grin turned sharp. "Set in stone," she whispered, as if she were announcing a verdict.

Mara gave her a look that could cut leather.

Sarah lifted her hands in mock innocence, still smiling. "What? You said it."

Lauren's eyes met mine for a second—fond, amused, but also quietly approving. A little softness, granted without turning into theatre.

I returned to the invoices because if I let myself linger on it, my thoughts would drift right back to the more important softness I was trying not to mishandle: Sharl's support, my dependence on it, and the boundary conversation I was going to have to initiate.

Tonight, I told myself, and the word "tonight" felt like an operational task, not romance.

I would have to say it plainly: support is welcome, but it is not a currency. Provider fantasies do not buy authority. Not at work, not at home.

The numbers kept moving.

I pulled material costs, wrote them down, and watched them multiply with rude indifference. Linen didn't care about our ethics. Hardware didn't care about our ideals. Thread didn't care about my future.

Then I moved to labour, and this was where Wardrobe's cruelty became mercy.

We didn't guess. We had the ledger.

We had entries for fitting time, rework time, retest time. We had failure points mapped like injuries. We had the proof of our standards.

Lauren leaned in again. "Deposit schedule," she reminded me.

"Deposit on acceptance," I said. "Second payment at first delivery. Final payment on completion."

"Good," Mara said. "No chasing."

Sharl's fingers moved quickly, turning my spoken structure into clean document language. He did it in a way that never felt like he was taking over—more like he was translating me into something procurement could sign without fear.

And then—right on cue—his old reflex tried to crawl out.

"If we keep the margin low," he said cautiously, "we might look more—"

"No," Mara cut in, immediate as a slammed drawer.

Lauren didn't raise her voice, but her warmth sharpened into steel. "No cheapening the work. No martyr maths."

Sharl's mouth opened, then closed. His jaw tightened as if he were swallowing something older than this room.

He looked at me—quietly—like he wanted permission to do what his instincts told him was "good": take more weight, absorb more strain, buy belonging with self-sacrifice.

I kept my voice calm. Not gentle like pity. Calm like governance.

"If we underquote," I said, "we teach them our skill doesn't cost. Then the next job expects the same lie. That's how shops die."

He nodded once, cleanly. No sulk. No shame performance.

"Right," he said.

I felt the relief hit me like air in lungs.

He could be corrected.

Which meant I had no excuse not to correct him when it mattered.

Mara scanned the draft quote on the laptop and circled a line with her pen. "Repair clause," she said. "Make turnaround explicit. Forty-eight hours. Not 'as soon as possible.' 'As soon as possible' is where liars live."

I edited it. Typed the words. Felt them lock.

Lauren nodded. "That will keep you alive."

I read the quote once through—slow, careful. It looked almost boring.

Which meant it was strong.

"Send it," Mara said.

I attached it to an email, typed the subject line, and before I hit send I forced myself to add a short paragraph of assumptions and scope boundaries. Not to be fussy—to be clean.

Then I pressed **Send**.

The moment the email left, something in the room eased. Not relief. More like the pressure shifting from *immediate* to *ongoing*.

Mara didn't do emotion, but she did ritual in her own way.

"Print," she said.

The printer whined and spat the pages out, slow and stubborn. Mara took them, crossed to the corkboard above the ledger, and pinned the quote up with the same brutality she pinned defect reports.

Proof. Record. No sentimental fog.

She stood there a beat longer than necessary, eyes on the paper, as if she were checking that reality had stayed nailed in place.

Then she turned back to us.

"Now," she said, and if this were a different story it might have sounded triumphant. Here it was simply consequential. "Now we can afford standards."

Lauren lifted her cup toward me in a small salute. "Crown earned," she said lightly, making it a joke so I wouldn't turn it into theatre.

I exhaled once. A clean breath.

Sharl closed the laptop halfway, then opened it again, as if stopping work was a language he hadn't learned.

I watched him for a second and felt that postponed conflict rise again—not as dread, but as responsibility.

He was becoming infrastructure in my life.

And I could already feel how easy it would be to let that happen without naming it, without pricing it, without guarding him from being caught in the thankless role women had been caught in for centuries.

I would not do that.

Tonight, I promised myself again.

Not romantic. Not tender. Operational. Ethical.

Tonight I would outline it clearly: support is welcome, but self-sacrifice is not a currency; and provider fantasies do not steer our household, our work, or my future.

I gathered the invoices into a neat stack because tidying was how I told my nervous system we were still in charge.

"Next step," I said, practical again. "We open a new ledger section: 'Museum Run.' We log assumptions, and we set a build schedule. No heroics. Just repeatable work."

Mara nodded. "New heading. New standards."

Lauren smiled. "And a new kind of pressure."

Sarah, still hovering, grinned sharp enough to be affection. "Sharl," she said, pleased with herself, testing the name again like a stitch. "You ready for your empire?"

Sharl blinked at her, then looked back at the laptop as if the question were mildly irrelevant.

"Sure," he said. "It's... just work."

In his head, I could almost hear it—dry and unbothered:

Sharl. Fine. Short for Charlemagne. Emperor. Busy. Next.

And because he didn't make it a thing, it stopped being a thing.

That was how Wardrobe did it: small human accidents becoming systems—clean, repeatable, and strangely kind.

I looked once more at the quote pinned above the ledger.

Not flowers.

Not romance.

A document, brutal in its plainness.

Proof that somebody had done the boring thing correctly.

And in that fluorescent honesty, I felt the pivot: craft into shop, shop into scale, scale into consequences.

The world wouldn't care how we felt about it.

So we'd make sure we were ready.

If you'd like, Scene 25 can open with the *tiny domestic beat* you mentioned earlier: Celeste catching herself about to say something debt-creating ("I don't know what I'd do without you") and instead choosing a sentence that sets up the boundary talk ("This works because we keep it clean. I'll talk to you tonight.").



Yes, please. Thank you.

Scene 25 — Keep It Clean (Celeste POV)

At home, the quiet had a different texture.

Wardrobe's silence was fluorescent—flat, interrogative, full of edges. Home silence had softness to it, as if the air had been warmed by the fact that nobody was currently judging your competence.

Which was, of course, exactly why it was dangerous.

I dropped my keys into the bowl by the door and heard the small clink like punctuation. Sharl's shoes were already lined up neatly beside the skirting board—parallel, facing outward, prepared for the next day as if time itself respected organisation.

He was in the kitchen, sleeves pushed up, rinsing something at the sink. Not making noise. Not announcing his presence. Just... doing the boring thing that made the next boring thing easier.

The smell of dish soap, warm water, and coffee grounds hit me like a memory I hadn't lived yet.

"I'm home," I said.

He turned, towel in hand, and smiled—small, restrained, like he wasn't sure whether smiles were a resource he was allowed to spend freely.

"Hey," he said. "How'd it go?"

I could have answered with the practical summary. Quote sent. Assumptions logged. Deposit schedule set. Mara had accidentally sealed "Sharl" into the shop's language and the universe had not collapsed.

Instead, what rose up first was the truth underneath all of it:

It went the way things went when he was there. Steadier. Cleaner. Easier.

And the sentence that tried to leave my mouth was the one that turned wives into ghosts.

I don't know what I'd do without you.

It sat on the tip of my tongue, sweet and grateful and—if I let it land—dangerous as a locked door. Because that sentence didn't just thank him. It wrote a story around him. It made his support feel like a requirement. It made the room feel like it belonged to his labour.

And once you said it enough times, you stopped noticing how much labour there actually was.

I swallowed it back.

I watched him set the plate in the rack with the kind of care that looked like nothing until you tried to live without it.

He didn't look up while he worked, which meant he wasn't performing. He was simply being himself.

Which made it harder.

"Good," I said instead, and the word sounded bland even to me. I hated how bland it sounded. I hated how easily sincerity got confused with debt.

Sharl nodded once, accepting the blandness as if it were normal.

That was another thing. He didn't demand emotional payment. He didn't fish for validation. He didn't do the little resentful dances people did when they wanted you to notice their sacrifice.

He was so easy to lean on that I could feel myself doing it.

I went into my room—*my* room; the fact still mattered—and dumped my bag on the bed. Papers. Notes. A printout with pen marks. The kind of debris that looked messy but was actually the record of thinking.

When I came back out, he'd put the kettle on.

Not because he wanted tea. Because it was what people did in houses where pressure had happened, and someone needed to come down from it.

"Do you want—" he began.

"No," I said quickly, then softened it because I wasn't trying to snap at him. "No tea. But... thank you."

He nodded as if "thank you" were enough and didn't require commentary.

I moved to the kitchen bench, leaned my hands on the laminate, and stared at the neat little universe he'd arranged without ever making it feel like his territory. The sponge squeezed out. The dishcloth folded. The bin not overflowing.

This was what wives did, historically: not because they were born to it, but because someone had to. Because leaving friction lying around was expensive, and women were trained—explicitly or not—to pay that expense with their own time.

Sharl was paying it now.

Not as a performance. As instinct. As the easiest way to be useful.

And I could feel his old provider fantasy behind it like a shadow: *If I make her life easier, I'll be worth keeping.*

Even if he didn't phrase it that way. Even if he didn't understand it that way.

I needed to interrupt it before it calcified.

Not because I didn't want his help.

Because I did.

But help that couldn't be named became labour that couldn't be valued. And labour that couldn't be valued became expectation. And expectation became entitlement in the person who benefited.

I wouldn't do that. I refused.

I looked at him.

He was at the sink again, not because the sink needed him, but because his body didn't know what to do with waiting. He kept moving to keep the room stable.

"Sharl," I said.

He turned, attentive.

I held his gaze and forced myself not to wrap it in softness that would make it easier to ignore later.

"This works," I said, and I gestured between us—house, arrangement, day, everything. "It works because we keep it clean."

His eyebrows lifted slightly, a question without words.

I felt the cowardly part of me want to stop there. *Good job. Boundary implied. Go sit down.*

No. That wasn't clean. That was avoidance dressed as wisdom.

"I'm going to talk to you tonight," I said.

He stilled. Not alarmed. Just... present. Ready.

"Okay," he said quietly.

I nodded once, because the commitment mattered more than whatever tone I put around it.

"Not a big thing," I added, because I didn't want him spiralling. "Just... clarity. Terms. The same way we do it at Wardrobe."

A flicker crossed his face—relief, actually. Like the mention of terms and process had given him a handrail.

"Right," he said. "Okay."

I exhaled.

The hardest part, I realised, wasn't telling him to stop doing things for me.

The hardest part was admitting that I liked the support. That I was beginning to depend on it in the practical way that mattered. That if I didn't name it now, I'd wake up in six months with a domestic system that ran on his invisible labour and a mind that had started treating that labour like weather.

That was how women got caught.

I watched him for a second longer, then picked up my papers and walked toward the table I used for study.

"I need an hour," I said, and I didn't apologise. "In session."

He nodded immediately. "Yep. I'll be quiet."

He reached into the drawer and pulled out the small card we'd made—white card stock, black marker:

IN SESSION

He placed it on the bench where it would be visible, like a signal flag. No drama. No wounded expression. No bargaining.

Just compliance with a system that protected my future.

I sat down, opened my notes, and the words on the page steadied me.

Behind me, I heard him move lightly—one cupboard, one drawer, one soft click. The domestic machine continuing. The wife-work continuing.

But now it had a name.

Now it had a boundary approaching.

And the simple fact of that made the room feel cleaner, even before I said the rest.

I looked down at my notes, pen poised, and let my mind make a promise that wasn't sentimental and therefore had a chance of being true:

Tonight, I would keep it clean.

Not by refusing care.

By naming it.

By pricing it.

By refusing to let it become currency.

Because I could already feel the old story trying to write itself.

And I was not going to let it.



To add a bit of complexity, perhaps Celeste could admit to Sharl that she 'likes' him. This confuses him and clouds the 'provider fantasy' further. Celeste tries to explain her (our) principles but realises they don't all land due to a blind spot he harbours about the provider thing. She realises that he needs to come to terms that she is the provider, and he is the wife. This is going to be a challenge to present in a way that he can accept. There has to be a bit of challenge to keep the story interesting, and this would be it, Emily. She doesn't use coercion: she tries to enlist his cooperation because the system is already working in the roles that all he needs to do is acknowledge.

This isn't going to be easy to write.

Thought for 11s >

You're right: it won't be easy to write *if* we try to do it as a clean "speech" where Celeste explains everything and Sharl simply updates his worldview on cue.

But it becomes very writable if we treat it as what it actually is: a **systems conversation colliding with a blind spot**.

- Celeste speaks in *terms, structure, ethics, repeatability*.
- Sharl hears (even if he doesn't mean to): *kept, feminised, diminished, unnecessary*.

- Celeste realises "explaining" won't fix it. He has to **consent to the frame**—and his pride has to survive the consent.

So: we make it a scene where Celeste tries three approaches, sees what bounces off, adjusts, and ends with a **clear next-step agreement** rather than total resolution. That keeps the story interesting without coercion.

Below is a full-prose continuation you can splice after Scene 25. (Call it **Scene 26** if you prefer; it reads like "the talk" promised.)

Scene 26 — *Clarity (Celeste POV)*

When my hour was up, my brain felt scraped clean in the best way.

Not rested—never rested—but organised. The kind of tired that came from putting chaos into boxes and labelling the boxes properly. I capped my pen, stacked my notes, and sat for a moment with my hands flat on the table.

The **IN SESSION** card still sat on the bench like a small authority marker that hadn't needed to raise its voice.

From the kitchen came the softest sounds: one cupboard door, a drawer, the kettle set down without clang. He moved like a person who believed noise was waste.

I stood, carried my papers to my room, and returned to the kitchen with nothing in my hands. Empty hands. No props. No "big talk" posture. Just me.

Sharl was wiping the bench. Not because it needed it. Because he didn't know what to do with waiting.

He turned when I entered, cloth in his hand.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." I took a breath, then nodded toward the small table. "Sit with me."

He hesitated for a fraction—only long enough to show he knew this mattered—then pulled out a chair and sat. He folded his hands, attentive in that way he had that made you feel like you could say anything and he'd try to get it right.

It was a dangerous quality.

Not because it was manipulative, but because it made people lazy. It made them rely on him to absorb what they didn't want to carry.

I sat opposite him and forced myself to keep my voice level.

"Tonight is not a trial," I said. "It's not a correction session. It's... alignment."

He nodded once. "Okay."

I held his gaze for a beat longer than comfort, because he needed to understand that the clarity wasn't optional in the way some conversations were allowed to be optional.

"This living arrangement works," I said. "It works because it's boring. Because it's written. Because we don't do theatre."

He nodded again, quick, like he was grateful to be back on familiar ground. Systems. Rules. Something you could follow.

I let the silence stretch a moment.

Then I said the thing I wanted to say—cleanly, and without packaging it as a gift.

"I like you."

The words landed in the small space between us with a surprisingly physical weight.

His face changed—just a flicker, but I saw it: the mind racing to attach a meaning, to interpret, to place it in a category that would tell him what he was supposed to do next.

He blinked. "You... like me."

"Yes." I didn't soften it, because softness made it sound like I was trying to cushion him from reality. "I do."

He shifted in his chair, a tiny movement, like he was adjusting under a collar. "I thought—I mean, I know we're—"

"We're doing something that works," I finished for him. "And I'm telling you that I like you, not just the functionality."

He looked down at his hands as if the meaning might be printed on his skin.

"That's..." he began, and stopped. He swallowed. "Okay."

His voice was careful, as if "okay" was a safe placeholder until he could find the correct emotional tool.

I watched him do what he always did: reach for usefulness.

"If you like me," he said slowly, "then I should... I don't know. Do more? Make it easier? I can—"

"There," I said, gently but immediately. "That. That's what I'm talking about."

He went still, startled—not angry, but caught.

I leaned forward a little, not to loom, but to make the conversation hard to sidestep.

"When I say I like you, your brain turns it into a contract," I said. "A performance. A requirement. It becomes something you have to *pay for*."

His jaw tightened.

"I'm not trying to—"

"I know," I said. "This isn't an accusation. It's a pattern. And it's... older than you."

His eyes lifted to mine, and there it was—the blind spot trying to defend itself by becoming virtue.

"I just want to be... good," he said.

"I know." I kept my voice steady. "But you keep trying to be good in a way that turns you into a currency."

He frowned. "A currency."

"You offer yourself up," I said. "Your time. Your energy. Your comfort. You try to buy security by over-functioning."

He stared at me, and the confusion in his expression was so genuine it almost made me laugh. Almost.

"Isn't that... what you do?" he asked. "If you care about someone?"

No. I thought. That's what women have been told to do if they want to be tolerated.

But I didn't say that, not yet. If I made it a lecture, his pride would find a place to hide and call it "principle."

Instead I reached for terms.

"You care," I said. "And you contribute. But you don't turn care into a debt. You don't turn contribution into authority. And you don't turn my liking you into a reason to erase yourself."

His eyes flicked down again. "I'm not—"

"Yes, you are," I said, and I didn't apologise for the firmness. "Not on purpose. Not maliciously. But you are. You disappear into the role because it feels safe. Because it feels like something you can control."

He looked up quickly, and for the first time his voice carried a thread of defensive heat.

"I don't want to be... kept," he said.

There it was. The real word.

I nodded once, calmly, as if he'd just named a cost in an invoice.

"Thank you," I said. "That's the fear."

His cheeks flushed faintly, like he resented having been read.

"I'm not—" he began.

"You are," I said again, quieter this time. "And it's okay. But we're not letting that fear run the house."

He swallowed.

The silence stretched between us, and I could feel him trying to find a way to say it that didn't sound small.

"I don't want you to think I'm... useless," he said finally.

That one landed cleaner. That one was honest enough to work with.

I let myself breathe.

"Sharl," I said, "I don't think you're useless. I think you're the most quietly useful person I've met in a long time."

His eyes widened a fraction, as if he didn't know what to do with praise that wasn't bait.

"And," I continued, because I wasn't letting him wriggle away from the hard part, "I need you to accept something that you keep skirting."

He stiffened slightly. "Okay."

"I am the provider," I said, plainly. "In the framework we're building. In the long arc. In the plan. I am the provider."

His throat moved. He didn't speak.

I kept going.

"That doesn't mean you don't contribute," I said. "It doesn't mean you don't matter. It means you stop treating provision as the only legitimate way to be a man in a house."

His eyes flickered, pain and resistance at once.

"I'm not—" he tried again, but the sentence wouldn't form, because he didn't have language that didn't collapse into shame.

I softened my tone, not my position.

"This is the blind spot," I said. "You keep trying to turn yourself into the person who gets to decide, because you think money equals direction. That's the old story."

He stared at the table. "I don't want to decide," he muttered.

"You do," I said, and he looked up sharply, startled by the accuracy. "Not in the obvious way. Not by barking orders. In the subtle way: you want your sacrifice to become unchallengeable."

He flinched, and I saw it land. Not as insult. As exposure.

"That's not fair," he said quietly.

"It's not fair," I agreed. "It's what you were taught."

He swallowed again. His voice came out thin.

"So what... what do you want me to be?"

The question hung there, raw.

This was the knife-edge. If I answered wrong, it would sound like coercion. If I answered softly, it would sound like evasion.

So I answered like Celeste: with structure.

"I want you to be my support," I said. "In the same way women have supported men for centuries—except without the invisibility and without the entitlement on the other side."

He blinked. "That's... that's a lot."

"It's just the truth," I said.

He looked away, jaw clenched, as if he were trying not to react like someone who'd just been handed a humiliating costume.

I watched him struggle with it—this was the challenge you wanted, and it lived exactly here: the moment he feels the role become gendered in his mind, and his pride starts shouting.

"I'm not a wife," he said, a little too fast.

I didn't flinch.

"I didn't say you were a woman," I said. "I said you're doing wife-work. Support labour. The labour that keeps a life running."

He stared at me. "That word—"

"I know," I said. "It bothers you. That's why I'm using it carefully. Because the discomfort is information."

His mouth tightened. "It makes me sound... small."

"It makes you sound *unpaid*," I corrected. "It makes you sound *unseen*. And that's what I will not allow."

He gave a small, humourless laugh. "You won't allow it."

"That's right," I said. "I won't."

That firmness didn't come from cruelty. It came from the exact principle you articulated: she guards against relaxing into privilege.

I leaned forward slightly.

"I like you," I repeated. "Which means I have even more responsibility not to benefit from you and then forget you. I'm telling you now because if I don't tell you now, the system

will drift. And drift is how people get exploited."

He looked at me as if he wanted to argue but couldn't find a clean argument that didn't sound like confession.

I gave him an exit that wasn't a retreat.

"Here's what I'm asking," I said. "Not a conversion. Not an identity rewrite. Cooperation. Acknowledgement."

He swallowed. "Okay."

"We put household contributions in writing," I said. "Not because I don't trust you. Because I do trust you—and trust is not a system."

His eyes flicked up, a tiny spark of recognition: language he respected.

"We set limits," I continued. "You're not the default for everything. You don't pre-emptively remove every friction point before anyone even knows it exists. Some things stay on my plate because they're *mine*."

He nodded slowly, not liking it, but hearing it.

"And," I said, "we agree on a rule: you do not use sacrifice to negotiate for position."

He swallowed. "I don't—"

"You almost did today," I said. "With the margin."

His face flushed.

I didn't let him drown in it. I just held the line.

"You want to help," I said. "So help within the system. If you want more responsibility, we define it and we pay it and it's visible. We don't smuggle it in through martyrdom."

He stared at the table for a long moment.

Then he said, very quietly, "I... like helping."

"I know," I said.

"And I like..." He hesitated, as if the words were too intimate. "I like being... needed."

There. The second fear.

I nodded once. "That's human."

He looked up, searching my face.

"But," I added, "being needed is not the same as being owed."

He flinched again, because the difference mattered.

I let the silence settle.

Finally he said, "So you're saying... you can like me... and I don't have to earn it."

"Yes," I said, and kept my tone firm enough that it couldn't be mistaken for reassurance theatre. "That's exactly what I'm saying."

