

Letter to Yourself

Zoe Storm

(Based on a prompt by Juniper Rose)

[Content warnings: implied bullying and suicidal ideation.]

A knock on the door pulled my attention away from the screen. “Who is it?” I called.

“It’s Randall, Jo,” Randall’s voice said in response.

“Come in, it’s open.”

I focused on the TV again as the door opened and then closed again behind me. “Do you have a moment? There’s something I want to discuss with you,” Randall said.

“Is it urgent? I mean, right-now urgent?” I replied.

Randall chuckled. “No, it can wait until you’re done with your shows.” I nodded, and Randall walked around the sofa, to stand just in front of it; he squinted at the screen. “What’s this? I don’t think I’ve seen it before.”

“It’s new. *Doctor Who*, it’s called. Now shush, I don’t want to miss anything.”

“Okay,” he nodded. While I sat in silence, watching the final part of the episode, he moved to the kitchen, put on the kettle, and made tea.

“Okay, that was interesting,” I said as the credits rolled on the screen; I got up, walked over to the TV, and turned it off. “Now, what can I do for you?” I asked, turning back to Randall.

“I wanted to talk about one of my students, Louis Ingram,” he replied. “Nice kettle, by the way.”

“It’s new, I like it because it shuts down on its own,” I said as I walked across my flat’s living room to the kitchen, sitting down at the table with Randall. “So I don’t risk burning my flat down when I get distracted.”

He poured me a cup of tea and grinned. “Which is often.”

“Which is often,” I agreed. “Louis Ingram, you said?”

“Yes.”

“Ingram, Ingram...” I mused. “Doesn’t ring a bell. Baron? Viscount?”

“Guess.”

I punched him in the shoulder. “Don’t make me go get *Burke’s*, you ass, just tell me.”

Randall laughed. “Would be useless anyway, he’s not an aristo.”

“Alright. So what, banking family? Merchants? Industry?”

“Nope, his family’s completely unimportant.”

“Seriously?” I said, my eyebrows rising in surprise. “Poor lad, the other boys must be giving him hell.”

He took a breath, and sighed it out. “Yeah, they are. I’m trying to shield Louis from the worst of it, but you know how it is.”

“I remember. Unfortunately. But what’s he doing at Howarth, then?”

“Well you see, his dad’s in the RAF. Vulcan pilot. He gets sent all over the country, even overseas, and brings his wife along with him. But they decided the children needed stability: both sets of grandparents died in the Blitz, thus the boarding school; the government’s footing the bill. Louis’ sisters are just over the hill, at Carpenter.”

Carpenter, of course, being the girls-only Carpenter School for Young Ladies, sister school to the boys-only Howarth Academy; I nodded. “Makes sense. I mean, I don’t *like* it: kids need a family much more than they need to be cooped up in ancient manors in the countryside, being watched upon by some old codgers.” I took a sip of tea. “No offence.”

“None taken.”

“So, what about Louis Ingram?”

“Right, I should probably start at the beginning. A week ago I tasked my students with writing a letter to themselves, ten years from now.”

“Oh?” I inquired, raising an eyebrow at him. “First time I’ve heard of someone doing that in an educational setting.”

“It’s a new thing. They’ve been doing it for a while across the pond, and it’s apparently quite useful: students learn how to write a letter, while at the same time developing their critical thinking skills by trying to imagine where they will be a decade later. *Who* they’ll be a decade later. Plus it’s good penmanship practice, and—”

“Okay, I get it,” I cut Randall off before he could launch off into one of his usual speeches about educational techniques – the man could be very enthusiastic about his job. “So your students wrote a letter to themselves. Including young Ingram.”

He nodded. “And I’ve read all of them, of course.”

I frowned. “What about privacy?”

“It’s *homework*, Jo,” Randall replied. “I have to grade them somehow.”

“Did they know you would read the letters?”

“...No.”

“Well then.”