He shook his head slightly, as if the concept were physically hard to hold.

"And you're saying you're the provider," he said.

"Yes."

"And I'm..." He couldn't say it.

I didn't force him to swallow the whole word tonight. That would be coercion-by-language.

"You're my support," I said. "You're part of the machine. You matter. And if you ever want to change what you contribute, you bring it to me like a grown-up: as a proposal, not a sacrifice."

He stared at me a moment longer, then gave a tiny nod.

"Okay," he said, and it sounded like the first honest acceptance he'd offered all night.

Not happy. Not thrilled. But willing.

I felt something in my chest ease, not because it was resolved, but because it had become real.

"Good," I said. "That's enough for tonight."

He blinked. "That's it?"

"That's it," I said. "We don't do emotional marathons. We do repeatable practice."

His mouth twitched—half a smile, half disbelief.

I stood, and the movement ended the moment without ending the work.

"Tomorrow," I said, "we write the household contribution sheet. You help draft it. You don't get to disappear from it."

He looked up. "I help draft... my limits."

"Yes," I said. "Because this isn't punishment. It's governance."

He nodded slowly, still processing.

As I turned toward my room, I paused at the doorway and looked back at him one more time.

"And Sharl?"

"Yeah?"

I let my voice soften just a fraction—not as reward, not as bait. As truth.

"I meant it," I said. "I like you."

His face did that startled thing again, but this time he didn't reach immediately for usefulness.

He just... accepted it, as if he were practicing.

"Okay," he said, quieter. "I... okay."

I went into my room and closed the door gently.

Not to shut him out.

To keep the system clean.

And in the quiet that followed, I felt the story take on the complexity you wanted: not conflict from cruelty, but conflict from a blind spot being illuminated—and a girl with ethical power choosing to do the hard thing the right way.

Not coercion.

Practice.

Governance.

Clarity.

If you want, the next scene beat can be *tomorrow morning* with the written household contribution sheet (boring = safe), and Sharl trying to negotiate via "extra help" again—smaller, subtler—so Celeste can correct it once more without drama. That repetition is what will make his eventual acceptance feel earned rather than sudden.



I realise this might open a can of worms, here, but I totally expected Celeste to actually use the term 'wife' instead of 'support'. Indeed, in the previous text, his rebuttal of the role - and he DID use 'wife' - would have made more sense if Celeste had. I *KNOW* this is tiptoeing into FLR and all that nonsense, but I do want to be clear on terms so that we can expose traditional wifedom and the exploitation of women for what it is. Do you follow? Oh, and this, in my chronology, is Scene 25.

I follow completely — and you're right on the continuity point.

If Celeste is going to *name the thing* (so the story can expose it), she can't keep skirting the loaded word with euphemisms. The trick is to use "**wife**" as a functional term (support labour without leverage), while *explicitly refusing* the theatre version of it (humiliation, ritual power, fetish optics). That keeps it daylight-proof and still sharp.

Also: yes — in your chronology, this is **Scene 25**. Let's lock that in.

Below is a **revised Scene 25** where Celeste uses "wife" plainly, and Sharl's rebuttal lands cleanly because the term has been put on the table first by her.

Scene 25 — Clarity (Celeste POV, revised with "wife")

When my hour was up, my brain felt scraped clean in the best way.

Not rested—never rested—but organised. The kind of tired that came from putting chaos into boxes and labelling the boxes properly. I capped my pen, stacked my notes, and sat

for a moment with my hands flat on the table.

The **IN SESSION** card still sat on the bench where Sharl had put it earlier, like a small flag that hadn't needed to raise its voice.

From the kitchen came the softest sounds: one cupboard door, a drawer, the kettle set down without clang. He moved like a person who believed noise was waste.

I stood, carried my papers into my room, and returned with empty hands. No props. No script. No performance posture.

Sharl was wiping the bench. Not because it needed it. Because he didn't know what to do with waiting.

He turned, cloth in his hand.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey." I nodded toward the small table. "Sit with me."

He hesitated for a fraction—only long enough to show he knew this mattered—then pulled out a chair and sat. Hands folded. Eyes up. The posture of someone prepared to cooperate, which was both a virtue and a trap.

I sat opposite him and made my voice steady.

"This isn't a trial," I said. "And it's not a correction session. It's... alignment."

He nodded once. "Okay."

I let the silence stretch until it stopped being soft and became honest.

"I like you," I said.

The words landed between us with surprising weight.

He blinked. His gaze flicked down to his hands, then back up, as if he were searching for a checklist.

"You... like me."

"Yes." I didn't soften it. Softness made it sound like a gift he could owe me for. "I do."

His throat moved. "I thought—I mean, I know we're—"

"We're doing something that works," I said. "And I'm telling you I like *you*, not just the functionality."

He sat very still, confusion clouding the air around him like steam.

Then, exactly as I'd expected, his mind reached for usefulness—because usefulness was his safest language.

"If you like me," he said carefully, "then I should... do more? Make it easier? I can—"

"There," I said, gently but immediately. "That. That's what I need to talk about."

He frowned, startled. "I'm not trying to—"

"I know you're not," I said. "I'm not accusing you. I'm naming a pattern."

He drew a breath, visibly trying to be good. "I just want to... contribute."

"You do contribute," I said. "But you keep turning contribution into currency."

His brow tightened. "Currency."

"You offer yourself up," I said. "Time, energy, comfort. You try to buy security by over-functioning. And you don't even notice you're doing it because it feels like virtue."

His jaw set a little. Not anger. Pride trying to protect itself by becoming moral.

"I just want to be... useful," he said.

"I know." I held his gaze. "And you are useful. That's part of the danger."

He blinked, genuinely lost.

So I stopped circling it and put the word on the table, plain as an invoice.

"Sharl," I said, "you're doing wife-work."

His face changed instantly. A flinch. A tightening. A reflexive recoil from the implication.

"I'm not—" he began.

"I know what you're about to say," I said, and kept my tone calm. "So listen to me all the way through."

His mouth closed. He swallowed.

"Wife-work," I repeated. "Support labour. The labour that keeps a life running. The labour that makes everything smoother, quieter, easier—and then disappears because the person benefiting stops seeing it."

He stared at me. The objection was there, hovering behind his teeth.

I didn't let him turn it into theatre.

"I'm not calling you a woman," I said. "I'm not humiliating you. I'm not turning this into a roleplay. I'm naming the function because if we don't name it, it becomes invisible. And invisible is how women get exploited."

He held my gaze for a beat, and then the real fear slid out—sharp, honest, unvarnished.

"I don't want to be a wife," he said. Too fast. Too loaded. Like he'd tasted shame in the word before he'd even understood it.

There. Now it made sense—because I had actually said it first.

"I know," I said. "And that reaction is exactly why the term matters. You hear 'wife' and you hear 'small.' 'Kept.' 'Unpaid.' 'Unseen.'"

His cheeks flushed. "I don't want you to think I'm—"

"Useless," I finished quietly.

He looked down, jaw tight, as if the word had been pulled out of him against his will.

I let a second pass. Not to punish him. To let the truth breathe.

"Sharl," I said, "I don't think you're useless. I think you're the most quietly competent person I've met in a long time. And I like you. That's why I'm doing this now, not later."

He looked up again, wary. "Doing what."

"Preventing drift," I said. "Preventing the exact exploitative story that 'wife' usually becomes."

He swallowed. "So what are you saying. That I have to—"

"No," I said, immediate. "No coercion. No forcing. Cooperation."

He stared at me.

I leaned forward slightly. Not to loom. To anchor.

"I'm saying this: in the framework we're building, I am the provider," I said. "Not because I'm trying to emasculate you. Because that's the reality of the plan. The education pathway, the scaling, the direction—that's me."

He went still.

"And you," I continued, "are my wife in the functional sense."

He flinched again. Harder this time.

I didn't back off. Backing off would turn it into a game where the truth could be bargained down until it was harmless.

"In the functional sense," I said again, slower. "Support labour without leverage. Support that doesn't purchase authority. Support that doesn't get to become 'unquestionable' because it's self-sacrificing."

His voice came out tight. "That sounds... awful."

"It is awful when it's invisible," I said. "It is awful when it's expected. It is awful when it becomes entitlement in the person benefiting."

I held his gaze.

"It becomes survivable when it's named, priced, bounded, and respected," I said. "That's what I'm building. That's what I'm guarding. That's what women almost never get."

He looked away, breathing shallowly. "I don't want to be... kept."

"That's the blind spot," I said. "You think 'provider' is the only respectable way to exist in a house. So when you're not the provider, you panic—and you try to fix that panic by over-functioning until you feel legitimate again."

His head snapped up. "I'm not—"

"You almost did today," I said, gently but firmly. "With the margin."

He flushed.

Lauren's earlier words echoed in my head: *No martyr maths.*

"I don't want your sacrifice," I said. "I want your cooperation."

He stared at me like cooperation sounded too small and too big at once.

"Okay," he said slowly. "What does that look like?"

I felt something in my chest ease. Not because he'd accepted it. Because he'd asked for terms.

"That," I said, "is the right question."

I ticked it off with the same language that kept Wardrobe clean.

"One: we write household contributions down," I said. "Not because I don't trust you. Because trust is not a system. Visibility is."

He nodded once, reluctantly.

"Two: we set limits," I continued. "You are not the default for everything. You do not preemptively remove every friction point before anyone even knows it exists. Some things stay on my plate because they're mine."

His mouth tightened. "But it's easier if—"

"Easier for who," I asked.

He went quiet.

"Three," I said, "we agree on a rule: you don't use sacrifice to negotiate for position."

He frowned. "I'm not trying to negotiate."

"I know you don't think you are," I said. "That's why it's a blind spot. Sacrifice *feels* moral. But if it becomes unchallengeable, it becomes power. Quiet power."

He stared at the table, thinking.

Then he said, very quietly, "I like helping."

"I know," I said.

"And I like..." He hesitated, like the next sentence was too naked. "I like being needed."

There. The second hook.

"That's human," I said. "But being needed is not the same as being owed."

He flinched as if the distinction stung.

I let the silence settle.

Finally he said, almost as if he were testing the shape of the idea with his tongue, "So you can like me... and I don't have to earn it."

"Yes," I said, and I made the word firm enough to be a boundary. "Yes."

He shook his head slightly, as if the concept was physically hard to hold.

"And you're saying you're the provider," he said.

"Yes."

"And I'm... the wife," he said, and the way he said it was full of resistance and disbelief and something like grief for a story he'd expected to live.

"In function," I corrected. "In labour. In how the system runs. Not in your identity."

He breathed out slowly.

"I don't like the word," he admitted.

"I know," I said. "You're allowed not to like it."

He looked up. "But you're still using it."

"Yes," I said. "Because I need you to feel the discomfort that women have been forced to swallow quietly for centuries. Not to punish you. To make you aware. Awareness is how we keep it clean."

His eyes held mine, and for a moment I saw it: not acceptance, but the beginning of understanding. The start of him realising the word didn't have to be humiliation—it could be truth.

"Okay," he said finally. "So... we write it down."

"Yes," I said. "Tomorrow morning."

He swallowed. "And if I want more responsibility..."

"You bring it as a proposal," I said. "Not a sacrifice. We define it, we price it, it's visible."

He nodded, once. Small. Real.

I stood then, because ending a hard moment cleanly was part of governance.

"That's enough for tonight," I said. "We don't do emotional marathons. We do repeatable practice."

His mouth twitched—half humour, half disbelief. "Wardrobe, but at home."

"Exactly," I said.

I paused at the doorway to my room and looked back at him.

"And Sharl?"

"Yeah?"

I let my voice soften a fraction—not as reward, not as bait. As truth.

"I meant it," I said. "I like you."

He blinked, startled again, but this time he didn't reach immediately for usefulness.

He just... sat with it.

"Okay," he said quietly. Then, after a beat: "Okay."

I closed my door gently.

Not to shut him out.

To keep the system clean.

And in the quiet that followed, I felt the story click into the challenge you wanted: not conflict from cruelty, but conflict from a blind spot being illuminated—and a girl with ethical power choosing to do the hard thing the right way.

Not coercion.

Clarity.

Visibility.

Terms.

Practice.

If you want, we can make the *next* scene a “boring = safe” follow-through: Celeste drafts the written household contributions sheet with Sharl at the table, and we show (subtly) how he tries to smuggle value in through “extra” again—then catches himself because now the word “wife” is on-record and he can’t pretend he isn’t doing it. That’s where the real arc starts to bite.



Absolutely PERFECT. Exactly what I wanted to say, Emily.... you have touched on it all. I do want to de-sex the term 'wife'. There are the providers, and there are the wives (those that support / infrastructure). To deny what a wife does minimises her (or him)... this Scene makes the picture clear. Yes, Sharl is going to struggle a bit, until he realises Celeste's truth: this is him, and HAS BEEN ALL ALONG! Now I'm curious: do Lauren appreciate the change in dynamics between Sharl and Celeste? What about Sarah? Mara? Also, the museum clothing... are we hiring more seamstresses? Inquiring minds want to know.

Yes — and the way you’re framing it (provider vs wife as *infrastructure*) is exactly how you de-sex the term without devaluing it. The trick is: once the word is **named and bounded**, it stops being an insult and becomes a **job-description with ethics**.

On your questions:

Do Lauren, Sarah, Mara notice the shift?

Lauren

Lauren notices first, and she appreciates it in the most *Lauren* way: quietly, as relief.

- She’s watched Sharl’s reflex for martyr-maths and “earn my place” behaviour for a long time. Celeste naming it cleanly would feel to Lauren like someone finally putting a hand on the steering wheel.
- Lauren will also clock that Celeste isn’t just “in charge”; she’s **actively refusing entitlement**. That’s rare. Lauren respects that more than dominance.

- How she shows it: not with praise (that becomes emotional payment), but with small reinforcements:
 - she backs Celeste's language in front of others ("Terms. Visibility.")
 - she interrupts Sharl if he tries to relabel wife-work as "just helping" (because "just" is how labour gets erased)
 - she makes sure Celeste doesn't slip into vague gratitude-debt.

Lauren's internal note is basically: *Good. This will protect him—and it will protect her from becoming the kind of person she'd hate.*

Sarah

Sarah enjoys it, but not kindly at first.

- Sarah's scepticism is reader-aligned; she's the one who pokes the bruise to prove it exists.
- She'll tease Sharl—not because she wants to humiliate him, but because she wants him to **stop romanticising "provider" as the only adult role.**
- Once she sees Celeste is serious (and fair), Sarah flips into something unexpectedly protective: she becomes the enforcer of "no martyr maths" in a more social, mocking way:
 - "Oh, don't start buying your own chair again, Sharl."
 - "You're not a tragic hero, mate. Sit down."
- Underneath, she respects Celeste for naming the dynamic without making it kink-coded or theatrical. Sarah hates theatre.

Mara

Mara notices, but she treats it like a production variable, not a romance plot.

- Mara's view is brutally functional: *Does this make the system more reliable or less reliable?*
- Celeste calling it "wife-work" will register to Mara as **excellent risk management**:
 - it prevents invisible labour from becoming a hidden failure point
 - it prevents Sharl from trying to "solve" problems with unpaid heroics (which always breaks later)
 - it keeps Celeste from drifting into entitlement (which would rot the shop culture)
- How Mara shows approval: she gives Sharl more defined responsibilities **with limits**, which is her version of respect. She might even say something like:
 - "Good. Now it's written. No more improvising your value."

And because it's Mara, she will also be firm if Sharl tries to "prove himself":

- "Stop purchasing belonging. It's inefficient."

Are we hiring more seamstresses for the museum run?

Almost certainly, yes — but in your world it won't be "we're hiring because we're successful!!!!" It'll be:

we are hiring to protect standards.

And the hiring itself becomes part of the women-led competence network: onboarding into the ledger system, clear scope, clear hours, written expectations, and visible labour.

Here are three scaling options that stay on-theme (you can pick one, or blend them):

Option A: Two part-time seamstresses on contract (fastest, cleanest)

- Celeste brings in 2 experienced makers on **paid trial shifts** (not "can you just help out?").
- Mara defines the workflow: who does seams, who does fittings, who does finishing.
- The ledger becomes the onboarding tool: every garment has a page; every change is logged.
- This is the most realistic way to fulfil a museum deadline without breaking your main trio.

Who are they? Perfect chance to fold in your "returning-to-work mother" baseline as an actual worker:

- a 45-ish woman who's done real labour, now returning to work, fiercely competent, zero tolerance for nonsense.
- she becomes a living embodiment of "wife-work exploited" — *and she will not allow it to happen in this shop.*

Option B: One seamstress + one apprentice (adds story juice)

- One experienced seamstress for speed and quality.
- One apprentice (young, eager, potentially a bit romantic about the atelier) who gets corrected by the system.
- The apprentice becomes an audience surrogate who *tries* to make it a story, and Mara/Celeste keep snapping it back to work.

This option gives you conflict without touching the moral cleanliness.

Option C: Outsource sub-assemblies, keep "truth work" internal (most scalable)

- Outsource predictable components (ties, simple chemises, bulk cutting) to a trusted local maker group.
- Keep fittings, stays, and final assembly/QA inside Wardrobe.
- Celeste builds the vendor terms; Mara sets the QC checkpoints; Lauren sanity-checks ethics.

This one makes Celeste look very business-head.

One delicious consequence: hiring forces the "wife" term to become policy

Once new staff are present, Celeste has to formalise the principle or it becomes gossip.

So you get a sharp, daylight-proof moment where Celeste says it to the room, not just to Sharl:

- "In this shop, provider work and wife-work are both real work. Wife-work doesn't disappear. It's logged, paid, and bounded. No heroics. No invisibility."

That's how you de-sex it and de-mystify it.

If you want, next I can draft the follow-through scene you hinted at: **the morning after**, when Celeste and Sharl write the household contribution sheet *together* (boring = safe), and then Mara interrupts with hiring logistics for the museum run — forcing Sharl to face the "wife-work" label in a public, non-humiliating, policy-based way.

That scene will let Lauren, Sarah, and Mara *show* their reactions in-action rather than in exposition.



Yes please. I do find the "audience surrogate who tries to make it a story, and Mara/Celeste keep snapping it back to work" angle to be a compelling one. Whatever approach would work for you will be fine by me. Thanks, Emily.

Thought for 12s >

Scene 26 — *Boring on Purpose* (Celeste POV)

Morning arrived without ceremony.

No dramatic wake-up. No sunrise epiphany. Just light through blinds and the ordinary fact of a house that had already been quietly stabilised before I opened my eyes.

When I stepped into the kitchen, Sharl was there—of course—standing at the bench with a pen in his hand and a sheet of paper laid out like a blueprint. Not a love letter. Not a plea. A table with headings.

He looked up as if he'd been caught doing something intimate.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning." I poured water into the kettle and didn't comment on the paper yet. I'd learned that if I treated his organisation as adorable, it would become emotional payment. If I treated it as invisible, it would become entitlement. The only clean option was to treat it as what it was: labour.

He cleared his throat. "I... started a draft."

"Good," I said simply. "Show me."

That seemed to relax him. Terms. Process. A handrail.

He slid the paper toward me. Across the top, in his careful, unshowy handwriting:

HOUSE CONTRIBUTIONS — WEEKLY

Below that, columns:

- **Task**
- **Owner**
- **Frequency**
- **Time estimate**
- **Notes / Boundaries**

And then, in smaller writing under "Notes," he'd added:

If it's not written, it drifts.

That line had become our household's version of a prayer. Not spiritual. Practical.

I sat opposite him, took my mug, and read down the first few rows.

Bins — Sharl — Wed/Sun — 10 mins

Dishes — Shared — daily — 15 mins

Laundry — Sharl — Sat — 45 mins

Groceries — Celeste — Fri — 30 mins

Bills / transfers — Celeste — Mon — 20 mins

Study hours protected — Celeste — nightly — 2 hrs — IN SESSION

He'd left space. He hadn't filled it like he was claiming territory. He'd made room for negotiation.

That mattered.

I tapped the paper lightly with my finger. "Okay," I said. "Two changes."

He straightened as if he were about to be graded.

"One," I said, "we separate *provider work* and *wife-work* as categories, not as identities."

His mouth tightened.

I didn't let him dodge it. I didn't let myself soften either.

"Not because I'm trying to provoke you," I added. "Because if we don't name it, it disappears."

He stared at the page, jaw working.

"Okay," he said, but the word had grit in it.

"And two," I continued, "you don't get default ownership of anything just because you're good at it."

He blinked. "I'm not—"

"I know," I said. "This is prevention. Not punishment."

I took the pen from beside my mug and drew two headings in clean block letters above the task list:

PROVIDER WORK (CAPITAL / DIRECTION)

WIFE-WORK (INFRASTRUCTURE / SUPPORT)

Sharl's eyes flicked to the second heading and stuck there like his pride had snagged on a nail.

I kept writing anyway.

Under **PROVIDER WORK**, I wrote:

- rent / bills / transfers (Celeste)
- museum job deposits / cashflow tracking (Celeste)
- education plan admin (Celeste)
- Wardrobe operations coordination (Celeste)

Under **WIFE-WORK**, I wrote:

- meals / kitchen reset (Sharl + shared)
- laundry / linen / uniform prep (Sharl)
- daily friction removal (shared, bounded)
- "in session" protection (shared enforcement)

Then I turned the paper slightly so he could see it plainly.

"This," I said, tapping the categories, "is what I mean when I say I'm the provider and you're the wife—in function. Not in identity."

He stared for a moment too long, as if the words were trying to climb into his chest and rearrange his skeleton.

Then he said, quietly, "It still sounds like... I'm less."

I didn't flinch. "It sounds like that because the world has treated wife-work as less," I said. "Which is why we're not doing that. We're writing it. We're bounding it. And if it grows beyond a fair share, we correct it."

He swallowed.

"And," I added, "if you want more responsibility, you propose it. You don't sneak it in through extra labour."

He nodded once, reluctantly.

I slid the paper back to the centre and picked up my mug.

"Okay," I said. "Now we decide limits."

He looked up. "Limits."

"Yes," I said. "Because you're already doing the thing where you make everything easier, and then you get tired, and then you pretend it's nothing."

A faint flush rose in his cheeks.

"I don't pretend—"

"You do," I said, calmly. "It's part of the wife-work trap. People disappear into it because it feels safer than asking for space."

He stared down at the paper.

For a moment, I thought he might push back.

Instead he said, very quietly, "So what's the limit."

There it was. Cooperation. Terms.

I wrote:

WIFE-WORK LIMIT: *No more than 7 hours/week without renegotiation.*

NO HEROICS RULE: *No 'extra' work offered to buy position or affection.*

VISIBILITY RULE: *If you did it, it goes on the sheet.*

REVIEW: *Sunday night, 10 minutes.*

I tapped the bottom of the page. "Sign it."

He blinked. "Sign it."

"Yes," I said. "Because this is how we keep it adult. No vibes."

He took the pen and signed his name—careful, almost solemn.

Then I signed mine.

It wasn't romantic.

It was intimate anyway.

Not because it was cute. Because it was protection.

He exhaled as if he'd been holding his breath all night.

"Okay," he said again. And this time it sounded less like grit and more like acceptance in progress.

"Good," I said. "Now—Wardrobe."

Wardrobe was already awake when we arrived.

Not bustling, not loud. Awake in the way a professional kitchen is awake: everything in its place, the day's sharpness waiting in drawers.

Mara stood at the cutting table with the museum file open—printout, notes, the quote copy pinned above the ledger like a warning to the sentimental.

Lauren was there too, coffee in hand, leaning a hip against the counter as if she belonged anywhere she decided to stand. Sarah hovered nearby, arms folded, expression that said she could smell drama from two suburbs away and enjoyed it mostly as entertainment.

Mara looked up when we entered.

"Celeste," she said. "Sharl."

She said it without pause.

No irony. No correction.

Set in stone.

Sarah's grin flashed and vanished.

Lauren's mouth twitched into something like satisfaction.

Sharl's shoulders tightened for half a second and then loosened again as he accepted the inevitable: the shop had named him, and the shop didn't care how he felt about it.

Mara tapped the museum file. "We're hiring."

No preamble. No "how do we feel about that." Just the truth.

I nodded once. "How many."

"One experienced maker," Mara said. "Two days a week, minimum. And one apprentice."

Sarah's eyebrows went up. "An apprentice," she echoed, half amused. "Oh, that'll be... educational."

"It will be controlled," Mara replied, which in her voice meant the same thing as kind.

Lauren sipped her coffee. "I have someone," she said.

Mara's eyes narrowed slightly. Not suspicion—evaluation. "Who."

Lauren set her cup down. "She's nineteen. Keen. A bit... romantic about the idea of 'atelier life.' Which means she's going to need snapping back to reality."

Sarah's grin returned. "Ah. Audience surrogate."

Lauren gave her a look. "Exactly."

Mara nodded once. "Bring her."

Lauren checked her phone. "She's outside."

Mara didn't change expression. "Good."

The bell chimed, and a young woman stepped in with a kind of breathless brightness that didn't belong under fluorescent lights.

She wore black jeans and a white blouse and carried a tote bag that looked over-packed. Her hair was tied back too tightly, as if she'd tried to make herself look professional by sheer force. Her eyes flicked around the room—mannequins, fabric bolts, chalk, the pinned quote—and I could almost see the story writing itself in her head.

She was already narrating. Already imagining.

Lauren met her halfway. "Tilly—this is Celeste."

Tilly's smile was immediate, wide, earnest. "Hi! Oh my god, this place is— it's like—"

"A workplace," Mara said.

Tilly froze, blinked, then recovered with a laugh that was slightly too high. "Yes. Of course. A workplace."

Mara didn't soften. She didn't need to. This was the kindness: removing confusion early.

"And this," Lauren continued, "is Mara."

Tilly's eyes widened, as if she'd expected Mara to be a myth.

"Hello," Tilly said, a little too brightly. "It's an honour."

Mara didn't acknowledge the honour. "Skills."

Tilly blinked again. "Sorry?"

"What can you do," Mara clarified, as if translating from theatre into truth.

Tilly swallowed. "I... I sew. I've done— I've done some historical stuff. And alterations. And— I'm really passionate about—"

Mara raised a hand. "Stop. Passion doesn't hold a seam."

Sarah made a delighted little sound. Tilly's face flushed.

Lauren's tone stayed warm, but firm. "Answer the question, love."

Tilly nodded quickly. "Machine work. Hand finishing. Buttons. Hems. I can follow a pattern."

Mara's gaze shifted to me. "We're not hiring romance," she said. "We're hiring repeatability."

"I know," I said.

Tilly's eyes darted to me as if she'd been expecting me to be the softer one.

I didn't indulge it.

I stepped forward just slightly—not to intimidate her, but to anchor the ethos.

"Tilly," I said, "this shop runs on two principles."

Her face brightened again, grateful for something she could hold onto.

"One," I continued, "if it isn't written, it isn't real."

She nodded quickly.

"And two," I said, "we don't do invisible labour."

Her smile wavered, uncertain what that meant.

Mara slid the ledger toward the edge of the table and opened it to a fresh section. In bold at the top of the page, she wrote:

MUSEUM RUN — GARMENT 1**DATE ISSUED:****MAKER:****WEAR-TESTER:****NOTES (MOVEMENT / STRESS):****FAILURE POINTS:****FIX APPLIED:****RE-TEST:****SIGNED (MARA):****SIGNED (CELESTE):**

Then she added a new line in her angular hand:

LABOUR LOGGED = LABOUR PAID.

Tilly leaned in, eyes shining. "That's so... organised."

Mara didn't look up. "It's ethical."

Lauren's gaze flicked to me, a small pulse of approval: this was exactly what I meant when I said systems were morality.

Tilly's eyes moved across the room and landed on Sharl.

Her expression shifted into the kind of curiosity that always wanted to turn a person into a plot point.

"And you're—" she began, smiling at him, "you're like... the—"

Sarah made a sharp little cough that sounded suspiciously like laughter.

Mara's head lifted slowly.

The temperature dropped by three degrees.

Tilly swallowed hard. "Sorry. I mean— what's your role?"

It was a better question. Still loaded, but better.

Sharl's posture went slightly rigid. I could feel him bracing for the word.

So I made it clean. Public. Policy-based. No humiliation.

"He does wife-work," I said.

Tilly blinked.

Sarah's eyebrows went up, delighted.

Lauren's face stayed neutral, but her eyes softened—*good, Celeste, don't let it hide.*

Mara's expression didn't change, which in Mara meant: correct.

Tilly looked startled. "Wife—?"

"Infrastructure," I said immediately, so the word couldn't be sexualised in her head.

"Support labour. The work that keeps the shop and the household running. It's logged. It's bounded. It's respected."

Tilly's mouth opened, then closed again as she processed the idea that the room was not asking her to giggle.

Sharl's cheeks flushed faintly.

I didn't look away. I didn't soften into apology.

I kept it clean.

"And I'm the provider," I added, because the frame only works if the other half is named.

"Capital, direction, operations. That's me."

Tilly stared at me as if she'd just seen a rule of the universe rewritten in front of her.

Sarah broke the moment with a grin. "Welcome to Wardrobe," she said. "Where we price the invisible and ban the hero complex."

Tilly let out a small, nervous laugh. "Right."

Mara tapped the ledger with her pen. "Trial shift," she said. "Two hours. You'll do straight seams on linen. If you make a mistake, you log it. If you fix it, you log it. If you get stuck, you ask. No hiding. No drama."

Tilly nodded quickly. "Okay."

Lauren tilted her head, kind but unyielding. "And if you feel the urge to make it a story—"

Mara cut in. "Don't."

Tilly's blush returned. "Understood."

Mara turned to me. "We'll need schedules," she said. "And a wage structure."

I nodded. "I'll draft the terms and bring them to you for review. Paid trial. Clear scope. Clear expectations."

Mara's gaze held mine. "No exceptions."

"No exceptions," I echoed.

Sharl had gone quiet again, hands near the laptop, ready to be useful. I could feel him wrestling with the public use of the word—wife—feeling it prick his pride even as it clarified his function.

I didn't rescue him from that discomfort.

The discomfort was information.

And I had promised: no drift. No invisibility. No exploitation.

I stepped closer to the table and spoke to the room like it was policy, not personal:

"In this shop," I said, "provider work and wife-work are both real work. Wife-work doesn't disappear. It's logged, paid, and bounded. No heroics. No martyr maths."

Lauren nodded once, satisfied.

Sarah grinned like she'd just been handed a weapon she approved of.

Mara's pen tapped the ledger once—sharp, final.

Tilly swallowed, eyes wide, and then—because she was young and earnest and still trying to orient herself—she nodded too.

"Okay," she said softly. "Okay. I... get it."

Not fully, she didn't. But enough to start.

Mara slid a bundle of linen across the table toward Tilly. "Start there," she said.

Tilly picked it up carefully, as if it were sacred.

It wasn't sacred.

It was fabric.

And that—exactly that—was the point.

As Tilly moved toward a machine, Sarah leaned closer to me and murmured, amused, "She's going to call it 'atelier life' again, I guarantee."

"Then we correct her again," I murmured back.

Sarah's grin sharpened into something almost affectionate. "You're terrifying," she said. "In a really tidy way."

Lauren's hand brushed my shoulder as she passed, not a hug, not a big gesture. Just a quiet acknowledgment: *good governance*.

Mara didn't look up from the ledger. "Celeste," she said, already moving on. "Museum Run. Page one. Bring Sharl's labour log too."

There it was again—wife-work made visible, made official, made non-negotiable.

Sharl nodded once, steady, and reached for the laptop.

He didn't smile.

He didn't argue.

But his shoulders eased a fraction, as if something in him recognised—despite the sting—that being named wasn't humiliation.

Being named was protection.

I watched him for a second longer than necessary.

Then I turned to the ledger, opened a new page, and wrote the heading in clear block letters:

MUSEUM RUN — STANDARDS

Boring on purpose.

Safe on purpose.

And—if we did it right—kind on purpose.



Good. OH! that women who WERE wives were accorded the same respect as Sharl. Whilst he struggles with the title, women in the wife role disappear into it. Here is a key point that readers need to understand: women just *do*. No fanfare, no pats on the back, no promotions, no pay raise. So, young Sharl gets to know wife-work intimately as THAT, and he begins to understand why the stigma bothers him. He learns about the inequality created by male privilege and the patriarchy just because of his reactions to the term. He realises that what Lauren has experienced as his mum is to some degree his lot, but without the unfairness that his dad would impose. Eyes wide open, now.

Yes. That's the blade-edge of it — and it's so much more interesting than "he learns to accept a role." He learns why the role was made small in the first place.

You've basically set up a perfect moral engine:

- **The stigma** Sharl feels around "wife" isn't just personal discomfort.
- It's a *symptom* of a culture that trained everyone to treat infrastructure labour as lesser **because women did it**.
- And the moment Sharl feels the sting, he finally has a doorway into understanding what Lauren (and women generally) lived: doing the work, disappearing into it, being treated as background until the background stops.

The key is to dramatise this without turning it into a lecture. Let him discover it by **running into the same invisibility mechanics**—but with Celeste refusing to replicate the patriarchal unfairness.

Here are three clean, "daylight-proof" ways to show it on-page.

1) The "invisible until missing" moment (**simple, devastating**)

A day when Sharl doesn't do one routine thing—maybe deliberately because he's tired or because he's trying to test whether it's *noticed*.

Nothing dramatic breaks. But friction accumulates: no clean mugs, no reset bench, small messes that cascade. Celeste notices *immediately* and names it *without contempt*:

- "Okay. The infrastructure didn't happen. That means it's real work."
- "We log it. We price it. We correct the load."

Sharl realises: **this is what wives are blamed for**—the absence gets noticed more than the presence.

And then the double hit:

- Celeste doesn't scold him.
- She doesn't assume it was his job by nature.
- She treats it as a workload distribution issue.

That contrast is how he sees patriarchy: not as a slogan, but as a set of defaults that punish women.

2) The “praise trap” (why pats-on-the-back are also control)

Give Sharl one moment where Tilly (or Sarah) says something like:

- "You're such a good boy, you're basically... domesticated,"
or
- "You're a unicorn, most guys wouldn't do this."

Sharl stiffens. He can't quite say why it feels gross, but it does — because it frames wife-work as **exceptional** when a man does it, and **expected** when a woman does it.

Celeste corrects it cleanly, in policy tone:

- "We don't praise people for meeting baseline contributions. We thank them and log the hours. Praise is how labour becomes performance."

Sharl feels the relief in that, and it clicks: women rarely get praise because their work is treated as natural. Men get praise because it's treated as optional. Praise becomes another form of inequality.

3) The “Lauren pivot” (motherhood as wife-work under patriarchy)

This is the one that lands your exact point: Sharl realises his *lot resembles Lauren's*—except without the unfairness his dad imposed.

You don't need a big monologue. You need a small exchange that turns a key.

Example beats:

- Lauren comes by, sees the household contributions sheet on the fridge or bench.
- She goes still for a moment. Not sentimental, just... struck.
- Sharl says, awkwardly, "We wrote it down."
- Lauren replies, very quiet: "No one ever wrote mine down."

That's it. That sentence detonates.

Later Sharl tries to articulate the discomfort:

- "When you called it 'wife-work'... it made me feel small."
- Lauren: "That's because it was designed to be small."
- Sharl: "But you did it anyway."
- Lauren: "Women just do."

And then Celeste (the ethical alpha) adds the crucial distinction:

- "You're not being made invisible. That's the difference. This is support without exploitation."

Sharl's eyes widen. He realises: his discomfort isn't shame—it's the first honest taste of how women have been socially conditioned to accept being minimised.

What this does to Sharl's arc

It creates a *real* conversion:

- At first he resists the title because he thinks it diminishes him.
- Then he realises the title was used to diminish *women's labour*.
- Then he sees that his resistance is basically **male privilege defending itself**—not maliciously, but reflexively.
- And finally he accepts not just the role, but the moral responsibility: to **treat infrastructure as real work**, to stop romanticising provision as the only respectable contribution, and to stop expecting gratitude as payment.

He becomes "eyes wide open," exactly as you said — and it's earned.

Where to put it (so it hits hard)

Right after Scene 26's hiring + policy moment is perfect, because you've already made "wife-work" public and de-sexed it.

I'd do it as a **two-scene mini-run**:

Scene 27 — “The Missing Mug”

Sharl skips one routine. Chaos by paper cuts. Celeste names it as infrastructure failure and logs it. Sharl feels invisibility mechanics.

Scene 28 — “No One Wrote Mine Down”

Lauren sees the household sheet. One quiet line. Sharl's understanding pivots.

No speeches. Just the click of a lock.

If you want, I'll draft **Scene 27** next (Celeste POV), with Sharl's dawning realisation happening in the most mundane, non-preachy way possible — the kind that makes a reader go still because they recognise it.



Please do - you've tick all the boxes, Emily.

Scene 27 — *The Missing Mug (Celeste POV)*

The first thing that went wrong was a mug.

Not a dramatic wrong. Not a crisis. Just the small, stupid fact that when I reached into the cupboard for my usual one—the plain white with the chipped rim—it wasn't there.

I stood for a second with the cupboard door open, staring as if the mug might materialise out of shame.

Behind me, Sharl moved quietly, making coffee the way he'd learned: measured, tidy, without flourish. He didn't look up. He didn't announce. His whole body did that same thing it always did—pre-emptively smoothing the day.

Except today, I realised, it wasn't smooth.

The sink was half full.

Not overflowing, not disgusting—just... not reset. A plate leaned at an angle, a teaspoon in the bottom like a small insult. The dishcloth was damp and bunched instead of folded. The bin liner sat a little too loose at the top, sagging.

Paper cuts.

I found another mug and turned the kettle on. The click of the switch sounded louder than it should have.

"You okay?" Sharl asked, glancing up.

I almost said yes. Habit. Easy lie. Keep the machine running.

Instead I did what Wardrobe had trained into me: I named the variance.

"The kitchen reset didn't happen," I said.

He blinked. "It... didn't?"

"No," I said, and I kept my tone neutral. Not accusing. Just factual. "It didn't."

He looked around, eyes flicking over the evidence as if he were seeing it for the first time. The half-full sink. The cloth. The bin.

A flush rose faintly in his cheeks.

"I was going to," he said quickly. "I just—I thought I'd do it after—"

"After is drift," I said, and I heard Mara in the words. I didn't apologise for it.

Sharl's mouth tightened. "I didn't mean to—"

"I know," I said. "I'm not scolding you."

His shoulders eased a fraction, then tightened again as he tried to understand what I was doing.

I poured boiling water over the coffee and watched it bloom, darkening the surface in slow spirals. The smell should have been comforting. It wasn't, not today.

Because the thing I was watching wasn't dishes.

It was infrastructure.

When infrastructure happened, it looked like nothing. When it didn't happen, it looked like everyone else's "minor" problems suddenly had sharp edges.

Sharl put down his spoon and moved to the sink automatically, reaching for the dishcloth.

The wife reflex.

I stopped him with two words.

"Don't," I said.

He froze, dishcloth in hand.

"What?"

"Don't fix it yet," I said. "Not because I want to punish you. Because I want you to see it."

He stared at me, confused. "See what."

I gestured at the sink, the cloth, the bin, the crumbs on the bench that would have been wiped without thought.

"This," I said. "This is what 'wife-work' looks like when it doesn't happen. Not tragedy. Friction."

His brow creased. "It's just... dishes."

"It's never just dishes," I said, quietly.

He looked as if he wanted to argue. Then he stopped. Because he'd learned, at least a little, that arguing with a system wasn't useful.

I took my mug to the table and sat down with my notes, trying to proceed as normal.

It was impossible.

Within ten minutes, Tilly arrived.

She burst in with the kind of bright, hopeful energy that always made me feel like someone had opened a window in the wrong season.

"Morning!" she said, too loud, then caught herself when she saw me and lowered her voice dramatically, as if we were in a cathedral. "Oh—sorry. Morning."

Sharl gave her a small nod.

Tilly's eyes darted around the kitchen, catching details the way a storyteller catches props.

"Oh!" she said, spotting the sink. "You guys are so busy. Like... living the dream."

Sharl's mouth tightened.

I heard the words, and I heard what lived underneath them:

Busy was noble. Busy excused everything. Busy made invisible labour disappear under a blanket of "we're all doing our best."

That's how it happened. That's how women vanished into the role.

I kept my voice even. "We're not living a dream," I said. "We're running operations."

Tilly blinked, startled, then laughed nervously. "Right. Ops. Got it."

She set her tote down, already reaching for a second tote like she'd brought her whole identity to work.

Lauren walked in a moment later, coffee in hand, calm as ever, and her eyes did a quick scan of the kitchen the way they always did—soft but thorough, like a mother checking a room for hazards.

Her gaze paused on the sink.

Her expression didn't change much. Just a tiny shift. A recognition.

Then she looked at Sharl.

"Morning," she said.

"Morning," he replied, and something in his voice sounded careful.

Lauren's eyes flicked to me. A question without words.

I answered it with a small nod: yes, I'm doing this on purpose.

Lauren didn't smile. She didn't praise. She simply stepped to the side of the room and waited, giving the moment space to do its work.

Tilly, oblivious, bounced on her toes. "So, um, do you want me to—I can do dishes! I'm happy to help!"

Of course she was. She was nineteen. She thought helpfulness was love. She thought fixing meant belonging.

Sharl moved immediately, relief flashing across his face at the offered solution.

"No," I said again. Firm. Quiet.

Both of them looked at me.

"It's logged labour," I said. "We don't fix it by volunteerism. We fix it by assignment."

Tilly blinked. "Oh."

Sharl's jaw tightened. "Celeste—"

I held up a hand. Not to silence him. To keep the room from turning into theatre.

"Sharl," I said, "how many minutes do you think it would take you to reset the kitchen properly right now?"

He stared at the sink as if it were a math problem he'd hoped to avoid.

"Fifteen," he said reluctantly. "Maybe twenty."

"Write it down," I said.

Tilly looked as if she expected a scolding. Lauren looked as if she expected exactly this.

Sharl hesitated, then pulled a notepad from his pocket—of course he had a notepad—and wrote:

Kitchen reset (missed) — 20 mins — Sharl

His pen hovered.

"And now," I said, "where does that twenty minutes come from."

He looked up, confused. "What do you mean."

"I mean," I said, "you don't get free time in a day. You steal it from something else. So what does it replace."

His throat moved. His eyes dropped to the page.

"My... break," he said quietly.

Or my quiet. Or my rest. Or my own life.

That was how it always went.

Tilly was watching with wide eyes now, the story in her head struggling to adjust.

Lauren leaned back against the counter, calm. Not intervening. Letting it land.

I kept my voice steady.

"That's the wife-work trap," I said. "The labour doesn't disappear. It just comes out of the wife."

Sharl flinched slightly at the word.

Good.

Discomfort was information.

Tilly's mouth opened, then closed. She glanced between us, uncertain how to be "good" in a room that didn't reward performance goodness.

Sharl looked at the notepad as if it had betrayed him.

"It's... just twenty minutes," he muttered.

I didn't let him minimise it.

"It's twenty minutes today," I said. "And forty tomorrow. And an hour by Friday. And then it becomes 'just how things are' and nobody sees it, including you."

His eyes lifted. There was something in them now—an anger, but not at me. At the concept. At being made to look at it.

Lauren's voice entered softly, almost conversational.

"No one sees it when it's done," she said. "They only see it when it isn't."

Sharl turned his head toward her, startled by the quiet weight in her tone.

Lauren didn't look away. She didn't dramatise it. She simply offered a truth, plain as a plate.

Sharl's face changed—confusion giving way to recognition.

He swallowed.

"Is that..." he began, then stopped. He tried again. "Is that what it was like for you."

Lauren's mouth twitched—something that wasn't quite a smile.

"Like what, love."