“Okay, alright, fine, I get it. I should’ve told them I would read them, my bad, I’ll do it next time. Most of them were completely boring and uninteresting anyway: I’ll join Father in his business, I’ll be a Member of Parliament, I’ll marry into the Royal Family, stuff like that.” He scowled. “I swear, these children are woefully unimaginative.”

“That’s what you get when you have your life path laid out for you since birth,” I said. “Maybe some of them will learn to rebel against their pre-ordained fate; I’m not hopeful. But you said *most*, didn’t you? I’m guessing one of the few original ones was Louis’?”

“The only original one, actually.” He reached into his pocket and produced an envelope, which he set down on the table. “Here. Give it a read.”

I looked at the letter, and then up at him. “Should I really? I mean, we’ve just talked about privacy, haven’t we?”

“Yes, but the well-being of my students comes before anything else, even their privacy.”

“Well-being...?” I murmured.

I kept looking at him for a few more seconds, my head inclined to the side, but he didn’t answer my question. Instead he said, “Just read it, please?”

I sighed. “Okay.”

I picked up the envelope, opened it, and unfolded the letter inside. After a few moments of looking at it I felt my eyes widen in surprise, and looked up at Randall again; he nodded. Turning back to the letter I kept following the words down the page, occasionally mumbling to myself as I read, until I reached the bottom.

I paused for a second, folded the letter up again, and set it on the table, on top of its envelope.

I took a deep breath and let it out.

“Well then,” I said.

Randall nodded again. “I hope you understand now why I came to you, Jo,” he said.

“I do,” I nodded back. “Poor kid. I remember what it was like, being in that situation, no one to turn to. No one who will listen, and no one who will understand even if they *did* listen.” I leaned back into my chair. “The question is, what do we do about this.”

“There’s not much *I* can do: I’m just his English teacher, after all, and I can’t show favouritism. Also, times are changing; nowadays a thirty-seven year old man,” he pointed at himself, “approaching and befriending his young pupil is seen with much suspicion. *You*, on the other hand...”

I smiled. “I see what you’re getting at. I’m in quite a different position than you, am I not?”

“That you are. You have many more resources at your disposal, and a sturdier safety net. Can I hand this whole situation off to you?”

“Gladly. So how do we do this?”

“I was thinking I could give my class some homework which will require them to come see you. And then you’ll take it from there.”

“Yes, that sounds fine,” I nodded. “When are you going to do it? Next week?”

“First thing on Monday. No sense in wasting time, right?”

“Right.”

“I just hope we can manage to help Louis”, Randall said, and sighed. “Ever since I first saw him walk into my class a couple months ago, I could tell there was something bothering him.” He laid his hand on the envelope on the table, and tapped it a couple times with his finger. “Now I know why.”

I reached out, placed a hand on Randall’s, and smiled at him. “You’re a good man, my friend,” I said; he smiled back at me.

I looked up from the book I was reading as I heard the door open, and frowned as a small group of students walked in, chatting loudly and occasionally laughing.

“Lads,” I called out, barely raising my voice but moving the muscles in my throat to make the sound carry; they turned to look at me, and I pointed at the sign hanging over my desk, which read *Quiet, Please*.

“Sorry, love,” the one who looked like the ringleader called out in response; I narrowed my eyes at him and put my finger to my lips, and he laughed again; still, they turned the volume down a few decibels, and started wandering the room, glancing at shelves, pulling books down.

I sighed and shook my head as I turned my attention back to the book; I would have to clean up in the boys’ wake, I realised. But then again, it *was* my job.

“Um. Excuse me, Miss,” a voice said, and I looked up, startled, at the boy standing before my desk – I had neither heard him enter the room nor noticed him walk up to me: he’d probably been really careful not to make noise or draw attention to himself until he had to.

I shook myself. “Yes? May I help you, young man?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I have to write a book report for my English class. Mr. Wallace told us to pick any book from the Victorian Era.”

“Alright,” I nodded. “Did you have something specific in mind when it comes to genre?”

“Not really. Do you–”

“Oi! Ingram!” one of the boys who’d been roaming the hall shouted, walking up to the young man standing in front of me. “Are you doing that book report?”