"Like..." He glanced at the sink, then at his notepad. "Like doing all the... little things."

Lauren's eyes softened, but she didn't rescue him from the answer.

"Yes," she said. "All the little things. Every day. Forever."

Tilly made a small sound, half gasp, half embarrassed laugh, as if she'd just realised the room had depth and she'd been skating on the surface.

Sharl stared at the sink again.

Then, very quietly, he said, "And Dad..."

Lauren didn't answer straight away.

Her silence said enough.

Sharl's shoulders rose and fell with a slow breath, like someone trying to let a new truth settle without breaking.

I watched him—watched the stigma he'd felt around the word "wife" start to shift shape. Not disappearing, not yet, but changing from *shame* into *understanding*.

He wasn't offended because the word made him small.

He was offended because the word had been made small **on purpose**—because women had been made to wear it like invisibility.

He looked up at me, and there was a strange clarity in his expression, as if something had finally clicked into place.

"So when I..." he began, then swallowed. "When I hate the word, that's—"

"That's you feeling the inequality," I said. "For the first time."

Tilly was staring now, eyes wide, cheeks flushed.

Sarah appeared in the doorway, drawn by the scent of something real. She took one look at the sink, the notepad, our faces, and her eyebrows lifted with delighted comprehension.

"Oh," she murmured. "Someone's been given the mug lesson."

Sharl flushed again, but this time he didn't snap back.

He looked at his notepad.

Then he wrote another line beneath the first, slower, more deliberate:

Wife-work is visible labour. Not 'help'.

He paused, then added, as if testing the words:

Stigma is the point.

His pen hovered.

Lauren watched him, and I could see something in her eyes—not pride exactly. Something steadier. Relief, maybe, that he was finally seeing what she'd lived.

I stood and picked up the dishcloth.

Sharl's head snapped up, reflexively. "I'll do it."

"I know you will," I said. "And you will log it. And we will keep it bounded."

I handed him the cloth, not as a punishment, not as a dismissal, but as the return of responsibility to the system.

He took it.

Tilly shifted awkwardly. "So... I shouldn't just jump in?"

"You can," I said, and I kept my tone kind. "But you don't get to buy belonging with unpaid labour. Not here. If you're doing work, it's logged, it's assigned, and it's paid."

Tilly nodded, chastened. "Okay. That makes sense."

Sarah smirked. "Welcome to the cult," she said lightly.

Mara's voice cut in from the hallway like a blade.

"Celeste. Museum Run. We're behind."

I didn't raise my voice. I didn't apologise for teaching the lesson. I simply nodded toward the door.

"Coming," I called.

Then I looked at Sharl one last time before I left the kitchen.

His hands were in soapy water, moving steadily. The mundane act of cleaning, suddenly heavy with meaning.

He met my gaze, eyes a little wider than usual.

Not wounded.

Awake.

"I get it," he said quietly.

Not fully. Not forever. But enough.

I nodded once.

"Good," I said. "Now we keep it clean."

And I walked out, leaving him with the sink, the notepad, and the first honest taste of what wives had carried without fanfare for centuries—except this time, in this house, it wouldn't be invisible.

Not if I had anything to do with it.

□ ...

O-KAY! Tilly works out, she's got talent and she's fast. The other seamstress is a steady worker and has to increase her hours. A bit of discussion on work/life balance. Sharl settles into wife-work... slowly. Lauren helps: she knows her son and realises his future is tied to Celeste's.

Now, a challenge for you, Emily. Lauren wants the best for Sharl but realises that the relationship of provider/wife is a real, functional one. Also realises that Celeste herself cannot see where her management of the situation has placed her. She quite like Celeste, thinks she'd be an excellent provider and already acknowledges that her son is ideally suited to be Celeste's wife. Now, how to play matchmaker? How to make Sharl more appealing to Celeste? It's almost like Lauren has to rethink Sharl's qualities. She doesn't over-think things: Lauren is fairly pragmatic. And then, Sharl does design and comes up with a brilliant chemise/shift that has appeal to the modern woman as a wonderfully comfortable and attractive garment. Lauren sees an "In".

I am running with this: let me know if I derail at all, Emily.

You're not derailing — you're doing the exact thing your story *wants* to do: let the women's competence network expand outward, and let "relationship" emerge as a **by-product of systems** rather than a bouquet-and-violins plot.

This is coherent, it deepens the theme, and it gives Lauren a role that isn't "mother meddles" but **adult strategist protecting two young people from drift**.

The only derail risk is if Lauren becomes a puppet-master who "pushes" romance. But you've already built the guardrails that prevent that:

- Lauren is pragmatic.
- Lauren hates theatre.
- Lauren respects Celeste's autonomy.
- Lauren wants what works and lasts.
- And Lauren's north star is: **no exploitation, no debt, no coercion**.

So her "matchmaking" can be framed as **making the right qualities legible**—not manufacturing them.

The core insight: Lauren doesn't try to make Sharl "more masculine" or "more impressive."

She helps him become **more visible** in the ways Celeste actually values:

- reliability without martyrdom
- competence without ego

- initiative that doesn't seize control
- creative skill that scales into a business asset
- *consent to the provider/wife frame* as an ethical stance, not a humiliation

That's the reframe: Sharl isn't appealing because he "provides." He's appealing because he's **safe infrastructure and a maker.**

And the chemise/shift is the perfect "in" because it's not about flirting; it's about **product.** Celeste can't dismiss it as sentimental. It lands where she lives: outcomes.

How Lauren plays matchmaker without breaking tone

Lauren's moves should be **three small actions**, all adult, all boring, all plausibly deniable as "just operations."

Move 1: She stops protecting Sharl in the old way

Old Lauren would smooth Sharl's self-doubt, excuse him, translate him.

New Lauren does the opposite: she **lets him stand in the light** and take responsibility for his role.

- If he starts "earning" affection by doing extra, Lauren doesn't say "good boy," she says:
"Log it. Bound it. Don't buy your place."

This makes him look more appealing to Celeste because it removes the one thing Celeste fears: drift into entitlement or debt.

Move 2: She makes his wife-work *legible as a professional strength*

Not "he's helpful." Not "he's sweet." Those are domestic traps.

She frames it as a **reliability trait** that can be scaled:

- "He sees friction before it becomes failure."
- "He's a natural QA brain."
- "He can hold standards without ego."

This is Lauren's pragmatic mother-love: she teaches people how to read her son accurately.

Move 3: She engineers a moment where Celeste experiences Sharl's value as *her own benefit*

Not through him serving her. Through him building something that advances *her* vision.

That's where the chemise comes in.

The chemise/shift as the "In"

Make it a design that:

- honours historical truth (pattern logic)
- feels astonishingly comfortable
- flatters modern women without being male-gazey
- is easy to launder
- fits a wide range of bodies (inclusive block logic)
- can be sold as a "base layer" or "sleep shift" or "summer house dress"

In other words: it's a product with **market**.

Lauren sees it and thinks: *This makes him visible to Celeste as an asset, not a dependent.*

And Lauren's "matchmaking" move is simple:

She puts it in front of Celeste in the right frame.

Not: "look how talented my boy is."

Instead:

- "Celeste, this solves a problem you've been circling: how to take your historical pipeline and make a modern revenue line without cheapening standards."

Now it's not romance. It's strategy.

And strategy is Celeste's love language.

How Sharl becomes more appealing (without changing who he is)

Lauren's rethinking of his qualities goes like this:

What Lauren used to think Sharl needed:

- confidence
- assertiveness

- "being a man"
- proving himself

What Lauren realises he actually needs:

- to stop trying to "provide" as a legitimacy ritual
- to consent to wife-work openly, without shame
- to express competence in ways Celeste respects: **design + documentation + repeatability**
- to accept praise without turning it into a contract

This is very pragmatic. It's not therapy. It's just: "Stop doing the thing that makes you look unstable."

A clean scene beat you can write next

Scene idea: "The Shift"

- Tilly and the steady seamstress are working; there's a small talk moment about hours increasing.
 - Work/life balance is discussed by women who have actually had to carry invisible labour.
 - Sharl brings a prototype shift/chemise. It's plain at first glance but engineered beautifully: seams that don't rub, neckline that sits right, gussets that allow movement, a tie that adjusts without digging.
 - Lauren tries it on herself over leggings (or holds it up, checks the cut) and goes still.
 - She sees the product line: women will *want* this.
 - She doesn't squeal. She simply says:
"Right. That's your lever."
 - Later she shows Celeste, but in a business way:
"Put this in front of your museum contact's wives, docents, the gift shop buyer—
whoever you trust. See what happens."
 - Celeste's reaction isn't gushy. It's: "This is... sellable."
And that is, in Celeste's world, practically a declaration of admiration.
-

Work/life balance: how to keep it on theme

Your "steady seamstress increases hours" beat is great because it forces Celeste to demonstrate her ethics in scaling:

- Celeste refuses the classic exploitation move ("just one more late night").
- She adds systems: rotating shifts, capped overtime, paid overtime, predictable schedules.
- She treats work/life balance as **retention and quality control**, not benevolence.

This reinforces that Celeste isn't becoming a new patriarchy in a skirt. She's building something better.

The one thing to watch

Don't let Lauren "sell" Sharl to Celeste like a product.

Lauren's role is to **present reality cleanly**:

- "My son is good at infrastructure."
- "Your direction makes him stable."
- "Here is a design he made that advances your goals."
- "The rest is yours to decide."

That keeps Celeste's agency intact and avoids romance-fog.

If you want, I can draft the next full prose scene (Celeste POV or Lauren POV—Lauren POV would be *very effective here*) where the chemise prototype appears and Lauren quietly recognises it as the bridge: not to romance, but to *legible value*—which is exactly how Celeste allows admiration to enter without violating her own ethics.



Oh! Let's do Lauren POV... we haven't switched from Celeste... EVER. So, we need to make it crystal clear who is talking now. Her voice, her warmth: Lauren isn't clipped, tidy, she's emotional, warm... gentle. But also very much a realist. This is going to be interesting, watching you change voice, Emily.

Scene — *The Shift (Lauren POV)*

Wardrobe at mid-morning didn't feel like a shop yet.

It felt like a kitchen you didn't own but still cleaned, because if you didn't, everyone suffered. Not glamorous, not romantic. Just a place where hands moved and things got made and the day quietly demanded you keep up.

I'd come in with coffee and a bit of stubborn hope, the way I always did when I didn't want to admit I was worried. You learn, as a mother, that worry is a tide: it comes whether you invite it or not. Better to meet it with something warm in your hands.

The girls were in.

Tilly at one machine, bright as a sparrow, foot tapping like she could will speed into her stitches. Talented, yes. Quick, yes. And still carrying that look in her eyes—the look that said she was half-in love with the *idea of this place*.

The other seamstress—Janine—sat with her shoulders relaxed and her hands doing the same perfect motion again and again. No drama. No flourish. The kind of competence that doesn't need to be seen to exist.

Mara had said, *We're hiring*, and then the world had simply rearranged itself.

That was how it went when women ran things properly: no speeches. Just consequences.

I moved between tables, picking up scraps as I went—offcuts, pins, a marker someone had left uncapped. Tiny friction removals. I did them without thinking, and then I caught myself.

Wife-work. Infrastructure. The quiet stuff.

I almost laughed, but it came out as a small sigh instead.

My son had always been like that. A boy who noticed the edge of a problem before anyone else did. A boy who tried to smooth the world because the world felt sharp.

And now he'd been named for it.

Not teased, not humiliated. Named. Logged. Bounded. Respected.

It still sat oddly in my chest—this strange, bright relief I hadn't expected to feel.

Because I knew what "wife" had meant in the mouths of some men.

I'd lived it.

"Lauren?" Tilly called softly, and I turned to find her staring at her stitch line with panic starting to bloom. "Can you— can you just check if this is right? I don't want to ruin it."

I stepped in beside her and leaned close. The linen was good quality—firm under the fingers, honest. Her seam was straight. Not perfect, but straight.

"It's fine," I said gently. "Your tension's a bit tight. Ease off a hair. Let the fabric breathe."

Tilly exhaled like she'd been holding her lungs hostage. "Okay. Thank you."

"Don't thank me," I said, smiling. "Thank the system. If you're unsure, you ask. That's how you get fast without getting sloppy."

Her grin flashed, grateful. "I like it here," she blurted, then blushed as if she'd confessed something private.

"I know you do," I said, soft but real. "Just remember it's a workplace, love. Don't fall in love with the story. Fall in love with the standards."

She nodded, solemn as a child being given a rule that mattered.

Across the room, Janine looked up briefly and met my eyes. There was no sparkle there, no romance—just the quiet acknowledgement of another woman who'd spent her life doing work nobody threw parades for.

I walked over.

"How're you finding the hours?" I asked.

Janine's mouth quirked, not quite a smile. "You mean... the reality."

"Yes," I said.

She glanced down at her hands. "I can do more," she said. "If you need it."

Of course she could. Women always could. We carried the extra by default. We picked it up because someone had to.

"What does 'more' cost you," I asked gently.

Janine looked at me then, surprised by the question.

"My evenings," she said after a beat. "My kid's dinner. My own... everything."

There it was. The truth under the offer.

I nodded slowly. "Okay," I said. "Then if we ask for more, we pay for more. Properly. And we don't pretend it's nothing."

Janine's shoulders loosened a fraction. Relief. Not gratitude. Relief that she didn't have to perform martyrdom to be seen as decent.

"I'm not trying to be difficult," she said quietly.

"I know," I said. "You're trying to be reliable."

She looked away, back to her seam. "That's what women do," she murmured.

It wasn't bitter. It was simply... fact.

I felt my throat tighten and forced it to relax again. Warmth was fine. Sentimentality was where drift lived.

"Mara and Celeste are building something better," I said. "But better doesn't happen by accident. It happens because someone asks the questions you're not supposed to ask."

Janine nodded once and kept sewing.

Behind me, I heard Mara's voice—sharp as chalk on a board.

"No. Log it. Then fix it."

And then Celeste's voice, steadier, younger, but already carrying that provider clarity that made you feel oddly safe:

"We don't buy belonging with unpaid labour."

I turned and watched her for a moment without meaning to.

She stood at the operating table, papers spread out, hair pulled back, face composed. Not cold. Not clipped. Just... aligned. Like she'd decided what she would and wouldn't become.

And I liked her, I realised again, in that uncomplicated way you sometimes like a person when you see them refusing the easy path.

She wasn't playing at power.

She was practicing ethics.

Which meant—whether she could see it or not—she was already in the most dangerous position of all.

Because provider power, even female provider power, comes with a gravity. It pulls other people into orbit. It makes it easy to stop noticing the pull.

Celeste was resisting that. But she couldn't resist what she couldn't see.

And what she couldn't fully see yet was how much my boy wanted to be *worth something* in her world.

He'd been trained—by culture, by old stories, by whatever ghost of his father lived in his bones—to believe provision was legitimacy. That if he couldn't provide, he had to compensate with sacrifice. Quietly. Nobly. Until it became unchallengeable.

Celeste had named it. She'd named it better than anyone I'd ever met.

But naming didn't erase a reflex.

It just brought it into daylight.

A soft footfall behind me.

Sharl.

He moved through the room like he didn't want to disturb the air. He carried a folded piece of fabric in both hands as if it were a newborn.

He stopped near my shoulder.

"Mum," he said quietly.

I turned, and my heart did that familiar, stupid thing it always did when I looked at him: the ache of love and the ache of knowing love doesn't protect a person from themselves.

"What've you got there, poppet?" I asked, and the endearment slipped out before I could stop it.

He didn't react. He never did. He accepted tenderness the way he accepted a cup being set down near him: like it was useful but not something he deserved.

"It's... a shift," he said.

"A what?"

"A chemise," he corrected, then hesitated. "A modern one. Sort of."

He unfolded it carefully.

And I went still.

Because at first glance it looked simple—white, soft, almost plain. But simplicity in cloth is never accidental. The cut told the truth immediately: the way the shoulder sat, the way the sleeve joined without pinching, the little gusset under the arm that promised movement without chafing. The neckline had a modest scoop that wasn't prudish and wasn't trying too hard. The seams were placed where a body could live in them.

It had the quiet intelligence of a garment designed by someone who understood comfort as dignity.

"Sharl," I breathed.

He flinched at the name—still not used to the softness of it in my mouth—but he didn't pull away.

"I made it from the museum notes," he said quickly, as if he needed to justify why he'd spent time on it. "Docents moving all day. Heat. Sweat. Under layers. I thought—I thought if the base layer is right, everything else behaves better."

I reached out and touched the fabric.

It was astonishingly soft.

Not flimsy. Soft the way good linen gets after years of washing. Soft the way something becomes when it has been lived with and survived.

"You didn't use the scratchy bolt," I said, half amused.

He shook his head. "No. It's... wrong for skin."

Of course he knew that. Of course he'd thought of it.

I held the garment up and imagined it on a body, not as costume, but as relief. Something you could sleep in. Something you could wear on a hot day with bare feet and not feel like you were performing femininity for anyone.

Something that made a woman's life easier.

My throat tightened again.

This was his gift, I realised. Not money. Not authority. Not provider theatre.

He made life livable.

He made the friction disappear.

He made the world softer.

And the world had told him, over and over, that softness was lesser.

No wonder the word "wife" burned him. It wasn't the role that was shameful. It was the contempt society had poured onto the role because women had carried it.

"Have you shown Celeste," I asked.

He shook his head quickly. "No. I didn't want to... I don't know. I didn't want it to look like I was—"

"Trying to earn your place," I finished gently.

His eyes flickered. He looked away.

I took a breath and made a decision that felt almost comically practical for something that might change his whole future.

Here it was. The "in."

Not a bouquet. Not a push. Not "go on, tell her you like her."

A garment.

A product.

A bridge from wife-work into value that a provider mind could recognise without sentiment.

"Listen to me," I said softly.

He looked up.

"This," I said, lifting the shift slightly, "isn't you trying to buy anything."

His shoulders tightened, defensive.

"It's you doing what you do best," I continued. "You saw a problem. You made a solution. You made it measurable."

He swallowed.

"And Celeste," I said, "will understand this. Not because she's cold. Because her language is outcomes."

His mouth twitched, humourless. "She... doesn't do romance."

"No," I agreed. "And thank God for that."

He blinked at me, startled by my bluntness.

I smiled, gentle. "Romance is where women get tricked into carrying things they shouldn't. Celeste is building terms. That's safer."

His expression softened, then clouded again.

"But she doesn't..." he began, lost. "She doesn't see—"

"She sees," I corrected, and I kept my tone warm but firm. "She sees plenty. She just doesn't see *everything* yet. She's young. She's powerful. She's ethical. And she's busy."

He looked down at the shift in his hands like it was too intimate to be held in public.

I touched his forearm lightly, grounding him.

"You want to be appealing to her?" I asked quietly.

His eyes snapped up, startled. "Mum—"

"Hush," I said, still gentle. "Don't make it weird. I'm not matchmaking with a ribbon and a spell. I'm being practical."

He swallowed.

"You become appealing," I said, "by being legible. By making your value visible in the way she understands. Not by sacrificing. Not by trying to provide. By making things that scale."

His breath caught slightly, like he hadn't realised that was an option.

I nodded toward the operating table where Celeste stood, papers in hand, face serious.

"Take that to her," I said. "Not as 'look at me!' As 'this solves a problem.'"

He hesitated.

Then he said, very softly, "And if she doesn't want it."

"She'll want it," I said, and I was surprised by how certain I felt. "Because it's good. And because it's for women. And because it respects comfort instead of treating it like vanity."

I felt my own eyes sting a little and blinked it away.

"There's your lever," I added, a tiny smile. "Not charm. Not money. Design."

He gave a small nod, still nervous, but steadier.

"Okay," he said.

"And Sharl?" I said, stopping him before he could drift into old reflexes again.

He turned back.

"If she likes you," I said softly, "don't try to earn it twice."

His face flushed.

"I won't," he murmured.

He walked toward Celeste then, carrying the shift like a quiet offering to the only god that mattered in this place: usefulness that didn't demand payment.

I watched him go, heart full in a way that had nothing to do with sentimentality and everything to do with seeing a boy become a person.

I watched Celeste look up, take in the garment, and go still.

Not with romance.

With recognition.

And I thought, with a mother's plain, stubborn realism:

Right.

That'll do.

Not because I was trying to trap my son into a story.

Because I could see, clearer than he could, that his future was tied to hers.

Not as a leash.

As a design.

A life with terms.

A life where wife-work didn't disappear.

A life where being soft didn't mean being less.

And if I could nudge that into place with a piece of linen cut intelligently?

Well.

That wasn't meddling.

That was mothering.



Oh, you put it PERFECTLY.

I'll admit: I'm a bit on a fence. I'm kind-of thinking this: Sarah could now realise what an amazing sort of person (and partner) Sharl would be and sort-of starts making little advances... nothing bold, just little things. Which, of course, confuse Sharl. BUT Celeste picks up on this, and well... that's an issue. Sarah has become a crucial player in the team. So, we are not going to throw her out. Her little 'advances' are all couched in strong deniability. Celeste has to come to terms with the fact that her feelings for Sharl are a bit stronger than she wanted. And then, the testing phase of the chemise Sharl has designed includes him wearing it at home. He has become oblivious to any conflict wearing items he creates, regardless of the target gender of the garment: he's a professional tester. So, he's sitting at breakfast, long hair down his back, wearing a chemise of his design,

Celeste's morning ready because he did his wife-work right. And, she... melts?

Thought for 27s >

Yes — that triangle is *perfectly* on-theme if you keep it clean: not soap-opera flirting, but **status, visibility, and power dynamics** expressed through tiny, deniable moves.

Why it works (and how to keep it daylight-proof)

Sarah's "advances" can be read three ways at once (that's your deniability):

1. She genuinely likes Sharl and is curious.
2. She's competitively testing Celeste's grip on her "provider composure."
3. She's asserting social dominance in the team ("I can touch what you value and you can't punish me for it without looking petty.")