“Uh... yes?” Ingram – Louis Ingram, I belatedly realised – replied.

“Great! Can you do mine too, mate?”

Louis gulped. “Um, Ben, I don’t think–”

“Well you’re not supposed to think, are you now? You’re just supposed to write,” Ben said. “You’ll write that report for me, won’t you?”

Louis licked his lips nervously and gulped again. "I..." he began.

"Why should he?" I asked.

Louis and Ben both turned to look at me, identical, startled looks on their faces; and a quick glance around the room told me Ben's cohorts had stopped in what they were doing, and were looking on at the unfolding scene. After a few seconds, Ben's lips drew back into a smirk that was almost a sneer.

"Because we're friends," he said. "Isn't that right, Louis?"

"Um—" Louis began again.

"All the more reason, then," I said. "Friends don't let friends fail their classes. Which you will, if you have him write that report for you."

Ben scoffed. "Oh, come on, it's not like anyone will notice."

I looked at him for a moment, then shrugged. "Suit yourself. But I'll be sure to let Randall know what you think of him."

"...Randall?"

"Randall Wallace. He's your English teacher, isn't he? Thing is, he's also my close friend. And I think he'll be quite interested in knowing some of his pupils think he's such an idiot he wouldn't notice someone cheating on their homework."

Ben narrowed his eyes at me. "You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" I said, giving him an innocent smile.

"Don't you know who I am? Who my father is?"

"No, I don't. And I don't care."

"You *will* care," Ben said, trying to sound ominous and completely failing. "Come on."

He made a gesture which he clearly thought was imperious, and his cronies quickly fell in behind him as he stormed out of the room, sparing a single glance backwards at me: I smirked at him and got a frown in return, and then he was gone, the door closing on its spring hinges behind him.

I turned back to Louis and smiled. "Please excuse them. We get prats like him every year in this school. Now, where were we?"

"...You shouldn't have talked back to him," Louis said in a whisper. "I mean, I'm happy you stood up for me, no one's ever done that before, but now you'll get punished for it."

I gave him a curious look. "Punished?"

"Yeah. He'll write to his parents and get you punished, or even fired."

"Oh, they can't *fire* me, dear," I laughed. "Or punish me, for that matter."

“They can, I’m sure of it. I mean, don’t you realise who that was? Benjamin Hayward de la Fontaine. His dad’s an MP, and went to Eton with the headmaster.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Like I said, I have nothing to worry about.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because of who I am.”

He gave me a careful look. “Because you are... the librarian?” he said.

He’d been a bit hesitant, since he clearly knew that couldn’t be the whole reason I was being so confident; I smiled at him. “Correct, I am indeed the school’s librarian. But do you know what my name is?”

Louis shook his head. “No, I don’t.”

“Well then, let us rectify that right away. Nice to meet you, I’m...” I licked my lips, inhaled, and in a single breath said, “Jodie Sophia Alexandra Mary Elisabeth Grace Carpenter-Howarth.”

“Whoa,” Louis said. “That’s quite a name.”

“It is, isn’t it?” I laughed. “My friends call me Jo, and you can do that too.”

I extended a hand towards him, and he shook it and nodded. “Louis Ingram. A pleasure, Miss Jo.”

I giggled. “No, just Jo. Now, Louis, did you notice something peculiar about my name?”

Louis frowned slightly and his lips moved as he repeated the name to himself; then he blinked. “Wait, Carpenter-Howarth?” he asked. “You mean Howarth as in Howarth Academy?”

“Precisely. It was founded by my great-grandfather, as was the Carpenter School. And while it’s true that I am technically employed here at the Academy, and thus the headmaster could absolutely fire me... I also own both this building and the land it sits on.” I crossed my arms in front of myself and smirked. “I’ve butted heads with Headmaster Morton a few times before, and we have reached an understanding, which is still in place: he doesn’t fire me and lets me manage the library as I see fit, including ejecting anyone who causes trouble, and I don’t evict him.”

Louis gave me a dubious look. “Could you really do that?”

“Yeah, I could. It would be quite bothersome, lots of bureaucracy you see, but I absolutely could. So don’t worry, I’m safe.”

He nodded. “Good.”

I nodded back. “So! A report on a Victorian book, you said?”

“Yes. I was thinking maybe something short? Or short-ish anyway, I know writers back then could be quite long-winded.”

I smiled. "They could, especially since they were often paid by the word. But I think I have something you might like. Wait for a moment."

I got up from my seat, turned around, and ran my eyes over the bookcase that was set behind my desk to find the book I was looking for; I plucked it out, turned around again, and offered it to Louis.

He took it and turned it over so he could see the cover. "*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*," he read out loud. "Isn't this too childish?"

"So what?" I shrugged. "How old are you, Louis?"

"Ten."

"You're still a child, then."

He bit his lip for a moment, staring down at the book; then he looked up at me. "But I don't want to be a child," he said. "I'm not *supposed* to be a child."

"Let me guess, because you're here," I said, and waved my hands to encompass the library around us and the building at large, "and your parents are counting on you to behave and get a proper education while they're away, so you have to take care of yourself, right?" Louis looked me in the eye, then hesitantly nodded. "Yeah. Been there, done that, and let me tell you: you don't have to be a man just yet. You still have some time to go before you have to grow up and choose who you want to be. So yeah." I pointed at the book in his hand. "That book is perfect for you."

"...Okay," he replied; I could see he was still a bit hesitant.

"Good. Now, will there be anything else?"

He looked around for a moment, then turned back to me. "Think I can stay here for a while longer? Read the book and do the report in here?"

"You don't want to go back to the common room just yet, am I right?"

"Yes. Being with Ben and the other boys is just... I don't like it."

"I understand. Come with me," I said, smiling and beckoning at him; I stood up from my chair, rounded the desk, and started towards the back of the library. After a few moments, the noise of footsteps told me Louis was following me.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

I unhooked my keyring from my belt and rifled through it without looking, finding the key I was searching for by touch alone. "Not too far," I replied. "We're here, in fact."

I stopped and turned around, pointing at a door which was set into the wall, between two bookcases; Louis looked at it curiously. "Where does it lead?"

"To a reading room," I said. "A very special reading room." I unlocked the door and pulled it open. "After you."

He looked at me for a couple seconds, then hesitantly stepped through the door, stopping just beyond the threshold: he glanced around, taking in the mahogany tables and

wooden chairs which filled the small room, then turned back to me. "I don't understand. What's so special about this place? It looks like a normal reading room."

"It's special because only librarians are allowed back here. Only librarians have the key."

"Then why am I allowed back here?"

I grabbed a book that was lying on one of the tables and handed it to him. "Take this."

He took it, and looked at the cover. "*The Clocks*, by Agatha Christie," he read aloud.

"It's new. Detective fiction. I've just finished reading it. Now go put it back."

He gave me a blank stare. "Pardon?"

"Go put it back. Find where this book goes and shelve it."

"...Okay," he said, still clearly weirded out; but he turned on his heel and, with me following, walked back to the main room of the library. He looked around, trying to get his bearings; I kept smiling encouragingly at him, and after a few minutes he'd found the detective fiction shelf and replaced the book in its proper spot. "What was the point of me doing this?" he asked, turning to me.

"The point, my young friend, was that you've finished your very first job, so now you're officially an Adjutant Librarian. Congratulations, here's the key to the reading room."

He blinked in surprise as I unhooked a key from the keyring and handed it to him. "Excuse me?"

"Now you can get in whenever you like. If you need a quiet place to study and do homework, or just to get away from the boys for a while, the reading room's there for you."

"Oh," he said. "Thank you."

"You're more than welcome. And also, the door at the far end of the reading room leads to my flat. So if you feel like having a chat, or want to have some tea, feel free to pop in whenever. But not," I added, wagging my finger at him, "when you're supposed to be in class."

He laughed. "Of course."