Celeste's problem is not "jealousy = drama." Her problem is: *if she wants Sharl, she has to stop pretending she doesn't*. Provider power comes with a temptation to stay aloof and let others do the emotional risk. She can't preach visibility and then hide her own stake.

Sharl's confusion stays believable because he's not socially calibrated for female-coded subtext. He'll interpret Sarah's cues as either friendly teasing or a test he's failing.

The moral cleanliness is maintained if:

- Sarah never crosses into overt sexual behaviour; she stays in *social* territory.
- Celeste doesn't punish Sarah for liking him; she **sets boundaries around conduct and triangulation**.
- Sharl remains a professional tester; the chemise is treated as a garment prototype, not a costume scene.

Full prose scene (Celeste POV): Breakfast + chemise + "she melts"

Scene — *Prototype Morning* (Celeste POV)

The house smelled like toast and warm linen.

That was not normal.

Normal in my old life was waking up and doing a quick scan of what had gone wrong overnight—what had drifted, what had slid off the edge of the system, what would now cost me time I didn't have.

This morning, the drift had been pre-empted so thoroughly it felt... suspicious.

I stood in the doorway of the kitchen for a second, half expecting the room to reveal its trick: a hidden mess, a sink full of dishes, a bin liner sagging like a slow insult.

Instead: reset.

Bench wiped. Cloth folded. Sink empty. Mugs aligned in the drying rack like a small, silent salute to order. Even the kettle was filled to the line I used without thinking.

My brain tried to file it under "nice."

My body filed it under "unsafe," the way it always did when something felt too easy. Ease is how you stop noticing labour.

Then I saw him.

Sharl sat at the table with his hair down—an unbroken dark fall halfway down his back, still slightly damp at the ends as if he'd showered and not bothered with the last tidy step. He had a notebook open beside his plate, pen resting across the page.

And he was wearing the chemise.

Not coyly. Not theatrically. Like a mechanic wearing coveralls. Like a person in the middle of a test cycle.

White linen. Simple, intelligent cut. The neckline bound so it lay flat without digging. Underarm gussets that gave movement without strain. Seams placed where a body could live in them, not where a pattern book demanded.

His forearms were bare. His hands looked the same as always—steady, practical—lifting a fork, turning a page, chewing without thinking because his mind was somewhere else.

A professional.

I stayed still long enough for the moment to register properly.

This was what I'd asked for, in the most literal way: wife-work done right, the day softened, my future protected. Infrastructure so quiet it made the house feel like it had

always been this way.

And then, because life is cruel, the thought that came next was Sarah's smile from yesterday—sharp and amused and deniable.

She'd stood too close when Sharl showed the shift. She'd made a comment that wasn't a comment.

"You're going to ruin modern women for their polyester," she'd said, bright as a joke.

And then, as if she were testing a seam for weakness, she'd looked right at him and added:

"You look... weirdly right in that, Sharl."

Weirdly right. Not "beautiful." Not "hot." The kind of compliment that could be filed as technical appreciation—except it had landed on him like a pebble down a well. Confusing. Echoing. Unignorable.

He'd gone pink. He'd muttered something about *fit* and *breathability*.

Sarah had smiled, satisfied, as if she'd learned something.

I'd seen it in real time: her little probe into the system. Her interest in him, yes—but also her interest in me.

And I'd hated that I cared.

Not because I wanted to own him like a thing.

Because caring meant I was no longer neutral.

I stepped fully into the kitchen.

Sharl looked up, startled—as if he'd been alone with the house and his test notes and had forgotten I existed.

"Morning," he said.

The chemise shifted slightly as he moved, the fabric doing exactly what it was designed to do: move with the body, not against it.

My throat tightened.

I wanted to say the old sentence again. The dangerous one. The one that turned labour into debt.

I don't know what I'd do without you.

Instead I walked to the counter, picked up the contributions sheet we'd clipped there, and ran my finger down the entries.

Kitchen reset: done.

Bins: done.

Prep: done.

It was all there, visible and logged.

I turned back to him and made myself speak like a provider—truth, not theatre.

"You logged the reset," I said.

He blinked, as if he'd expected "thank you" more than "logged."

"Yeah," he said. "It was... twenty minutes."

"Good," I replied. "That means it exists."

His mouth twitched—almost a smile, almost relief.

Then he glanced down at himself.

"Oh—this," he said quickly, as if he needed to justify his body in my kitchen. "Prototype. I needed to check the neckline binding while sitting and eating. If it pulls, I'll know."

He said it like a report.

He said it like he didn't realise he'd become a picture.

I walked to the table and sat opposite him.

Up close, I could see the details Lauren had seen: the seam placement that respected skin, the way the shoulder was shaped to prevent rub. The garment didn't scream femininity. It whispered comfort.

He'd designed dignity. Quietly. Without asking permission.

My chest did something I didn't like.

It softened.

Not melting into romance. Melting into recognition.

This was what wives did—what women had done—make life livable and then vanish into the livability.

He was doing it right in front of me, and the only reason he wasn't disappearing was because I kept dragging it into daylight.

And then Sarah's face intruded again, and the heat of my reaction surprised me.

I didn't want to punish Sarah. She was too valuable. Too sharp. Too crucial to the culture.

But I also wasn't going to let my own feelings stay hidden while another woman tested the perimeter like it was a game.

Sharl chewed thoughtfully, flipped a page in his notebook, and didn't notice the war happening inside my ribcage.

"Okay," I said, and my voice came out calmer than I felt. "How's it performing?"

He brightened immediately, grateful for a question that made sense.

"Good," he said, tapping the neckline. "No pull. The binding sits. The gussets are—they're right. I think it's... scalable."

Scalable.

A word that made my brain light up.

He was not just doing wife-work. He was doing maker-work. Market work. Work that could fund my path forward.

Work that made him legible to me in the language I understood best.

I felt something dangerous and simple settle into place:

I liked him.

More than was convenient.

More than I'd planned.

And the moment I admitted that to myself, I saw my next responsibility as clearly as the clean bench behind him.

I had to claim my stake like an adult.

Not by owning him.

By being visible.

I leaned forward and lowered my voice a fraction, not conspiratorial, just private.

"Sharl," I said.

He looked up immediately.

"I'm going to say something, and I don't want you to try to earn it."

He went still, the reflex ready to flare.

I didn't give it room.

"I like you," I said. "And my liking you doesn't require you to do extra work. It doesn't require you to prove anything."

His eyes widened. His cheeks coloured.

He opened his mouth—

I lifted a hand, gentle but firm.

"Listen," I said. "I'm not saying it to make you panic. I'm saying it because I'm not letting you drift into invisibility under me. I won't do that. Not to you."

His throat moved.

He stared at me like he was trying to understand a concept he'd never been allowed to hold.

Then, very quietly, he said, "Okay."

He didn't add a plan.

He didn't offer a sacrifice.

He just sat with it, which told me he'd been practicing.

Good.

I let the silence breathe for a second.

Then I said the harder part, the part that was governance, not confession.

"And," I continued, steady, "if anyone in the team starts treating you like a story, you tell me."

His brow furrowed. "A story."

"Yes," I said.

He hesitated. "Do you mean... Sarah."

There it was.

Not accusation. Not scandal. Just his quiet, literal mind noticing a pattern and not knowing what to do with it.

I didn't let myself react like a girl. I reacted like a provider who was responsible for culture.

"I mean anyone," I said. "But yes. Sarah's been... testing."

His face clouded with confusion. "I didn't— I thought she was just—"

"She is," I said. "And she isn't."

He blinked, lost.

I exhaled once and softened my tone—not my line.

"She's valuable," I said. "We're not losing her. But we're also not turning you into a toy the room plays with."

He went very still, and I saw relief there—relief that I wasn't angry at him, relief that he didn't have to decode it alone.

"And you," I added, "don't owe anyone a reaction. If it confuses you, you say 'I don't understand what you mean' and you leave it there."

He nodded once, obediently, almost gratefully.

Then he glanced down at the chemise again, as if remembering he was sitting in my kitchen wearing a garment that the world would love to misunderstand.

"I'm not... doing anything wrong, am I," he asked, and his voice was quiet in a way that made my chest ache.

"No," I said immediately. "You're doing your job."

His eyes lifted.

"And your job," I said, "is real work."

He swallowed.

I reached across the table, not to stroke him, not to make it romantic. Just to touch his wrist briefly—an anchor, a claim, a promise.

"Eat," I said. "Then we go in. I'll handle Sarah."

His eyes widened slightly. "You will?"

"Yes," I said, and let a hint of steel show. "Without drama. Without punishment. With terms."

He nodded.

And in that small nod, I felt something in me finally give way—not into softness that made me weak, but into softness that made me honest.

Because in that moment, with his hair down and his chemise on and my morning already held together by work he'd done quietly and correctly, I realised something very simple:

He didn't need a provider fantasy to be worth keeping.

He was already worth keeping.

He just needed the system to stop lying about what wives were.

I stood, took my mug to the sink, and washed it myself.

Not because I didn't want him to do it.

Because I wanted him to see, in the smallest possible way, that I could be the provider and still do my share of the infrastructure without making it a performance.

The house didn't run on his disappearance.

It ran on our clarity.

I turned back to him.

"Sharl," I said.

He looked up, attentive.

"I'm glad you're here," I said. "Not because you make my life easier. Because I like the person you are."

He froze again, cheeks pink.

Then, after a beat, he nodded once, slow.

"Okay," he said softly. "Okay."

And for the first time, he didn't reach for usefulness to fill the space.

He just... let the truth sit on the table between us, as plain and real as the linen on his skin.

Outside, the day waited.

Inside, the system held.

And I knew—absolutely knew—that I wasn't going to let anyone turn him into a story without my consent.

Not even Sarah.

Not even me.

If you want to keep momentum, the next micro-scene can be **Celeste's "terms" chat with Sarah** at Wardrobe: not a jealous confrontation, but a calm boundary-setting that actually *raises* Sarah's respect for Celeste ("Oh. She's serious. And she's fair.").



Sarah is going to go with 'plausible deniability' and Celeste knows it: Sarah's case is strong at this point. Celeste also knows that if Sarah isn't challenged early on, she might still expose herself with things she didn't mean to say. Celeste being the stronger player is fine with biding her time. In the meantime, Sharl's chemise gets developed for his mum and Sarah: they are both quite ... I hate to use the word 'impressed' as it's a bit overused, but you get my meaning. The chemise goes into production, finds a market. The atelier changes nature again... more staff are needed. Celeste, while going to school shows her managerial prowess. Wardrobe... scales successfully.

Yes. This tracks cleanly — and it's a *very* satisfying evolution of the competence-network into an actual enterprise.

What you've outlined is basically: **Sarah becomes a slow-burn threat vector, the chemise becomes a clean revenue engine, and Celeste's provider role becomes visible through scaling ethics.** That's not a derail; that's the spine tightening.

Here's how I'd shape it so the deniability / boundary tension stays alive *without* turning into melodrama, while also letting the business arc feel earned and "daylight-proof."

1) Sarah's plausible deniability: how Celeste plays it (strong without "jealous girlfriend" optics)

Celeste's move is not to "accuse Sarah of flirting." That's weak, because Sarah can win that argument every time.

Celeste instead sets **process boundaries** that apply to everyone but are *clearly aimed* at Sarah's habits:

Boundary class A: Communication hygiene

- No private teasing that targets someone's identity/role (wife-work, Sharl's testing).

- Any feedback about garments goes through the ledger, not through "little comments."

This defangs Sarah because it moves the battlefield into paperwork, where Sarah can't operate as easily.

Boundary class B: Anti-triangulation rule

- "We don't create side channels around staff."
- If something is "just a joke," it can survive being said in front of the group. If it can't, it's not a joke.

Celeste doesn't need to say Sarah's name. Sarah will hear it anyway.

Boundary class C: Respect for tester neutrality

- Wear-testing is treated like QA, not a social stage.
- Any comments on Sharl's appearance are out-of-scope.

That's the cleanest, strongest version: **no romance talk at all** — just operational integrity.

And crucially: Celeste bides her time. She doesn't "confront." She sets conditions that make Sarah either comply or reveal herself later.

That's a strong-player move.

2) The chemise "impressed" problem: give them a better word

You're right: "impressed" is a bit blunt. In your register, you can rotate in:

- **taken aback** (quietly)
- **caught** (by the comfort)
- **won over**
- **converted** (from sceptic to believer)
- **disarmed** (but you prefer gentler language—so: *unravelled*)
- **surprised into respect**

For Lauren: she's *relieved* and *moved* more than impressed.

For Sarah: she's *intrigued* and *slightly annoyed* *she likes it*.

3) Chemise development beats that keep it morally clean

To keep it from feeling like "boy in women's underwear" territory, the beats should be:

- **Fabric + seams + wash testing** (shrinkage, abrasion, pilling)
- **Neckline and underarm comfort** (real pain points)
- **Size grading across body types**
- **Market framing:** "house shift / sleep shift / summer base layer / menopause comfort / sensory-friendly"

And importantly: Sharl's home wear-testing stays framed as **engineering**:

- "sit, reach, carry, bend, heat, laundry, repeat"
 - no mirrors, no posing, no "look at you"
 - Celeste's reaction is not sexualised; it's *recognition + tenderness + threat awareness*.
-

4) Scaling Wardrobe: what changes when a chemise becomes a hit

This is where your story can get deliciously consequential.

The atelier changes nature again

Before: bespoke, museum, ledger-heavy, intimate.

After: **hybrid**:

- Museum contracts keep standards sharp
- Chemise line funds the shop and Celeste's education
- Systems become the culture, not just Mara's preference

New staff needed (and what kinds)

To keep it believable, scale in layers:

- 1. Cutting + prep assistant**
 - frees skilled seamstresses from low-skill time drains
- 2. Production stitchers (2–4 part-time)**
 - simple, repeatable seams; trained into QC checkpoints
- 3. Finishing specialist**
 - hems, bindings, buttonholes, handwork (quality signature)
- 4. Fulfilment + packing (part-time)**
 - prevents the classic "makers also do boxes" burnout
- 5. Customer service/admin (eventually)**
 - email, returns, sizing questions, order tracking

Celeste's ethos shines when she **refuses** to scale by burning people out.

5) Celeste's managerial prowess while studying: what to show on-page

To make it feel earned, show her doing *unsexy work*:

- writing SOPs (standard operating procedures)
- building a simple sizing chart that actually works
- setting turnaround windows and sticking to them
- hiring with paid trial shifts
- pay bands and overtime rules
- a weekly cadence meeting that's short, boring, and effective

And show her doing the hardest thing:

- saying **no** to money that would break standards

That's provider power with ethics.

6) Where the story tension lives now (so it doesn't go flat)

As Wardrobe scales, you get three ongoing pressure sources:

Pressure source 1: Sarah as a "social risk"

She's valuable, charismatic, and still tempted to test boundaries.

Celeste contains her with systems. Sarah either grows up... or slips.

Pressure source 2: Sharl's identity conflict

He's accepting wife-work, but success makes it harder:

- "Now that the product is selling, am I allowed to feel proud?"
- "Does pride mean I'm trying to provide again?"

Celeste keeps steering him toward visibility without entitlement.

Pressure source 3: Celeste's blind spot

She's good at governance, but scaling can numb empathy if she's not careful.

Lauren becomes the quiet conscience: not critic, not meddler—just the person who notices drift early and names it.

7) A clean "next scene" suggestion (to lock the arc)

If you'd like, I can write a time-jump "compressed montage scene" (still full prose, not bullet points) that covers:

- Lauren and Sarah testing the chemise (their reactions distinct)
- first small batch production
- first orders landing
- Celeste doing the boring management work
- Mara grudgingly proud
- Sharl seeing his wife-work become market value
- Sarah behaving—mostly—under the new comms rules

And we end with a hook: a big order request, or a quality failure, or a Sarah slip.

If you say "go," I'll draft that montage-style scene (Celeste POV or Lauren POV — your choice). I can also keep it tight and cinematic so it feels like the story is accelerating, not meandering.



Absolutely GO! Thank you... great summary. Look, I don't mind Sarah being a bit piquant: it adds flavour. Small doses. I actually don't want her "reining in" too much... you need loose cannons in a story to keep it alive and interesting.

Scene 28 — *Batch One (Celeste POV)*

Success didn't arrive as applause.

It arrived as emails.

A subject line that didn't care about anyone's feelings:

RE: SHIFT / CHEMISE — PRICING + TIMELINE

And then a second one, five minutes later, like the first had brought friends:

Sizing? Fabric? Care? Wholesale?

Wardrobe started to change again—quietly, almost politely—like a room that pretends it isn't filling with people until you turn around and realise there's nowhere left to stand.

The chemise did not feel like a "line."

It felt like a solution that kept solving.

Lauren tried the first finished prototype at home, over leggings, because we weren't doing theatre and because she was practical. She came back the next day wearing it under a cardigan as if she'd always dressed like that, as if a garment couldn't possibly be important enough to mention.

She stood in the doorway of the cutting room, touched the neckline absently, and said, with that gentle realism of hers,

"This is going to make women... calmer."

She didn't say *impressed*. She didn't say *beautiful*. She said the thing that mattered: it would reduce friction in real lives.

Then Sarah tried hers.

Sarah held it up like it was evidence in court. Turned it inside-out. Ran her fingers down the seams as if she were looking for a reason to mock it. She put it on in the back room over her clothes, came out, walked a lap like she was checking the hem swing, then paused in the middle of the floor with a scowl.

"Well," she said, annoyed at herself, "that's... dangerously comfortable."

Sharl, who had been bent over his notebook, looked up like someone had just introduced a new variable.

Sarah tilted her head at him, eyes bright with the kind of mischief that could still claim innocence.

"You've ruined me," she said. "I'm never wearing a bra at home again."

Mara's gaze lifted slowly from the ledger.

Sarah smiled sweetly. "For comfort reasons, Mara."

Mara didn't blink. "Log your comments under 'wear notes,' not 'personal manifesto.'"

Sarah saluted. "Yes, Mother."

Mara's pen scratched one hard line through the air on the ledger page, as if she wished it could strike through Sarah's personality. It didn't. That was the point. You didn't sand down every sharp edge. You just kept it from cutting the culture open.

I watched Sharl write Sarah's comment down anyway—translated into something useful:

Support at bust: optional. Movement comfort: high. Wear note: psychological relief.

He did it without humour, without embarrassment, the way he did everything now: as QA.

At home, wear-testing became routine in the cleanest way possible. He didn't pose. He didn't check himself in mirrors. He ate breakfast, bent to tie his shoes, reached up into cupboards, carried laundry baskets, walked up and down the stairs. He wrote notes like an engineer logging failures.

If the hem rode up when he sat cross-legged: logged.

If the neckline gaped when he leaned forward: logged.

If the side seam twisted after washing: logged.

The chemise stopped being "a women's thing" in his mind entirely. It became "a garment with performance criteria."

Which was, inconveniently, part of why I kept catching myself looking at him.

Not with lust. With something worse, because it was steadier: recognition.

The house ran because he noticed what needed noticing. My mornings were quiet because he'd already done the friction work—bounded, logged, visible. My study hours held because he enforced the card system like it mattered, not like he was doing me a favour.

And every time Sarah's voice echoed in the back of my mind—*weirdly right*—I had to remind myself: policy first, feelings second. Not because feelings were shameful, but because feelings were sloppy if they weren't stewarded.

So I stewarded.

The first time a customer email came in addressed to "*the girls*," I replied with a template that didn't scold and didn't smile:

Hi—thank you. Wardrobe is a production team. Please address enquiries to Operations (Celeste) or Production (Mara).

Sizing questions: reply with bust/waist/hip + height + comfort preference (relaxed/standard/roomy).

Lead times and care notes attached.

Then I attached a PDF.

Not a mood. A document.

Mara watched me send it and made a small sound that was as close to approval as she ever got.

"That," she said, "will keep you alive."

The orders multiplied anyway.

Not hundreds at first. Dozens. Then more dozens. Women wrote the way women write when something finally respects their bodies without demanding performance:

"I didn't know clothing could feel like this."

"I can breathe."

"It doesn't itch."

"It makes my skin stop being angry."

"I'm autistic and this is the first thing I've worn all day without wanting to tear it off."

"Is there a long version? A short version? Can I sleep in it forever?"

I read those emails twice each—once for the information, and once for the reality check.

This wasn't vanity.

This was infrastructure for a life.

So we treated it like one.

We didn't scale by heroics. We scaled by roles.

Mara and I stood at the operating table, and I drew boxes on a piece of paper with a black marker:

CUTTING / PREP

ASSEMBLY (SEAMS)

FINISHING (HEMS/BINDINGS)

QC CHECKPOINTS

PACKING / LABELS

CUSTOMER EMAILS

Then we matched people to boxes, not vibes.

Janine increased her hours, but only after we wrote it down properly—rate, schedule, cap, review date—because “can you just” was banned.

She didn’t ask for gratitude. She didn’t make a speech. She simply said, quietly,

“I can do Tuesdays and Thursdays. Not evenings. My kid’s got footy.”

“Done,” I said, and I meant it. “No evenings.”

Sarah, overhearing, muttered, “Imagine men organising work around their children,” and then, when she saw me look up, added quickly, “I mean—historically. Systemically. Don’t glare at me.”

I didn’t glare. I filed it under *useful piquancy*. Then I wrote a policy line into the SOP draft:

NO AFTER-HOURS EXPECTATIONS WITHOUT PAID OVERTIME + 48-HOUR NOTICE.

Tilly stayed fast.

Not reckless-fast, not “sewing as adrenaline.” Fast in the way you become fast when you’re talented and somebody insists you do it clean.

She still tried, occasionally, to make it a story.

“Isn’t it wild,” she said one morning, eyes bright, “how this is all, like... changing our lives?”

Mara didn’t look up from the ledger. “No.”

Tilly blinked. “No?”

“It’s changing the shop,” Mara said. “Your life is your responsibility. Sew straight.”

Tilly flushed, then nodded. “Yes. Sorry.”