"Good," I nodded. "Now listen closely, because this is important: we librarians have a code, which we are sworn to follow. It's not law by any means, to be followed strictly and to the letter; it's more akin to a set of guidelines. And the two most important parts of the code are free accessibility and confidentiality."

Louis nodded, but didn't say anything.

"First: free accessibility," I continued. "We provide access to complete and impartial information to whoever requests it, without omitting or censoring anything. Now, you're just an Adjutant Librarian, so you don't know how to properly look up information just yet. Especially since we don't have just books in here, but also magazines, pamphlets, and

other assorted stuff. But if you want to know about something, anything at all, you just need ask; I will provide that information to you, no questions asked. Are you with me so far?"

"Yes," he said, nodding again.

"Good. Now, the second point: confidentiality. I will never, *ever*, under *any* circumstances, tell anyone what information I have given you without your explicit permission. And, above all, I will never judge you. Neither for the information you request, nor for anything else." I smiled at him. "Remember that."

He gave me a long, careful look, then slowly nodded.

I nodded back. "Great," I said. "I'll leave you to read. Do you need anything else?"

"No, thank you, Miss Jo," he replied; I shot him a warning glance. "Jo," he corrected himself, and raised *Alice* up to eye level. "This book is enough."

"I wasn't talking about books. Do you need a glass of water? Cup of tea?"

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded. "Tea sounds great."

"Milk? Sugar?"

"Milk and sugar."

"Cookies?"

At last, Louis' composure cracked: for the first time since I'd first seen him, he smiled. "I'd like a cookie or two."

"Coming right up," I smiled back. "You make yourself comfortable."

I heard the door creak open; I looked up. "Oh, hello there, Louis," I said, smiling at him.

"Hello, Miss Jo," he replied.

I hmpf-ed and crossed my arms. "Well if you're going to be like that, I'm going to take my hello back."

He blinked, apparently confused. "Why? What'd I do?"

"It's just Jo, remember?"

"...Right," he said, and then laughed. "Hello, Jo."

"Good," I nodded. "What can I help you with?"

"I came to return this." He reached into his book bag, and placed *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* on my desk.

I nodded again as I grabbed it and pulled out the card from its pocket just inside the front cover. "Everything good? How was the report? What grade did you get?"

"Full marks," he smiled. "Mr. Wallace told me I did good."

"I'm glad." I signed the card, replaced it inside the book, and set the book aside. "What about the story? Did you like it?"

"I did. I found it relatable."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Relatable? Do tell."

"It was mostly chapter five. Alice has been through so much in a very short time. She's been changed so much that she doesn't know who she is any more. And then she has to change herself once again, but being careful to find a way to turn into someone she can recognise as herself." Louis paused, and met my eyes: I was smiling placidly at him. "I don't know. Maybe I'm not making any sense."

"Oh no, you're making perfect sense," I replied.

He frowned slightly. "I am?"

"You absolutely are. You see, many people are comfortable with how they are, and give no thought as to the... *shape* of their bodies. Other people aren't, and can take some steps to change their bodies to match whom they feel they are. So they can become someone they can recognise as themselves."

"Change their bodies... how?" Louis asked; he was looking at me intently.

"Depends on the person," I shrugged. "Some people just cut their hair, or let it grow long and dye it. What, did you think I was a natural redhead?" I winked at him. "But there are other things that can be changed. The human body can be surprisingly malleable."

Louis was still looking at me. He nodded. Slowly.

"But anyway," I continued, "what someone does to their own body is no business of mine. Did you want to read the next *Alice* book?"

"There's another *Alice* book?"

"Of course, *Through the Looking-Glass*. Both books are quite famous: an American made a film out of them, too. But you're too young to remember it."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "Did you see it?"

"Yes. It's a good movie, though he made many changes to the story. But anyway," I smiled at him, "shall I get you that book?"

"Yes, please."

I nodded and stood up; I rounded the desk and made my way to the library's shelves. Just as I was about to venture between the bookcases, Louis spoke up again: "And..."

I turned to look at him; he gulped nervously.

"And... do you have a book on the human body?"

"That's quite the wide subject," I replied. "What in particular are you looking for?"

"Something about... how it's made. The shape of it. I don't know if I'm explaining myself here."

"I understand. Be right back."

I turned around again and was off, venturing inside the maze of bookcases, and I returned in short order with two books.

"Alright," I said, handing him the smaller of the two. "*Through the Looking-Glass*..."

He nodded. "Thank you."

"...and this is *Gray's Anatomy*," I finished, dropping the large tome on my desk, where it landed with a satisfying *thud*.

"That's... quite the book."

"Hefty, isn't it?" I said with a grin. "But there's pretty much everything you might want to know about the human body in it."

He nodded and, with some difficulty, lifted the book from the table. "Can I use the reading room?" he asked.

"Of course, you don't even need to ask. Tea?"

He nodded again. "Tea would be nice."

I looked up in surprise from my book as I heard a soft knock at the door. "Come in," I called out, and frowned as Louis stepped into the room. "Louis? What are you doing here?"

"I was hoping to borrow a few books to read over the holidays," he replied. "If it's not a problem."

I shook my head. "No, of course not," I said. "But what I meant was, why are you here *at school*. Everyone should've gone home for Christmas."

My young friend looked at me for a moment; then he sighed and looked away. "I can't go home this year. My dad is in the RAF, and he's taking part in an exercise. He's overseas, he didn't tell me where."

"He probably *couldn't* tell you," I said. "Military stuff is usually kept secret."

He nodded. "Yes. But this means I can't go home to be with them. And..." He paused briefly and bit his lip. "And I'm the only one who's not going home and the school is empty and I'm alone and—"

"Hey. Hey, no," I said, standing up from my chair, recognising the need to break him out of his spiral. "No, you're not alone, not at all. I mean, yes, you can't be with your parents this year, but you're not *alone*." I stepped up to him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm here too, aren't I?"

He looked up at me, eyes filled with tears.

"And since we're friends, we can keep each other company," I continued. "I honestly wouldn't mind, it will be the first time I spend Christmas with someone in... years, actually."

"The first time in years?" he said, his eyes widening in surprise. "You're not going home?"

I gently shook my head. "Have you forgotten? This is my home." I gestured at the room around us. "And my family... Well, my mum and dad died during the war; Mum in '41, during the Blitz, and Dad in the Netherlands in '44. I was left in the care of my

grandfather, and he passed away... ten years ago?" I put my finger to my chin as I thought back. "No, eleven, actually. Eleven years ago."

"I'm sorry."

I nodded. "So what do you say? Wanna keep an old lady company this Christmas season?"

"Oh, come on, you're not old," Louis said with a laugh.

"I totally am, I'm over thirty, you know?" I replied, laughing along with him. "Still. I was just about to go watch some TV, want to come with?"

He nodded, and followed me as we headed towards the reading room. "What are we going to watch?"

"*Doctor Who*."

"Never heard of it."

"That was... interesting," Louis said as the credit rolled on the screen.

"Did you like it?" I asked.

"I did, even though the old man is a bit of an asshole. Can I come over and watch the next part? It's a weekly show, right?"

I nodded as I clicked the TV off. "Right, so the next episode will be on the twenty-eighth. And you can absolutely come over. We're the only two people in this entire building after all, so we might as well keep each other company."

"I'd like that," he replied, smiling. "Oh, by the way, can I borrow some more books?"

"Of course. Looking for anything specific?"

"Well..." he began; then he bit his lip. "I read about the differences between the sexes in that book you gave me. *Gray's Anatomy*." I nodded. "And it mentioned that most differences are due to chemicals the body makes called... hormones, I think. Do you have any books about hormones?"

"Probably," I said. "I'll have to check, but I'm pretty confident there's something about hormones somewhere in the library. It's getting late now, but I'll look into it tomorrow."

He nodded. "Thank you. And..."

He didn't continue the sentence, so I smiled encouragingly at him. "And...?"

"Do you have any books about people? Specific people I mean. Their lives. Their history."

"The word you're looking for is 'biography.' And yes, there's plenty in the library. Who did you want to read about?"