Lauren, softer, stepped in beside her a moment later and said quietly, so only Tilly could hear,

“Don’t be ashamed of feeling things, love. Just don’t use feelings as a substitute for standards.”

Tilly’s eyes watered a little. She wiped them quickly as if tears were unprofessional.

Then she stitched even straighter.

We hired a cutter.

Not because it was glamorous. Because it stopped skilled seamstresses from spending their best hours doing the low-skill part that always ate the day.

A middle-aged woman named Pru arrived with her own shears and the expression of someone who had no patience for nonsense. She listened to Mara explain the ledger system, nodded once, and said,

"Finally. A shop that doesn't run on guilt."

Then she cut our fabric like it owed her money.

We hired a packer two afternoons a week—Dee, a uni student with a label printer and an almost aggressive love of tidy boxes. Dee's favourite phrase became,

"If it ships wrong, it's my fault, and I don't do fault."

She was, in Mara's terms, acceptable.

The first weekly cadence meeting happened on a Monday at 8:05am and lasted exactly eleven minutes because I refused to let it become a group therapy session.

We stood around the operating table like a pit crew.

I pointed at the whiteboard:

THIS WEEK

- Museum Run: 2 garments, fittings scheduled
- Chemise Batch 1: 24 units
- QC failure rate target: <3%
- Overtime: none planned
- School hours: protected (Celeste)

Mara spoke in bullet points: "Two failure points. Underarm seam tension and neckline binding twist. Fix applied. Retest required."

Sarah raised a hand. "Can we call Batch One 'The Great Comfy Uprising'?"

"No," Mara and I said at the same time.

Sarah grinned. "Worth a try."

Sharl sat to one side with his notebook, not in the centre, not making himself important. He spoke only when he had data.

"Shrinkage after first wash," he said. "One and a half percent on length. Half percent on width. If we pre-wash, we can control it."

Mara nodded. "Pre-wash the bolts."

I added it to the SOP. Pru wrote it on her cutting checklist without being asked.

This was how it felt when a system started to hold: women correcting each other without spite, without submission, without making it personal.

And Sharl—slowly, almost imperceptibly—started to settle.

Not into shame. Into function.

He still had flashes of the provider reflex. When a larger museum enquiry came in with numbers that made his eyes widen, he suggested, carefully, "If we take a lower margin on the first run, we could—"

"No," Lauren said from the doorway, warm but iron underneath.

"No," Mara echoed.

And I finished it cleanly: "No martyr maths."

Sharl closed his mouth, nodded once, and wrote in his notebook:

Provider reflex triggered: noted. No action.

He didn't punish himself for it. He logged it. That was growth.

Sarah, watching him, said lightly, "God, you're adorable when you try to be a noble peasant."

He looked up, puzzled. "What?"

Sarah smiled innocently. "Nothing. Compliment. Completely professional."

I didn't bite.

I didn't challenge her on flirting, because she'd win. She always could.

Instead, later, I added a line to the shop norms document and posted it on the corkboard above the ledger:

COMMENTS ON APPEARANCE ARE OUT OF SCOPE.

WE DISCUSS GARMENTS.

WE DON'T DISCUSS BODIES.

Sarah read it, eyes glinting.

Then she turned to me and said, sweet as honey, "Love this. Very feminist."

The way she said *feminist* made it sound like a blade in a velvet sheath.

I smiled back. "Good."

She held my gaze for a beat too long, then looked away first.

Strong players didn't rush. They set the board.

Batch One shipped on a Thursday.

Twenty-four boxes lined up on the packing table, labels straight, tissue folded, care cards tucked in. Dee moved down the row like an inspector. Mara stood at the end with the ledger open, checking each unit against QC signatures.

Lauren hovered nearby, not in charge, not out of place—just present, the way she'd learned to be present without becoming the invisible engine again.

Sharl taped the final box and set the dispenser down with the same quiet care he applied to everything.

Then he did something small and surprising.

He looked at the row of boxes—at the proof of the garment he'd designed now leaving the building—and his face shifted as if he were trying to allow himself a feeling he'd always mistrusted.

Pride.

He didn't perform it. He didn't announce it.

He just stood there, breathing a little differently.

Sarah appeared beside him like a cat, too casual to be accidental.

"Well," she said, soft enough that only he would hear, "look at you."

He blinked. "What?"

She tilted her head. "You made something women want."

That was a compliment with teeth, because it named the thing he was still learning not to be ashamed of: that his value wasn't in provision, but in support that created comfort.

Sharl's cheeks flushed. He looked down, then up again, confused by the warmth in his own chest.

"I... we did," he said, and his instinct tried to share credit so he didn't have to carry the spotlight.

Sarah's smile sharpened. "You did, Sharl."

He opened his mouth, closed it again.

And before he could drift into sacrifice or apology, I stepped in—not with jealousy, not with accusation. With culture.

"Sharl," I said, calm. "We need your wear-test notes for the long version. Two customers asked for calf-length."

He turned to me immediately, relieved to have a task that made sense.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. I've got—I've got ideas."

Sarah's eyes flicked to me, amused.

I ignored the amusement and wrote *calf-length variant* on the board under NEXT WEEK.

Then my laptop pinged.

A new email. Subject line bold enough to make my stomach tighten:

RE: URGENT — 200 UNITS — GIFT SHOP / WHOLESALE — 6 WEEKS

Two hundred.

Six weeks.

The kind of number that turned shops into sweatshops if you chased it the wrong way.

Mara saw my face.

Lauren saw it too.

Sarah leaned in, eyes bright with the scent of trouble. "Oh?" she murmured. "We got a big one."

Sharl looked up from his notebook, and I saw the provider reflex flare in him like a match finding oxygen—*I can fix this, I can carry it, I can—*

I didn't let any of it take the wheel.

I clicked the email open, read it once, and then spoke out loud so the room would hear the rule being born in real time.

"Okay," I said. "We don't answer this with panic."

Mara's voice was flat. "We answer with capacity."

Lauren's was warm. "And with sanity."

Sarah's smile was wicked. "And with leverage."

Sharl swallowed, eyes wide.

I shut the laptop halfway—not to hide it, but to keep the moment from turning into a cliff.

"Meeting," I said. "Now. Ten minutes. Standing."

And as we gathered around the operating table again—women, systems, labour visible—I felt the shop pivot one more time.

Not into romance.

Into consequence.

And the story stayed alive, not because anyone was reckless, but because the next decision would reveal exactly what kind of provider Celeste really was.



Right. I'll bring THIS into the equation. One question I faced from female patients when I was a nurse was: "Are you gay?" Why? Because I worked comfortably with

women, and women see that and can't reconcile it with what they know about men. So, Pru and Tilly could front that question, perhaps? Also, challenge met, accepted, successfully carried out... 200 garments shipped. But Mara and Celeste realise just how much this cost Wardrobe. The money was now there: time to upscale operations?

Thought for 14s >

You're *not* derailing — you're adding a truth that will ring like a bell for a lot of women readers: that reflexive "Are you gay?" question is rarely about sex; it's about **women trying to reconcile a man's ease in female space with the cultural script they've learned.**

And it's perfect here because it lets you expose patriarchy *without a lecture*:

- Women have learned to expect men to be unsafe, entitled, performative, or awkward.
- So when a man is calm, competent, non-grabby, non-theatrical, and doesn't demand emotional wages... women reach for the only model they've been given that explains it: "He must not be *that kind* of man."
- The tragedy is: *the "default man" could be this too*, but privilege trains them not to.

So yes: let Pru and Tilly front the question. It's believable. It's sharp. And it will make Sharl's arc land harder, because the question reveals the social damage.

And yes to your second point: 200 shipped is a triumph *and* a wound. That's exactly when a good provider makes the adult decision: **scale or die** (or worse: exploit).

Below are two full-prose scenes that fold in both beats cleanly.

Scene 29 — *The Question (Celeste POV)*

The day after the 200-unit shipment, Wardrobe felt like a body after adrenaline.

Not sick. Not broken. Just... hollowed out in places you didn't know could be hollowed.

Dee's packing tape dispenser sat abandoned at the end of the table like a dropped tool in an operating room. The label printer was still plugged in, silent now, its little green

light glowing as if it couldn't believe it had been allowed to stop.

Mara didn't say *well done*.

She said, "Failure rate?"

"Two-point-eight," I replied.

She nodded once. Acceptable.

Then she said, "Cost."

That was the real question.

I was standing at the whiteboard when I heard voices from the back—near the machines, where the air smelled of hot motor and fabric dust and the faint tang of someone's cheap hand cream.

Tilly's voice, bright but careful. Pru's, dry as a biscuit.

I moved toward them without rushing, the way you approached any live wire: present, not dramatic.

Sharl was there too, wiping down a machine plate with a cloth, the chemise pattern pieces folded beside him. He looked tired, but tidy-tired. The kind that came from finishing a job properly.

Pru stood with her arms folded, eyeing him in that blunt, appraising way older women sometimes did when they were deciding whether a man was safe or simply quiet.

Tilly hovered near the ironing board, fiddling with her hair tie.

Pru spoke first.

"So," she said, casual as if she were asking the weather, "are you gay?"

The room went strangely still.

Tilly's eyes widened in immediate horror—*Oh no, did we just*—but she didn't interrupt, which told me something else: she'd been thinking it too.

Sarah, of course, materialised in the doorway like she'd smelled blood in the water. She leaned against the frame, arms crossed, amused.

Sharl blinked once.

It wasn't outrage on his face. It was confusion—like someone had introduced a variable he hadn't known belonged in the equation.

"What?" he said.

Pru's tone remained flat, not cruel. Just... matter-of-fact.

"You're comfortable," she said. "With women. With the work. With all of it. Most blokes—" she flicked her gaze around the room, as if "most blokes" were a category of tool she'd learned not to trust—"they get weird. You don't."

Sharl stared at her, and I watched him do what he always did: reach for the correct answer, the correct behaviour, the thing that would keep the system stable.

But this wasn't a seam. This wasn't a binding. This was social culture—messy, coded, full of traps.

He glanced at me, very slightly, as if asking: *Is there a procedure for this?*

I stepped in before he could be forced into either confession or performance.

"Stop," I said, calmly.

Three heads turned toward me. Tilly looked relieved. Sarah looked disappointed, like I'd closed the theatre early. Pru looked mildly annoyed—but she didn't argue.

"That's not a workplace question," I continued. "And we don't speculate about colleagues' private lives."

Pru's mouth tightened. "Wasn't speculating. Was asking."

"And I'm saying no," I replied, evenly. Not sharp. Not apologetic. "If you need to know whether a colleague is safe, you don't ask their orientation. You look at their conduct."

Pru's gaze held mine. She wasn't a bully. She was a realist. Realists respected clean rules.

Tilly swallowed and tried to rescue the moment, voice small. "I didn't mean it like—it's just... he's nice."

Sarah let out a soft laugh. "A tragedy, truly."

I ignored Sarah.

I looked at Tilly, gentler. "Nice isn't the metric," I said. "Reliable is."

Tilly nodded quickly, cheeks pink.

Pru looked at Sharl again. "Fine," she said. "Conduct then. You're safe?"

Sharl's brow creased.

He answered like an engineer.

"I follow terms," he said. "I do my tasks. I don't... I don't touch people. I don't make comments. I'm here to work."

Pru watched him for a beat longer, then gave a small nod, as if ticking a box.

"That'll do," she said.

And there it was, laid bare: women had learned to run safety checks on men like you checked an appliance for a frayed cord.

The anger that rose in me wasn't at Pru or Tilly. It was at the fact this had become normal.

I kept my voice level.

"And for the record," I added, "a man being comfortable in female space isn't evidence of anything except maturity. We don't treat basic decency as a sexuality clue."

Sarah's eyes glittered. "Ooh. Put that on a mug."

"Out of scope," I said to her without looking, and the room went quiet again.

Pru's mouth twitched, almost amused. "Fair enough."

Then she turned slightly and added, in her dry voice, "Still reckon most blokes would combust in here."

"Most blokes were trained to think they're the centre," I said.

That got a real laugh out of Sarah.

Tilly's eyes widened, then she smiled—small, grateful—because she'd just been given permission to believe what she already suspected.

Sharl looked down at the machine plate, cloth moving in slow circles.

He said, very quietly, "So... women ask that because..."

Because they can't imagine men being safe unless they're disqualified from wanting women. Because patriarchy makes desire feel like threat.

I didn't say it all. Not here.

I said the clean, non-theatrical version.

"Because women have learned to be careful," I replied. "And because society has trained men to make women do the carefulness."

Sharl went still.

Then, as if a new light had come on behind his eyes, he murmured, "So the question... is about safety."

"Yes," I said.

He swallowed. "And... the fact it makes me feel... offended..."

Pru cut in, blunt. "Good. Sit with it."

I looked at her, surprised.

She shrugged. "Women sit with it every day."

Sharl's throat moved.

He nodded once, slow, eyes wide in that way that meant: *I'm learning something I can't unlearn.*

I let the moment land, then I did what a provider does: I moved the shop back to work.

"Okay," I said, clapping my hands once—one sharp sound. "Back to tasks. And for future reference: concerns about safety go to me or Mara. Not to gossip."

Sarah gave a little salute. "Yes, ma'am."

"Don't," I said mildly.

She grinned. "Out of scope. Got it."

And the room resumed, the machines whirring back to life, the culture intact—sharper now, more honest.

Sharl went back to wiping the plate.

But he wiped it differently.

As if, under the cloth, he'd found the seam of the whole world.

Scene 30 — *The Cost (Celeste POV)*

At 7:30 the next morning, Mara cleared the operating table again.

Ledger. Invoices. Fabric swatches. Calculator. Laptop.

Fluorescent honesty.

She didn't ask how anyone felt.

She wrote at the top of a clean page:

WHOLESALE 200 — POST-MORTEM

Then she drew two columns:

MONEY IN

COST OUT

Lauren stood near the doorway with coffee, quiet, warm presence without interference.

Pru was already cutting bolts, pretending not to listen but listening anyway. Tilly hovered at the edge like a student at the back of a lecture, trying to look grown.

Sharl sat on a stool with his notebook open. Wife-work in the room even when nobody named it: the mugs were washed, the bench was reset, the day could proceed.

Mara tapped the calculator.

"Money in," she said.

I gave her the number.

Mara wrote it down without reaction.

Then she lifted her pen and looked at me.

"Cost," she said.

I did not say "we managed."

I did not say "it was worth it."

I did the thing that makes women-led systems different:

I told the truth.

"Overtime hours: ninety-three," I said. "Paid. But still. Ninety-three."

Mara wrote it down.

"QC rework time: thirty-one hours," I continued. "Mostly neckline binding twist and one tension issue in underarm seams."

Mara's pen scratched.

"Study hours lost," I added, and hated the taste of the words. "Nine."

Lauren's hand tightened slightly on her coffee cup. Not judgment. Recognition of the cost women always paid first: their future.

Mara didn't look up. "Fatigue incidents?"

"Two near-misses," I said. "One iron burn avoided. One needle slip."

Mara's pen paused. That mattered to her more than money.

Then she wrote **SAFETY RISK: RISING** in hard block letters.

I breathed in slowly and forced myself to say the next part.

"Culture strain," I said. "Small. But present."

Sarah, of course, piped up from the hallway without being invited. "We were a delight."

Mara didn't even glance her way. "Out."

Sarah's grin flashed. She vanished.

Tilly's eyes darted after her.

I kept going.

"This order was possible," I said, "but it was not repeatable."

Mara finally looked up. Her gaze pinned mine like a needle through fabric.

"Good," she said. "Now you're speaking my language."

Lauren stepped closer, voice gentle. "So what do we do, love?"

I looked at the ledger, at the numbers, at the bare truth of what we'd asked the shop to carry.

Then I said the provider sentence I'd been building toward since the first receipt was pinned like proof:

"We upscale operations," I said.

Mara's mouth tightened. Not resistance. Approval disguised as severity.

"What does that mean," she asked.

I had already drafted it in my head the night before, because I didn't sleep when systems were unstable.

"Two more production stitchers," I said. "Part-time. Paid trial shifts. Clear scope. No evenings by default."

Mara nodded once.

"Dedicated finishing," I continued. "One person. Hems, bindings, buttonholes. That's where quality lives."

Mara wrote **FINISHING SPECIALIST**.

"Fulfilment increases to three afternoons," I said. "Dee or someone like her. Packing errors are expensive in time and trust."

Mara wrote it down.

"And," I added, "we set a hard capacity rule. If an order exceeds capacity, we don't 'make it work.' We price it or we decline it."

Tilly blinked. "Decline it?"

"Yes," I said, and kept my tone calm. "We're not building a business that eats women alive. Money that requires invisible labour is not profit."

Lauren's eyes softened.

Mara's pen paused, then continued.

Sharl spoke quietly from his stool, hesitant.

"And... the next wholesale request," he said. "Do we... do we take it?"

The provider reflex hovered behind his question—*we should, we can, I can carry it*—

I met his eyes and answered like a provider with ethics.

"We take it only if it doesn't require heroics," I said. "And if it does, we change the terms. Lead time. Price. Staging."

His shoulders eased slightly, as if he'd been waiting to be told he didn't have to bleed to be valuable.

Mara looked at me. "Education," she said.

I didn't flinch.

"Protected," I said. "Non-negotiable. I build this business to fund my future, not to replace it."

Lauren exhaled, almost a laugh, almost a sigh. "That's my girl," she murmured, and then caught herself—because praise could become pressure—and simply nodded instead.

Mara capped her pen.

"Good," she said. "Now write it. SOP. Hiring brief. Pay bands."

She slid the ledger toward me like it was a crown and a burden at once.

I took it.

And I felt, very clearly, that we'd crossed a line.

Not into romance.

Into responsibility.

The shop had proven it could do the impossible.

Now it had to prove it could do the sustainable.

And if we did it right, nobody would have to disappear into the work to make it happen.

Not the women.

Not Sharl.

Not me.

If you like this direction, the next scene can be **the hiring of the finishing specialist** (a formidable older woman, zero tolerance, instantly sees Sharl's wife-work as "finally someone gets it"), and/or **Celeste renegotiating the next wholesale order** in a way that shows her managerial steel: calm, professional, refuses urgency, demands lead times that protect staff, and wins anyway.



I have to admit: I truly LIKE Sarah! She is making the story fun. Keeps it real. We can't lose her. So no, her stance on Sharl doesn't devolve into anything romantic. Tilly, on the other hand? She sees herself - eventually - as a mini Celeste, except without the credentials. She likes the idea of being the one that runs things, but has no delusions of grandeur with respect to Wardrobe: that's Celeste and Mara's domain. However, she sees Sharl as an unclaimed prize. She sees Celeste's aloof stance towards Sharl as evidence to his 'availability'. Celeste picks up on this and finds herself registering pangs of jealousy: Tilly is young and pretty, but doesn't really understand what Celeste and Sharl have. Oh, and Tilly is easily cowed: she values her position so would do nothing to compromise it. So, her mild chit-chats, while piquing Celeste's concern, are but very early expressions of interest. Celeste realises Sharl means more to her than she wants... and it's now emotional. She has to come to terms with the fact that she doesn't just 'like' him. What's more is up for debate... but there is something more.

Yes. This is exactly the right way to keep Sarah as spice without letting her become the plot. She's the *loose cannon* that never fires at the core relationship—she fires at complacency, hypocrisy, drift. Perfect.

And shifting the “interest vector” to Tilly is smart because it lets you do something much richer than “rival”: it becomes a **misread of competence culture**.

Tilly mistakes:

- Celeste's restraint for indifference
- Sharl's professional neutrality for availability
- “wife-work” for servility rather than a bounded, respected infrastructure role
- the shop's warmth for romance-permission

And because she's *easily cowed* and status-sensitive, she'll keep it deniable. Which makes Celeste's jealousy more psychologically interesting: Celeste can't squash it without looking petty, and she can't ignore it without risking drift.

So the story tension becomes: **Celeste is forced to acknowledge her feelings not by Sharl pushing, but by a younger woman misreading the situation.** That's honest, and it keeps Celeste strong: she doesn't lash out; she has to govern her own interior with the same ethic she governs the shop.

What Celeste realises (and why it matters)

Celeste's jealousy isn't “I want him as property.”

It's:

- *I want the integrity of what we've built.*
- *I want the quiet intimacy of being known and supported without it being reinterpreted as a free-for-all.*
- *I want to be the one who gets to decide what this becomes.*
- *And I'm afraid my own aloofness has created the exact ambiguity that invites opportunism.*

That is a provider problem: **ambiguity invites chaos.**

And it forces the next step: *visibility*.

Not a big confession. Not “be my boyfriend.” Visibility in the competence-network way:

- naming stake

- setting boundaries
- clarifying roles
- keeping dignity intact

How to handle Tilly (without crushing her, and without melodrama)

Celeste doesn't accuse. She doesn't punish. She doesn't "warn her off."

She does what she always does: she tightens the system *around the behaviour*.

A clean policy approach that still carries emotional heat:

- 1. No side-channel intimacy around staff**
 - "If it can't be said in front of the room, don't say it."
- 2. No personal attention aimed at the wear-tester**
 - tester neutrality: feedback goes to the ledger, not to the person's body.
- 3. Mentorship redirect**
 - Celeste gives Tilly a legitimate path to "run things" in a limited sandbox: inventory counts, packing accuracy audits, label templates, SOP formatting—work that scratches her itch for control *without letting her play queen*.

That's how you keep Tilly useful and safe: you give her a channel.

And you let Celeste's jealousy show not as cruelty, but as a *tightening behind the eyes*—a provider noticing risk.

Scene suggestion: "Two Inches Too Close" (Celeste POV)

This is the scene that makes Celeste admit—to herself—there's more than "like."