"...April Ashley," he said in a low voice, looking away from me.

“The model? There’s no biography about her, I don’t think; she’s younger than I am, probably not even thirty.”

“...Oh.”

“But I read newspapers, and have plenty of them stashed away. I’m sure I can find something. I’ll look into it.”

“Thank you.”

I nodded. “As for the next few days, I was thinking we could have a Christmas party. On the twenty-fourth or the twenty-fifth. Maybe even invite your sisters.”

Louis blinked. “My sisters?”

“Yes, they’re at Carpenter, right? Howarth’s sister school. Since you didn’t go home, they probably didn’t, either. We can have them come over. Or don’t you want to?”

“No, I do want to, especially since I haven’t seen them since school started. But... how did you know I have sisters at Carpenter?”

It was my turn to blink. “Uh... lucky guess?” I ventured. “I mean, someone being an only child is not common, and since you don’t have any brothers, it was likely that you’d have sisters.”

“And since I’m here at Howarth, it was likely for my sisters to be at Carpenter,” Louis said.

“Yes, precisely,” I said.

“Hm. Makes sense,” he said; but he was eyeing me suspiciously.

I coughed. “Anyway, what are you doing for dinner?”

He shrugged. “Nothing, really. I can pop down to the kitchen and grab something from the fridge.”

“You can do that, yes,” I said. “But you can also stay for dinner if you want.”

“...I don’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing at all, it’s just leftovers anyway. Not very ladylike, I know.”

He chuckled. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“I’ll go heat them up, I’ll be just a minute.”

“Alright, the table is set, the ham’s in the oven, and the soup is on the stove,” I said under my breath, counting off the things I had to do on my fingers; I nodded to myself. “Okay, we’re set.”

Everything was prepared: I was still in my house clothes, of course, but I had plenty of time to change before having to drive over to Carpenter to pick up Louis’ sisters. So I could relax and—

I paused in response to a knock on the door. “Yes, come in,” I called out.

"Hi, Jo," Louis said, opening the door and stepping into the room.

"Hi, Louis. You're early, there's still time before we have to leave."

"I know. I was hoping to talk to you before my sisters got here, actually."

I tilted my head to the side and gave him a look. "Sure, what about?"

"You."

"...Me?"

"Yes."

I nodded. "Okay. What about me?"

Louis looked at me for a moment, then sighed. "I tried to come up with a way to say this that didn't sound rude, but I didn't find one. So I apologise, but I'm going to be blunt: how do you know so much?"

"About what?"

"About the things we talked about. About the things you told me. About how the human body is malleable and can be changed. About hormones."

I shrugged. "Well, I'm a librarian. We're supposed to know things."

"Yes, but you knew all of that off the top of your head, apparently. And you dug up lots of information on April Ashley when I asked you to."

"It was just a few news articles."

"But you did have them on hand. I don't think normal libraries keep a newspaper archive, right?"

I smiled. "No, they don't."

"Also, there's this," Louis said, marching over to the fireplace; he pulled down a framed photograph from the mantelpiece. "I noticed it when you were making dinner a few days ago. Your parents?"

He turned the frame around so I could see it, and I nodded as I walked over to him, still smiling. "Yes, my mum and dad," I replied, pointing. "And my grandfather there in the back. Taken just before the war."

He nodded. "And who's this?"

He pointed at the boy in the picture, standing in front of my parents and grandfather; my smile turned into a grin. "You're not going to believe me if I tell you that's my cousin, are you?"

"No, I'm not. The family resemblance is there, yes, but I thought it was weird you didn't have any photos of yourself with your parents, so I went and checked *Burke's Peerage*."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "You went looking for it in the library?" He nodded. "Good job. I should promote you from Adjutant Librarian to something better. And?"

“And there’s no Jodie Sophia Alexandra Mary Elisabeth Grace Carpenter-Howarth in that book. The last in the Carpenter-Howarth line is a man, named—”

“Okay, there’s no need to mention that,” I cut him off with a laugh.