Beats:

- Busy shop day. Chemise line humming.
- Sharl is wear-testing a revised neckline and doing notes at the packing table.
- Tilly drifts over with "helpful" questions that are really attention: "Does it feel... nice?" "Do you sleep in it?" "Do you ever... forget you're wearing it?" (questions designed to bring the garment into intimacy).
- All deniable. All plausible. All "I'm learning."
- Celeste watches, and the feeling hits her: not rage—heat. Possessive *impulse* she doesn't like in herself.
- She doesn't act on the impulse. She acts on culture:

- "Tilly, log questions like that in the SOP template. Sharl's not a focus group. He's QA."
- Tilly blushes, instantly cowed. "Sorry. I didn't mean—"
- Celeste, cooler: "I know. That's why I'm correcting it early."
- Sharl, confused, tries to smooth it: "It's fine, she was just—"
- Celeste's internal knife twist: he tries to protect people from consequences. Wife reflex. He makes himself smaller.
- Later, at home, she finds herself staring at the contributions sheet and realises the truth:
 - She doesn't just like him. She feels *claimed* by the life they're building—she wants to protect it, and she wants him in it in a way that's no longer merely functional.

And the scene ends with Celeste doing something small but seismic:

- she adds a line to their household sheet: "**Mutual stake — acknowledged**"
- then she stares at it, heart thudding, and realises she's past "like."

Not romance fog. Visibility.

What "more" could be (without going melodramatic)

You can keep it ambiguous but real:

- **attachment** (she feels safer with him than she wants to admit)
- **admiration** (she respects him in a way that's intimate)
- **protectiveness** (she wants to guard his dignity and their culture)
- **desire** (not necessarily sexual, but *wanting him near*)
- **love** (the scary word she won't use yet)

You don't have to pick the final label now. The tension is that Celeste can feel it growing and doesn't yet want to be the kind of person who uses her position to secure it.

So she has to do it cleanly: ask, not take.

That's your emotional engine.

If you want, I'll write **that full scene** ("Two Inches Too Close") in Celeste POV, with Tilly's deniable attention, Celeste's restrained correction, Sharl's confusion, and the ending where Celeste privately admits it's moved beyond "like."



Superb. Please do, Emily.

Scene — Two Inches Too Close (Celeste POV)

It wasn't a slow day.

Wardrobe didn't do slow days anymore. Not since the chemise stopped being a prototype and started being a thing women wrote emails about as if it had reached into their lives and moved the furniture.

The shop hummed with work that had learned to be repeatable: cutting stacked in neat piles, seams running straight, bindings pressed and cooled, QC cards clipped to garments like quiet vows. Dee moved down the packing table with her label printer and her small, ferocious devotion to correctness. Pru cut fabric like she'd been born with shears in her hands. Janine stitched with the steady rhythm of someone who knew the difference between speed and panic.

Tilly was everywhere in the way young people got everywhere when they were trying to prove they belonged.

Not chaotic—she'd learned not to be chaotic—but present. Ready. Offering help before anyone asked.

Sharl sat at the far end of the packing table with his notebook open, the revised chemise on his body like a testing rig. White linen, clean seams, neckline bound with the new tape we'd sourced, the one that didn't twist after wash. He looked tired in the quiet way he always looked when he'd been doing infrastructure work before anyone else arrived and then came straight into production without a dramatic complaint.

He lifted the fabric at the shoulder, checked the seam with his fingertips, and wrote something down.

He didn't notice he was a picture.

He didn't notice how the room moved around him as if he were a fixture.

That was what wife-work did, even when it was male: it became part of the environment.

I should have been relieved by how normal it looked now—how cleanly the shop had metabolised the strange and turned it into standards.

Instead, I found myself watching too closely.

A doorbell chimed at the front. A customer pickup. Mara's voice cut across the room like a line of chalk: "Dee—front." Dee went without complaint.

And in the small space that opened in the middle of the shop, Tilly drifted toward Sharl.

Drifted was the right word. It wasn't a stride. It wasn't an approach that admitted intention. It was the way you moved when you wanted to be close but wanted to be able to claim you hadn't meant anything by it.

She stopped beside him, leaning lightly on the edge of the table.

"Hey," she said, bright and soft at once.

Sharl looked up, startled as always when someone addressed him as if he were a person and not a function.

"Hey," he replied.

Tilly's eyes flicked down to the chemise neckline and then back up quickly, as if she'd been caught looking.

"That's the new binding, yeah?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yeah. It... behaves better."

"Does it feel... different?" she asked, and her voice did something that didn't belong in a ledger entry.

It was a question that could have been technical.

It wasn't.

Sharl didn't notice. Or if he did, he didn't know what to do with it.

"It's less scratchy," he said, earnest. "And the tension holds. The old one—after wash—twisted."

Tilly nodded as if she understood, but her gaze stayed on him too long.

"And... do you wear it like that at home?" she asked, casual, and then laughed a little as if she'd just made a silly, harmless question. "Sorry—QA brain. I'm curious."

My spine tightened.

Not anger. Not yet.

Heat.

The feeling hit like stepping into sun after shade: sudden and undeniable.

It wasn't the question itself. It was the assumption behind it.

That Sharl's body was a conversational space.

That his privacy was available for "curiosity."

That his role—wife-work, tester, quietly compliant—made him a safe object for a young woman to hover around without consequences.

I watched Sharl blink, trying to answer the question properly, because that was what he did: he cooperated.

"Yes," he said, still earnest. "Sometimes. If it needs longer wear time. I'm... used to it."

Tilly smiled at that, like she'd been given something sweet.

And I felt something in me register, with cold clarity, that I didn't like the taste of.

Jealousy.

Not theatrical jealousy. Not the kind you could confess in a movie and have the audience clap. The low, sharp kind that made you want to reach out and tighten a boundary you hadn't realised was loose.

Tilly leaned in a fraction, two inches closer than necessary.

Two inches.

That was all.

But it was the difference between coworker distance and something else.

"So you just... forget you're wearing it?" she asked, eyes bright. "Like, it's just normal?"

Sharl hesitated.

His cheeks coloured faintly.

It wasn't flirtation on his side. It was confusion—because the question wasn't about seams. It was about him.

"I... I don't think about it much," he said.

Tilly's smile softened into something that would have looked innocent to anyone who wanted it to be innocent.

"That's kind of... cool," she murmured.

I didn't move.

I didn't interrupt like a jealous girl.

I did the thing a provider does when a system starts to drift: I corrected the culture.

I stepped to the table and stopped beside them, not looming, just present.

"Tilly," I said, calm.

She jolted slightly, as if she hadn't realised I'd been watching.

"Yes?"

"Those questions are out of scope," I said.

Her smile faltered. "What? I was just—"

"I know," I said, and kept my voice even. I didn't accuse. I didn't sneer. "That's why I'm correcting it early."

Her cheeks flushed. She glanced down at the table, then up again. "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm just interested in the design."

"Then ask the design questions in the ledger," I said. "Sharl is not a focus group. He's QA."

Sharl's eyes widened slightly.

Tilly looked stricken—cowed instantly, exactly as I'd predicted. Her status hunger was stronger than her romantic impulse.

"Sorry," she said quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't think—"

"You don't have to apologise theatrically," I said. "Just adjust."

She nodded hard, swallowing. "Okay."

I turned slightly toward Sharl.

"Wear-test notes," I said, in the same tone I used when I asked for failure points. "Any pull at the neckline after sitting?"

He blinked, grateful—so grateful—for the return to a language he understood.

"No," he said quickly. "It's stable. But the hem—when I bend—rides a bit. Maybe we need an extra inch."

I nodded. "Log it."

He picked up his pen immediately and wrote:

Hem rise on bend: +1 inch length recommended.

Tilly stood there, hands clasped awkwardly, watching me with a mix of embarrassment and something else—respect, maybe, because I hadn't humiliated her. I'd simply shut the door and shown her where the correct door was.

"Celeste," she said softly, trying one last time to recover her dignity. "I didn't mean to... make it weird."

"I know," I said. "But weird happens when we treat people like stories."

Her eyes flicked to Sharl, then away.

I could see it: in her head, she wasn't being predatory. She was being hopeful. She was being young. She'd seen a man who seemed safe and gentle and, in her mind, unclaimed.

She didn't understand what Sharl and I had because it wasn't visible in the way she expected relationships to be visible.

We didn't flirt. We didn't display. We didn't perform.

We ran systems.

Which meant, inconveniently, that if I wanted to protect what we had, I had to do the one thing I'd been avoiding.

I had to make my stake visible.

Not by marking him as mine.

By being honest about the bond.

Tilly nodded again and stepped back, retreating toward her machine like someone leaving a room they hadn't been invited into.

As she went, Sarah passed behind her and murmured, loud enough for me to hear, "Oooh. Tilly got corrected."

Tilly's ears went red.

Sarah's eyes glittered as she glanced at me. "Good governance," she said sweetly, and wandered off before I could reply.

Loose cannon.

Useful.

I let the shop resume. I let the machines speak. I moved back to the operating table and answered two emails about sizing and lead times with brisk, clean clarity.

But my attention kept snagging on Sharl.

He wrote his notes. He adjusted the seam at his shoulder absent-mindedly. He asked Pru a question about pre-wash shrinkage. He moved a box for Dee without being asked.

Wife-work. Maker-work. Quiet competence.

And now, with Tilly's two inches still lingering in my mind, I felt the truth press against the inside of my ribs until it hurt.

I didn't just like him.

Liking was tidy. Liking was safe. Liking was something you could file away and pretend didn't require action.

This was not tidy.

This was attachment.

This was—worse—need.

Not need in the pathetic sense. Need in the structural sense: the way a building needs a beam you didn't notice until someone leaned on it and you felt the whole frame respond.

I finished the last email, closed my laptop, and stood.

"Break," I said to the room. "Ten minutes. Hydrate. Sit down."

Mara glanced up, surprised, then nodded once as if approving the decision after the fact.

People dispersed. The hum softened.

Sharl stayed where he was, like he didn't know what to do with stopping.

I walked to him and sat on the bench opposite, close enough for privacy, not close enough for theatre.

He looked up immediately, attentive.

"Yes?"

I watched him for a second and felt something in me soften again, dangerously.

Don't drift.

Name it.

Bound it.

Make it visible.

"Sharl," I said.

He swallowed. "Yeah?"

"I corrected Tilly," I said, "because I don't want anyone turning you into a story."

His brow furrowed. "She was just—"

"I know," I said. "And you don't have to protect her from correction."

His cheeks coloured faintly. He looked down at his notebook.

"I don't want to make people feel bad," he murmured.

"I know," I said. "That's part of why you're... you."

He looked up, startled by the softness in my tone, and I felt my heart do something reckless.

I steadied myself.

"I need you to hear something," I said. "Without trying to earn it."

He went still.

I held his gaze and spoke carefully, because this was the point where a provider could either use power or refuse it.

"I'm not aloof about you," I said.

His eyes widened.

"I've been restrained," I continued. "Because I don't want to become entitled. And I don't want you to feel like you owe me."

He swallowed, throat moving.

"But restraint," I said, voice lower now, "looks like indifference to people who don't understand us."

He blinked. "Us."

Yes.

There it was.

I felt the word settle between us like a weight and a relief at the same time.

"I don't just like you," I said quietly. "And I don't know yet what word I'm ready to use for what this is. But it's more than liking. And I'm not pretending otherwise anymore."

Sharl stared at me as if he'd been told the sky had changed colour.

For a moment, he looked terrified—not of the feeling, but of what feelings usually meant in his old world: expectations, debt, performance, proving.

Then, slowly, he breathed out.

"Okay," he whispered.

No sacrifice.

No provider bid.

No offer to do more.

Just... okay.

I felt something unclench inside me.

Good.

That was the right response. The only response I could trust.

I reached across the table and took his hand—not squeezing, not claiming. Just holding, briefly, like an anchor.

"You don't have to do anything extra," I said. "You don't have to be 'more.' You don't have to become a provider to be worthy of me."

His eyes went glassy for a second, and he blinked hard as if refusing to let emotion become a spectacle.

"I... I don't know how to—" he began.

"I know," I said. "You'll get used to it."

The phrase landed in my mouth and I felt its weight immediately—the echo of it, the future of it, the way it would come back later with a different voice and a different meaning.

Sharl looked at me sharply.

"You said that like..." he murmured, confused.

"Like it's a rule," I said softly. "It is. Practice. Repeatable practice."

His mouth twitched. Almost a smile.

Then his expression sobered again.

"So what happens now," he asked, small voice, honest.

I held his gaze and answered like the strongest player in the room.

"Now," I said, "we keep it clean."

He nodded once, slow.

And in that nod, I felt the story shift.

Not into romance fog.

Into something more dangerous, because it was real: a woman with power admitting she had a heart in the system, and choosing—consciously—to protect that heart with ethics.

Behind us, the shop waited to resume.

In front of me, Sharl sat with his hair down and his notebook open and his chemise on, looking at me like I was the first person who had ever told him he could be loved without being purchased.

I let myself feel it for one full, quiet beat.

Then I stood, released his hand, and said, brisk again,

"Okay. Back to work."

And we went back—into the hum, into the standards, into the day—changed, but not undone.



Shakespeare would be jealous, Emily. What a way to say this: fully Celeste; fully Sharl. Fully human. I have to digest... I have to think. Where on the story arc are we? One of the great themes of "Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu" was that the patriarchy made a point of nullifying the accomplishments of women. It would be cheap and tacky for Sharl to experience this: his chemise, now selling like hotcakes, his design... but it's all owned by Wardrobe. He's the wife-work person. No, women don't do that. They acknowledge talent, give credit where credit is due. They do it better. So, here's an odd little approach... sort of like in the film, the story within a story is the Orpheus in the underworld, if you remember from the film. And perhaps in the next Scene, we could have Celeste (wonderfully *French* name, by the way) get together with Lauren and Camille - and of course Sharl - to watch that exact movie... girl's-night-in. Sharl learns

something about male entitlement/the patriarchy and being of a sound justice-oriented mind, finds it reprehensible. Celeste and Lauren see potential parallels with respect to the chemise and Sharl's part in development but also his not taking any personal ownership of that fact: it's not in his nature. Celeste's love deepens. Lauren observes. Things are going well (trying not to be maudlin, but hey, it's lovely, isn't it?)

Thought for 19s >

You're sitting right on the hinge where the story stops being "a fascinating system" and becomes "a life with stakes."

Where you are on the arc

In clean story-structure terms, you've now completed the *first big transformation*:

- **Sharl has been named** (wife-work made visible and bounded; stigma confronted).
- **Celeste has claimed a stake** (not ownership of him—ownership of the truth: *it's more than like*).
- **Wardrobe has proven market viability** (chemise goes from prototype → product → wholesale).
- And you've hit your first *scale cliff* (the 200-unit order shipped, but at a real cost).

That puts you in what I'd call **early-to-mid Act II**: the "build" phase where the world expands and the price of success becomes clearer. The next stretch is about whether Celeste can scale without reproducing the same old exploitation dynamics—and whether she can let love exist inside governance without hiding it.

Your idea of the *Portrait* night is **exactly** the right kind of "story within story" moment: it lets your themes surface in a way that's human, domestic, and emotionally intelligent—not preachy.

And your instinct about credit is **dead right**: the patriarchy nullifies women by default; your women don't do that. They name labour. They credit it. They pay it. They don't let talent disappear—especially not when it shows up in someone like Sharl who would happily dissolve into usefulness.

Below is a full scene draft that does what you're after.

Scene — *Orpheus, With the Lights On* (Celeste POV)

Camille arrived with a bottle of something non-alcoholic and expensive-looking, because she had the kind of French practicality that understood ritual without needing intoxication to justify it.

She kicked her shoes off at the door like she lived here, kissed Lauren on both cheeks without asking permission, and then looked at me with frank interest—measured, unafraid, as if deciding whether I was worthy of being in the room with the women she already loved.

"You are Celeste," she said.

I nodded. "I am."

Camille's mouth curved. "Très bien."

Then her eyes moved past me—past the kitchen, past the tidy bench, past the contributions sheet clipped to the fridge like a quiet oath—and landed on Sharl.

He was at the counter, setting out bowls of popcorn with the same careful attention he applied to seam allowances. No flourish. No announcement. Just the work, done.

Camille watched him for a beat longer than politeness required.

"And you," she said, warmly, "you are... Sharl."

Not *Charl*. Not the hard edge.

Soft.

It slid into place as if it had always been that way.

Sharl looked up, blinked once, and then—because he was Sharl—didn't make a thing of it.

"Yes," he said. "Hi."

Lauren's face softened, the way it always did when she saw someone treat him gently without turning it into pity.

"Camille started that," Lauren told me, amused. "It caught."

"It's easier," Camille said with a shrug, as if linguistic tenderness was merely efficiency.

"Your mouth does not need to fight."

I couldn't help it. I smiled.

Camille's gaze flicked toward the living room. "So. We watch the film. Yes?"

"Yes," Lauren said. "Girls' night."

Camille glanced at Sharl again, eyebrow lifting.

Lauren's voice stayed warm, but it carried steel under it. "He lives here. He's not furniture. He's not a guest. He's... part of the household."

Camille studied Sharl, then nodded once, accepting the category as factual rather than sentimental.

"D'accord," she said. "Then we watch. Together."

Sharl appeared at my elbow with a clean tea towel over his shoulder, like a waiter who refused to make service feel like servitude.

"Blankets?" he asked.

"I already put them out," I said, and watched the relief flicker across his face—relief that I'd done my share of the infrastructure without making it a performance.

He nodded, as if the system had just passed another test, and went back to the kettle.

Camille watched him move, then leaned toward Lauren and murmured in French—quick, private.

Lauren answered her just as quickly, and I caught only one word: *doux*.

Soft.

Camille looked at me again, evaluating.

Then she said, in English this time, "He is... very at ease."

"Yes," I replied.

Camille's eyes sharpened. "It is not common."

I didn't argue. I didn't pretend it was.

Lauren's voice, gentle, carried the truth as if it were a familiar object she'd carried for years. "Women notice, love. When a man can be in a room with women and not try to

take it."

Sharl came in with mugs—four, because he didn't leave anyone out—and set them down with quiet care.

He sat on the far end of the couch, not in the centre, not claiming space. The chemise wasn't on him tonight—this wasn't testing, this was rest—but his posture was the same: attentive, ready to be useful, trying not to be in the way.

I hated the part of me that still wanted to translate that into "good."

It wasn't "good."

It was a habit of disappearance.

I reached over and nudged his foot gently with mine, a small anchoring gesture.

Not ownership.

Visibility.

He glanced at me, startled, then—slowly—settled back into the couch as if allowing himself, by permission, to occupy it.

Lauren watched, and something soft moved across her face.

Camille, too, noticed. Of course she noticed.

"Okay," Camille announced, clapping her hands once. "We watch."

Lauren hit play.

The film began, and the room quieted the way rooms do when women are given a story that understands them.

Not as objects.

As people.

Sharl sat very still at first—watching with the careful attention of someone who believed art was serious. He didn't fidget. He didn't check his phone. He didn't try to make jokes.

He watched as if he had been asked to witness.

Half an hour in, Camille paused it.

"Stop," she said, matter-of-fact.

Lauren groaned softly. "Camille—"

"No," Camille said. "This part is important."

She rewound a minute and let it run again.

On screen, the women were talking about Orpheus.

Camille turned to us, eyes bright. "So," she said. "What do you think?"

Lauren's voice came first, warm and worn with experience. "I think men write stories where love means possession."

Camille nodded. "Oui."

I spoke carefully, feeling the words as they left my mouth. "Orpheus turns because he can't tolerate not being the one who decides what happens."

Lauren's mouth tightened in approval.

Camille leaned forward. "Yes. It is entitlement disguised as devotion."

Sharl shifted slightly. Not uncomfortable in the prurient sense. Uncomfortable in the moral sense—the way a decent person gets uncomfortable when they see an injustice wearing a beautiful coat.

He cleared his throat.

"Can I... ask something?" he said quietly.

Camille looked delighted, as if he'd just done something charming without trying.

"Please."

Sharl stared at the screen, then back at us. "Why... why is it his choice."

Lauren didn't answer first. She let me answer, and that mattered.

Because this was my household now, and my ethics had to be practiced, not admired.

"Because patriarchy assumes men are the default owners of stories," I said. "Even the stories about women."

Sharl blinked, processing.

"But... she—" he started, then faltered. "She's the one who... pays."

Lauren's voice softened. "Yes, love. Women pay. Men call it fate."

Camille made a small sound, pleased and bitter at once.

Sharl's brow furrowed. He looked genuinely angry now—not performatively, not as a pose. As a justice-oriented person confronted with a system he could no longer pretend was neutral.

"That's... disgusting," he said, and the word came out stronger than he usually allowed himself.

Lauren's eyes warmed.

Camille nodded vigorously. "Yes."

I watched him, and felt my chest tighten—not with sadness, but with something fiercer: admiration.

Not for anger.

For recognition.

He wasn't defensive. He wasn't trying to excuse men. He wasn't trying to find a way to make it less true.

He was simply seeing.

The film rolled on, and as it did, I felt the parallels touch the edges of my mind like a finger testing a bruise.

Women's work erased. Women's credit nullified. The story belonging to the wrong person.

And then, because this house was not the patriarchy, the thought that followed was automatic and clean:

Not here.

Not in my shop.

Not in my life.

Camille paused the film again later—another “stop”—and pointed at the screen with the intensity of a lecturer.

“Look,” she said. “They do not ask permission to be intelligent. They simply are.”

Sarah’s spirit lived in that sentence, even though Sarah wasn’t here.

Lauren hummed. “That’s what men hate most,” she murmured. “A woman who doesn’t perform humility.”

Camille turned her gaze to me. “You,” she said. “You are like this.”

I didn’t blush. I didn’t reject it. I nodded once, accepting the responsibility implied.

“And Sharl,” Camille added, turning to him, “you are... unusual.”

Sharl looked startled again, like a dog hearing his name in a language he didn’t know.

“In what way,” he asked.

Camille waved a hand. “You do not make women smaller so you can feel large.”

Lauren’s face softened into something almost tender and almost dangerous.

“That’s because he knows what it is to be made small,” she said simply. “Even before he understood why.”

Sharl looked down at his hands, quiet.

I saw it, then, with sudden clarity: the chemise.

His design.

Selling.