He stared at me for a moment, then nodded. “I won’t. But it’s you, right? You’re like her. Like April Ashley.”

“Yes, I am,” I said. “Like April Ashley, like Christine Jorgensen, like Lili Elbe.”

Louis frowned. “Who are they?”

“Women like me. There are many, actually, and those are just the famous ones.” I paused, and then added, “And you’re like me, too.”

He blinked. “Wh—” he began.

“Please don’t deny it,” I cut him off. “I’ve read the letter.”

“...Wait, what letter?” he asked, his eyes widening.

“The letter you wrote to yourself, ten years from now.”

“No one was supposed to read that,” Louis whispered, shaking his head.

“Sorry. Randall forgot to tell you it was actual homework that he would grade, not merely a writing exercise. And when he read it he got worried and came to me. You remember what you wrote, right?”

Louis nodded. “I wrote...” he began; then he paused, and gulped. “I wrote that I hoped I would still be alive to read the letter. Ever since I read in the newspaper about April Ashley, ever since I realised I’m like her, everything has been... *so much*.” She shook her head again, fractionally, and then continued, “I showed the paper to my parents. I wanted to tell them I was just like her, but... they read the article, and called her a freak.”

I sighed. “Yeah. I’ve been there; I was just about your age when I realised it, too. I told my grandfather and he was supportive. My parents...” I shook my head. “From the way they talked, they probably wouldn’t have understood. But I never got the chance to tell them: me and gramps had decided to wait until the end of the war, and, well...”

“...I’m sorry.”

“I am, too.” I paused, then looked at her carefully. “So what are you going to do now?”

She sighed. “I don’t know. I mean, I should tell my parents, shouldn’t I?”

I bit my lip. “I’d... advise against that, actually. For the moment, at least.”

“Why?”

“What if they throw you out?”

She blinked, then looked at me, aghast. “They wouldn’t do that!” she exclaimed.

“Are you sure?” I said. “Are you *really* sure? Because the parents of several friends of mine did just that: when they found out their sons were actually their daughters they threw them out on the street, with nothing but the clothes on their backs.”

“...So I can never tell them.”

“Not never. But you should only do that if you know for sure they’re going to accept you, and you have a safety net to catch you in case you’re wrong.”

“A safety net such as?”

“This place,” I replied. “Once you’re old enough, once you’re sixteen, I can hire you to help me in the library. Make your position as Adjutant Librarian official.” I smiled. “Meanwhile, I can help you find your way. I can help you find clothes that fit you better than your school uniform.”

“But I can’t wear those at school. The other boys will know.”

I leaned forward and touched her nose with my finger. “Not the *other* boys, dear. Just the boys, period, since you’re not a boy. And you can wear them in the reading room, away from prying eyes.”

After a moment’s hesitation, she nodded. “Yes, I can do that, can’t I?”

“You can. And, when the time comes in a few years, I can help you find hormones if you want to. You’ve read the books I gave you, so you know what they’ll do.” I cocked my head to the side and smiled. “You may have to hide the effects for a while before you can be fully yourself, though. But we’ll think about that when the time comes.”

I gazed deep into Louis’ eyes, and there was hope in them; but also a tinge of fear. “You really think I can do this?” she asked.

“I don’t think so, I know so,” I replied. “Being ourselves isn’t easy, true, and it takes determination to do so, but I know you have that determination. And I’ll be by your side all the way.”

“Okay,” she nodded.

“We’ll talk and make plans. Right now, we have to go and get your sisters for dinner, or we’ll be late.”

“Right.”

“I’ll go change and make myself more presentable.”

I’d made it three steps towards my bedroom when she called out, “Jo?”

“Yes?” I replied, turning around to face her.

“When... when we’re alone. When it’s just the two of us. Could you not use my name? The one my parents gave me, I mean.”

“Of course,” I nodded. “What should I call you instead?”

She bit her lip. “Could... could you call me Alice?”

“Of course,” I repeated. “It’s good to meet you, Alice.”

I smiled at her, and she smiled back.

The End.