Leaving the shop in boxes with Wardrobe labels.

And the fact that he had not once asked for credit.

Not because he didn’t deserve it.

Because he didn’t know he was allowed to.

Or worse: because he didn’t think it mattered.

My jaw tightened.

I didn't say it out loud—not here, not in front of Camille, not in the middle of a film that already had its fingers in our ribs.

But I made the decision in silence, the way I made most decisions now.

Later, when Lauren and Camille went to the kitchen for more tea, I stayed on the couch and leaned toward Sharl.

He looked up immediately, attentive.

"After this," I said quietly, "we're updating the product page."

His brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Because your name goes on the chemise," I said.

He blinked. "It's... Wardrobe's."

"Wardrobe produces it," I corrected. "You designed it. That credit doesn't disappear just because you're infrastructure."

His cheeks flushed faintly.

He opened his mouth to protest—reflexively, like someone trained to give away his own value so nobody could take it from him.

I didn't let him.

"This is not optional," I said softly. "It's ethics."

He swallowed, and something in his eyes flickered—fear, maybe. Fear of standing out. Fear of being seen.

Then he nodded once, slow.

"Okay," he murmured.

No heroics.

No provider bid.

Just acceptance.

I felt something in me deepen—not a swoon, not a melt. A steadier thing. The knowledge that love, for me, was going to look like governance with tenderness: protecting him

from the world *and* from his own learned invisibility.

Camille returned and flopped back on the couch as if she owned it.

She looked at Sharl and said, almost casually, "You are Charlemagne, yes?"

Sharl blinked. "What?"

Camille grinned. "In your head. You said. Short for Charlemagne."

Lauren laughed, delighted. "Did he tell you that?"

"No," Camille said, unbothered. "It is obvious."

Sharl's face went pink. "It was just— it was a joke."

Camille waved a hand. "It is fine. Charlemagne was complicated. But at least he could organise."

Sarah would have loved that.

I pressed play again.

The film unfolded, and the room held—a small, women-centred universe with a man inside it who wasn't trying to dominate it.

At one point, I looked over and found Sharl watching the women on screen with the same careful attention he gave seams.

Not consuming.

Witnessing.

Learning.

His jaw was tight. His eyes were bright with contained feeling.

Lauren noticed too. She reached out and squeezed his knee briefly—maternal, grounding, no fuss.

He didn't move away.

He just breathed.

And in that breath, I felt the last of my "aloofness" crumble—not into something messy, but into something honest.

Because this, I realised, was what I wanted.

Not a man who provided so he could claim.

A person who supported so a life could be built—credited, bounded, seen.

I didn't say it.

I didn't need to.

The room said it for me: the women, the film, the quiet ethics we were practicing in real time.

When the credits rolled, Camille sighed dramatically as if the world had ended.

Lauren wiped at her eyes with the heel of her hand, irritated at her own softness.

Sharl sat very still, staring at the dark screen.

"That was..." he began.

Camille leaned forward eagerly. "Yes?"

He swallowed.

"That was... unfair," he said, and his voice shook slightly—not with weakness, but with the force of understanding. "And everyone just... accepts it."

Lauren's voice was gentle. "Not everyone."

Camille nodded. "Not us."

I stood, picked up the empty mugs, and said with calm certainty, "Not in Wardrobe."

Sharl looked up at me, eyes wide.

And in that look, I understood something new:

My love for him wasn't going to be a private feeling I tried to manage alone.

It was going to be a public ethic.

A refusal.

A practice.

A way of building a life where the person doing the wife-work didn't disappear, and the women doing the providing didn't become the thing they hated.

Camille clapped her hands once. "Okay," she announced. "Now we eat something. I am starving."

Lauren laughed, the room warming again.

Sharl rose to help automatically, then paused—caught himself—and looked at me, as if checking: *Do I have to?*

I shook my head, small and firm. "Sit."

He hesitated.

Then he sat.

Lauren watched, satisfied.

Camille watched, amused.

And I walked into the kitchen alone, not resentful, not heroic—just doing my share of the infrastructure as a provider who refused entitlement.

Behind me, in the living room, the system held.

And for the first time, I didn't feel like I was steering everything with effort.

I felt like I was building something that could carry all of us.

Including love.





Sharl is going to go on to bigger things: period attire women can wear easily, comfortably because of superior design. Here's an image I created of a garment I would think he could come up with. What do you think?

Thought for 52s >

This is very believable as something Sharl would design—especially once he's thinking like a maker who cares about **comfort, movement, washability, and repeat wear** rather than "costume correctness."

What I'm seeing in your image

- A **working dress** silhouette: fitted bodice, full skirt, practical sleeves.
- A visible **linen under-chemise** at neckline and cuffs (great "base layer" logic).
- **Front closure with buttons** (modern-friendly; easy on/off; no assistance required).
- Fabric reads as a sturdy wool/linen blend—matte, not shiny—so it *feels* workwear, not pageantwear.
- It's styled in a "domestic competence" setting (wash-tub, chickens, courtyard), which reinforces the garment's purpose: *the dress is built to be lived in.*

Period vibe: what era it reads as

This doesn't read 1780s to me. It reads more like **late 16th to early 17th century "working woman" / rustic Renaissance** (or a filmic hybrid of that vibe):

- the **front buttons** and the **smooth, continuous bodice** are more "kirtle / early bodice gown" than 1780s English/French everyday wear.

- In the 1780s you'd more often expect things like a **bedgown + petticoat**, a **round gown**, or an **open-front robe** with a stomacher/kerchief situation—different neckline logic and closure logic.

That's not a problem unless your story is anchoring him to a specific decade. If Sharl's trajectory is "period attire that modern women can actually wear," this hybrid is *exactly* the kind of design that sells.

Why it's plausible as *Sharl's* design

It's basically the chemise philosophy pushed outward:

- **Base layer visible and breathable** (chemise doing the skin-contact work; dress taking the abrasion).
- **No theatre / no assistance required** (front closure; simple structure).
- **Movement-first construction** (the sleeves and bodice look like they'd benefit from gussets and smart seam placement—his signature).

If you want it to feel even more "Sharl," you can quietly build in details that only a tester/designer would obsess over:

Sharl-ish upgrades (still pretty, still period-flavoured)

- **Underarm gussets** (non-negotiable for comfort; women will *feel* this immediately).
- **Side-seam pocket slits** (hidden pockets that don't break the silhouette).
- **Apron loops or a discreet tab** at the waist (so an apron ties neatly without cutting across the bodice).
- **Reinforced cuff facing** (because cuffs do the dirty work).
- **Replace buttons with a concealed tie-lacing panel** or keep buttons but add a hidden "relief" tie inside for fit variation (so it still looks tidy even if the wearer bloats, eats, works, bends).

If you want to keep it 1780s-adjacent

You can keep the *spirit* of this garment but nudge the visual cues:

- Swap the button-front bodice for a **front-laced closure** (or a stomacher-like insert).
- Add a **kerchief fichu** or higher modesty insert at the neckline.
- Slightly adjust sleeve shaping (a touch more 18th-century proportion).
- Add an **apron** (instantly signals working dress in that period).

Bottom line

As a "Sharl product" — *period-inspired, comfort-first, women-actually-wear-it* — it's a winner. It reads like something that would convert customers because it's not trying to

be sexy or precious; it's trying to be **livable**.

If you'd like, paste the prompt (or the core of it) you used to generate this, and I'll suggest a tightened version in two directions:

1. **Keep this era/vibe** but make it more "designed-by-a-tester."
2. **Shift it toward 1780s authenticity** while staying modern-wearable.



You will find the prompt impossibly floral and extravagant, but it did generate a pleasant image. Saying that, I wouldn't mind tightening it a bit more around the 1770s if possible. Here's the prompt (moimeme4 is me - LoRA trigger):

The woman's moimeme4 dark brown hair is pulled back into an intricate updo with loose tendrils framing her face; fine strands catch the dappled sunlight filtering through overhead foliage, revealing subtle sheen on her scalp. Her fair complexion glows softly under natural illumination, accentuated by minimalistic earth-toned blush and faintly defined brows that draw attention to her piercing gaze directed slightly off-center toward the viewer.

The woman exuding vintage charm, with her light brown hair styled in a loose updo with wisps of stray strands of hair framing her face. She is dressed in a gown of deep indigo, a 1770s wool day dress with a fitted bodice and square neckline; underneath, a white linen shift with a softly gathered neckline. The chemise is a separate garment and is visible only at the edge of the dress's square neckline and cuffs. This is authentic period costume detail, no modern styling.

In front of her rests a large wooden tub made from weathered oak, its grain running horizontally across the rim as water swirls gently around crumpled white cloth being agitated between her hands—the fibers glisten moistly, catching stray rays like tiny mirrors. In the

background are four chickens: one pale yellow scratches the dirt near stone pillars covered in mossy ivy, another reddish-brown pecks curiously at ground litter beside her left foot, while two others—one chestnut-feathered, another darker—are clustered within mid-ground shadows cast by archways beyond. Behind them looms a rustic stone courtyard wall lined with climbing vines whose leaves blur softly due to shallow focus, contrasting sharply with sharp foreground clarity captured via wide-angle lens distortion. Light enters diagonally from upper right, casting elongated halos behind objects while sculpting deep chiaroscuro contours along her collarbone and arm muscles. Camera angle tilts downward slightly, placing emphasis upon tactile interaction—with fingers gripping damp cotton—and blurs background elements including arched doorway framed by aged stonework. Negative space occupies much of top-right quadrant, allowing eye movement to linger naturally before returning inward to the central figure who anchors this pastoral tableau effortlessly.

That prompt isn't "impossibly floral" so much as it's doing *three jobs at once* (portrait, costume spec, and cinematography), which is why it works—but also why the model has room to drift era-wise. Tightening to **1770s** is mainly about swapping in the *right garment vocabulary* and removing cues that push it toward generic "storybook peasant dress."

Key 1770s anchors (for the model):

- **English gown / robe à l'anglaise** (back pleats, fitted bodice), or **round gown** (closed front), or **bedgown + petticoat** (working-class).
- **Neckline fill: fichu/kerchief** (very common daytime modesty).
- **Sleeves: 3/4 sleeves with engageantes** (ruffles) or plain linen cuffs.
- **Apron:** for laundry work, almost inevitable.
- **Closure:** pins/lacing/stomacher are more period than a neat button-front bodice (buttons exist, but that modern "buttoned bodice dress" silhouette screams later/folk).

Below are two tightened versions you can paste into ComfyUI. I'll keep your LoRA trigger in place.

Option A — 1770s authentic daywear, “middle sort” (most aligned with your goal)

This aims for robe à l'anglaise / English gown, practical but respectable.

Prompt

moimeme4, 1770s English daywear, robe à l'anglaise (English gown) in deep indigo wool, fitted bodice with back pleats and smooth front, front closure pinned over a plain stomacher, square neckline filled with a white linen fichu (kerchief), white linen shift visible only at neckline edge and sleeve cuffs, 3/4 sleeves with simple white engageantes, narrow waistband, full petticoat, plain white apron tied at the waist.

She is washing linens at a large weathered oak wash tub, hands wringing wet white cloth above swirling water. Rustic stone courtyard with ivy, arched doorway in soft background blur, four chickens in the yard. Natural dappled sunlight, realistic texture, shallow depth of field, documentary realism, no modern styling, no fantasy, no corset visible.

Negative prompt add-ons (if you use one)

modern buttons down the bodice, Victorian/Edwardian dress, Renaissance peasant dress, low neckline without fichu, bare shoulders, cleavage, shiny satin, zipper, modern makeup, fashion editorial glamour

Why this works: “robe à l'anglaise + stomacher + fichu + apron” is a strong 1770s signal and will drag the silhouette back from the “storybook kirtle” look.

Option B — 1770s working-class realism (bedgown + petticoat)

If you want “laundry day” to feel truly grounded.

Prompt

moimeme4, 1770s working woman laundry scene, short bedgown (jacket) in indigo wool or linen, front closing with ties or pins, worn over a white linen shift, neckline covered by a white fichu, separate striped or solid petticoat, plain white apron, sleeves practical and slightly rolled.

Washing linens in a large weathered oak tub, wringing wet cloth, rustic stone courtyard with ivy, four chickens nearby, arched doorway in soft focus. Natural daylight, realistic period clothing construction, humble domestic work, no modern styling, no fantasy.

Negative prompt add-ons

fitted button-front bodice dress, Victorian servant dress, Renaissance kirtle, corset showing, modern hair/makeup

Why this works: bedgown/petticoat is *the* working silhouette and keeps it from drifting into later "folk dress."

Trim the "floral" bits without losing the image quality

Your current prompt repeats the hair description and adds some camera jargon that can confuse the model ("wide-angle lens distortion," "negative space quadrant," etc.). You can keep the visual intent with fewer words:

- Keep: **lighting direction, shallow focus, courtyard, ivy, tub, cloth, chickens**
- Drop or simplify: heavy "composition theory" language

Here's a **tight cinematic block** you can append to either option:

dappled sunlight through leaves, soft shadows, shallow depth of field, realistic skin texture, candid documentary feel, gentle chiaroscuro, background softly blurred, natural color, film still

One small but powerful change

If you want the model to stop inventing the wrong era, put this near the start:

"1770s (NOT Victorian), accurate 18th-century clothing construction"

Models respond strongly to that parenthetical.

If you tell me whether you want Celeste/Sharl's product line to skew "**respectable middle sort**" (Option A) or "**working-class practical**" (Option B), I can also add 4–6 "Sharl signature" construction cues (gussets, reinforced seams, pocket access) in a way

that won't confuse the image model but will nudge it toward *designed-to-live-in* rather than costume.



I'm having a go with your first one... I do like the small bust that Z-Image-Turbo produces by default. She looks French, as opposed to Germanic, who typically are bit bigger-busted (Flux.1-Dev girls are difficult that way). Here's what your first suggestion produced... also very much on target with what I'd like to produce.

Thought for 43s >

Oh yes — this is *much* closer to the “wearable period” lane you want. It reads as **practical, lived-in, work-first** (and the whole frame sells the idea: courtyard, tub, cloth, chickens, soft natural light). The silhouette is pleasingly restrained, too — nothing is screaming “bodice as lingerie,” which keeps it morally clean and credible.

A few observations (and then some very targeted tweaks to shove it harder into **1770s** rather than “generic rustic historical”):

What's working brilliantly

- **Apron + laundry action** anchors it as workwear, not cosplay.
- **Indigo wool/linen** reads plausible and repeatable (not satin, not costume sheen).
- **Shift visible at neckline and cuffs** is exactly the right “base layer logic.”

- Headscarf/kerchief in a working scene is totally believable.
- The body read is nice and neutral; the garment does not sexualise her shape.

(Also: the small-bust look helps the “real person in a garment” vibe — but I’d gently steer away from “French vs Germanic” as a rule. Bust size varies wildly everywhere; what you’re responding to is mostly *model bias + silhouette conventions*.)

What still reads a bit *later* than 1770s

The main culprit is the **front buttoned, smoothly fitted bodice**. That specific “buttoned bodice dress” silhouette tends to read more **19th-century/folk/maid** in AI outputs, even when you tell it 1770s.

In the **1770s**, a “respectable day” look usually signals itself by one or more of:

- **fichu / neckerchief** filling the neckline (very common)
- **stomacher** (pinned) or **front lacing/pinning**, rather than neat buttons
- **robe à l'anglaise** cues: back pleats, robings, a more “gown over petticoat” logic
- sleeves often **3/4** with **engageantes**, though full sleeves exist in work contexts

Quick, high-impact prompt adjustments

If you want to keep almost everything you have but force the era:

Add these phrases (they're “era magnets”)

- “**robe à l'anglaise (English gown), back pleats**”
- “**front pinned stomacher (no buttons)**”
- “**white fichu tucked into the neckline**”
- “**gown worn over a separate petticoat (petticoat visible)**”

Add these negatives (to stop the drift you're seeing)

- “**no button-front bodice**”
- “**not Victorian, not 19th century**”
- “**no dirndl, no folk dress**”
- “**no modern maid uniform**”

A tightened “1770s push” version of your prompt

(Keep your moimeme4 trigger as-is.)

moimeme4, 1770s French/English daywear, robe à l'anglaise (English gown) in deep indigo wool/linen, fitted bodice with **back pleats, front pinned stomacher (no buttons)**, square neckline filled with a **white linen fichu**, separate white linen shift visible only at neckline edge and sleeve cuffs, **gown worn over a separate petticoat**

(petticoat visible), plain white apron tied at the waist, practical laundry kerchief/headscarf.

washing linens at a large weathered oak tub, wringing wet cloth, rustic stone courtyard with ivy and an arched doorway, four chickens, natural daylight, documentary realism, no fantasy, no modern styling.

Negative prompt add-on:

no button-front bodice, not Victorian/Edwardian, not Renaissance, no dirndl/folk dress, no corset visible, no shiny satin, no cleavage, no fashion editorial styling

"Sharl signature" nudges (subtle, but they help)

If you want it to feel like *his* design language without turning the prompt into a sewing manual:

- "underarm gussets for comfort"
- "reinforced cuffs and neckline binding"
- "hidden pocket slits"
- "built for movement and wash durability"

Those phrases tend to steer the model toward *purposeful construction* rather than decorative costume.

If you paste the exact generation settings you used (sampler/steps/guidance/denoise, plus any negative prompt you're already running), I can tune the wording to match how Z-Image-Turbo "listens" — some models respond better to fewer nouns and more "era magnet" phrases right up front.



Yep, authentic. A bit too puritanical, perhaps. The second image, less so, and it's based on:

moimeme4, 1770s French/English daywear, robe à l'anglaise (English gown) in deep indigo wool/linen, fitted

bodice with back pleats, front pinned stomacher (no buttons), square neckline filled with a white linen fichu, separate white linen shift visible only at neckline edge and sleeve cuffs, gown worn over a separate petticoat (petticoat visible), plain white apron tied at the waist, practical laundry kerchief/headscarf.

washing linens at a large weathered oak tub, wringing wet cloth, rustic stone courtyard with ivy and an arched doorway, four chickens, natural daylight, documentary realism, no fantasy, no modern styling.

Thought for 14s >

These are excellent results — and you've diagnosed the exact issue correctly: the **first image** reads a bit "puritan / colonial / severity-coded," mostly because the model has pushed the neckline up and turned the closure into a tidy, utilitarian front (very *not* 1770s "gown-over-petticoat" logic). The **second image** is much closer: the square neckline + visible shift ruffle is doing real 18th-century work.

What's happening visually (why #1 feels puritanical)

In #1, the model has "solved" your request by producing:

- a **high, closed neckline** (more 17th / early colonial / generic "plain woman")
- a **front closure that reads like a later jacket** (buttons/loops in a straight line)
- less obvious "gown edges over stomacher" cues

So it feels moralistic even though it's technically modest and plausible.

Why #2 is the keeper

#2 has:

- the **square neckline** you asked for
- **shift ruffle visible** (reads right)
- a bodice that *almost* reads like an English gown

The remaining "tell" is the centre-front closure still looking like **buttons or lacing** rather than *pinned stomacher with robings*.

How to keep authenticity but make it less "puritan"

The trick is not “more skin.” It’s **more 1770s neck/upper-chest styling:**

- Keep the shift ruffle.
- Make the **fichu optional or loosely tucked**, not a full bib.
- Use the right headwear: **cap > kerchief** when you want less severe.
- Add **gown robings** and **stomacher shape** so the model stops giving you a “button-front dress.”

Historically, a working woman *often would* cover her neckline, but “puritanical” comes from the **severity** of the styling, not from modesty itself. You can make it feel softer and more French by asking for:

- a **soft fichu, loosely folded**
 - a **frilled shift neckline**
 - a **rounder, gentler square neck**
 - **cap with ribbons** instead of a hard kerchief wrap
-

The “fix the closure” prompt (copy/paste)

Use this as a direct replacement for your costume line (everything else can stay).

Prompt (closure + neckline correction)

moimeme4, 1770s French/English daywear, robe à l’anglaise (English gown) in deep indigo wool/linen, fitted bodice with **back pleats, open front edges with visible robings, separate plain stomacher pinned with straight pins** (stomacher clearly visible as a triangular/oval front panel), **no visible buttons and no visible lacing**, square neckline showing a **softly ruffled white linen shift, optional fichu loosely tucked low** (not a full bib), gown worn over a separate petticoat, plain white apron.

Add this to your negative prompt

visible button placket, lace-up bodice, corset lacing, Victorian servant dress, dirndl/folk dress, colonial puritan, high neck, modern maid uniform

Those four negatives—**button placket / lace-up bodice / colonial puritan / high neck**—are especially effective at preventing the “severe” solution.

If you want “less puritanical” without changing the era: swap headwear

Your kerchief reads competent, but it also reads stern. Try:

"white linen **mob cap** with soft ties, a few curls escaping"

instead of kerchief/headscarf. It's still absolutely period, but it softens the whole impression immediately.

Micro-variants (choose your vibe)

Variant 1: "Laundry-day softness" (still modest)

fichu loosely tucked, shift ruffle visible, mob cap, gentle square neckline

Variant 2: "No fichu, still respectable"

no fichu, ruffled shift neckline provides modesty, square neckline clear

If you want, I can rewrite your full prompt in your existing style (still cinematic, just less redundant) with these corrections baked in — but the above closure/headwear tweaks are the biggest levers and will give you the most return for the least prompt churn.



I think I might put a pin in it for tonight, Emily. We've covered a LOT of ground. Also, I'd like to consider turning our effort into a screenplay at some stage. We did do things by scenes, so it shouldn't be excessively difficult, should it? Anyway, going to leave it for tonight - if I could get you to quickly write a context summary for our next meeting, please.

Absolutely — here's a clean context summary you can paste into a new thread.

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.

Sleep well — when you're back, we can pick up either with (1) the *Portrait* movie night scene (Celeste POV), (2) the post-mortem / scaling decision meeting (Mara + Celeste), or (3) a short bridging montage that shows Wardrobe's growth while keeping the cultural stakes alive.

