

## **He Said.**

Lucas Selby

*“Jump,” he says.*

The class dismissed themselves before class was dismissed. Noelle yelled their homework at them, and a few actually bothered to write it down. It was always nice when the undergrads respected their grad-student teacher. Everyone cleared out except for the new boy. Oliver? Blond hair, blue eyes, circle-frame glasses resting on a bit of a pointed nose. She glanced down at the “cheat sheet” roster for her BIO 343 class to confirm, yes, Oliver.

Oliver waited until the classroom cleared before making his way to her. He pushed his frames further up his nose before he said, “Professor, remind me of the homework?”

“Analyze the PCR sequences I posted online and determine which are from ‘superheroes’ and which are from regular people.” Noelle had spent so long coming up with an assignment that was so obvious in retrospect. With all the powered individuals popping up all over the world, what better way to get the students excited about biology?

*But she can’t.*

“Professor?”

Oliver made his way to the front of the class again, pushing the frames farther up his nose. He was one of the only ones, Noelle was sure, who’d written down the homework from the previous day. He was the only one who hadn’t turned it in.

She frowned on the inside, smiled on the outside. “Yes, Oliver?”

“I didn’t quite understand the homework from yesterday. Help me with it please?”

Noelle sat down at her desk and pulled up some research on the newest findings in superhuman research. She walked him through every step of the process, showing him telltale signs in gene sequences that marked emerging superpowers in a person’s development. He wrote down everything, then handed her his completed analysis.

“Accept this late and I promise I’ll do my own homework in the future,” he said.

She smiled. “Deal.”

“Okay, fine. Let me explain something,” he says.

Oliver failed to turn in his homework again, so he came to Noelle’s desk and pushed up his glasses. “Help me,” he said, so she slid into her desk chair and pulled up the latest research. He wrote down everything she told him, and when he handed in his homework, the conclusion stated, “In conclusion, non-physical superhuman powers are more difficult to detect than physical powers because there are no immediate signs of power development.”

“You have a good start here, but you need to do more research on your own if you want full credit,” she told him.

“Or, give me an A+ and forget about it,” he said with a joking smile.

So she did.

“Oh, and believe everything that I say.”

For four consecutive days, Oliver approached Noelle after class, pushed up the frames of his glasses, and was taught the intricacies of superpowers. He seemed so interested; how could she say no? She was a good teacher. How could she deny someone so obviously in love with the science? It wasn’t so long ago she was in his shoes, working hard every day in the subject she loved.

“Remember, Oliver,” she reminded him on Friday, “next week we’re learning about plasmid mapping, and I want you to try to do the homework on your own, okay?”

Oliver pouted and pushed up his glasses before asking, “Do we have to change topics? I’m really enjoying learning about superheroes.”

His face appeared so comically dejected, Noelle actually laughed. “Sorry, Oliver, but I promise DNA fingerprinting is just as exciting as superpowers—”

“Change the syllabus,” he said.

Noelle blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Change the syllabus so we can keep learning about powers next week. Please? For me?”

“I—” Noelle hesitated. He seemed so eager. His glasses made his eyes look bigger as he stared at her, begging her for a change she could not deliver on.

“Okay,” Noelle promised, and Oliver’s eyes widened with a mixture of gratefulness and astonishment. That weekend, she spent three sleepless nights researching more for the students to learn about superpowers.

*“You aren’t special.”*

Smiling through the steam rising from a cup of coffee, Noelle watched Oliver stride to the front of the classroom. Before he could push up his glasses and say something, she held up a finger. “I’m not going to just give you the answers today, Oliver. Today, you can research while I guide you. Tomorrow, I expect you to have actually done the homework.”

Oliver pushed up his glasses and smiled. With a flourish, he pulled out his completed homework. Noelle raised her eyebrows as he placed it on the desk and spun it around so she could see for herself. As her eyes scanned the incorrect contents, her expression furrowed a fraction. She overheard Oliver whispering to himself. “Say it’s good. Say it’s good,” he said. She forced a practiced teacher smile and handed the paper back. “It’s good,” she replied, and his face beamed before dropping again as she continued, “but it’s not exactly what I was looking for. You listed the specific types of powers but didn’t define them or list their subclasses.”

He gave her a half smile. “A for effort?”

Noelle smiled back at him, but it seemed more apologetic than agreeable. “Sorry, but it’s just not what I asked for.” She wrote a C+ at the top, then returned to her previous smile. “Listen, it’s a very strong effort, and I’m glad you’re taking the initiative to do the homework on your own, but I have to be fair—”

Oliver waved his hand and snatched back his homework. His eyes scanned over it, lingering here and there on the uncompleted sections. “What if . . .” he started, then seemed to rethink what he was saying. After a minute of patience, Noelle motioned for him to go on. She did have another class coming in. “What if you tutored me?” Oliver asked. Noelle frowned and opened her mouth to deny him, but he cut her off before she could speak. “Tutor me,” he said. “It’s the only way I’ll really be able to get this stuff.”

Noelle frowned again, as if she were considering his offer. Oliver stared back at her intently, his glasses slipping a little down his nose as he looked down on her. Her eyes met his, which seemed to

remind him to push his glasses back up against his face. “Fine,” she replied, still frowning at the difficulty of the promise. “When do you want to meet?”

*“In fact, you’re worthless.”*

As far as apartments went, Noelle’s wasn’t the smallest. That’s what she kept telling herself, anyway. Grad-student teachers didn’t make much in the way of livable income, but smaller apartments just had to exist, right? The walls and floor were bare; the desk and twin bed were packed in so tight that paper wouldn’t have separated them from the walls. She even found ways to economize, using her bed as the desk’s chair and owning no luxuries outside of her three-year-old laptop. Oliver didn’t complain though. He made himself right at home, kicking off his shoes and setting up at the foot of her bed with a notebook and pen.

Noelle pulled the desk to the head of the bed and placed her pillow behind her, making for a decent backrest. As the laptop took its time booting up, Oliver scooted closer to squint at the impressively smudged screen. “Do you ever clean this?” he laughed, poking a finger and adding another smudge. Noelle began to retort, so he said, “No offense.”

She wasn’t offended, not any more at least. He meant no offense. Why should she be offended? The wall pushed against her shoulder as Oliver scooted in and she scooted away from Oliver to give him room to see. Already an internet browser displayed detailed definitions and descriptions of the different power classifications and their subsets—her long hours of research from the weekend. None of the information strictly related to biology, not to mention that all the studies came from the previous year as superheroes came into the public eye, so Noelle understandably failed to have much background knowledge in the subject. Still, Oliver insisted, and so she taught what she could about what she learned.

And then here was Oliver, pressing up against Noelle as he leaned in to learn more about the most recent developments in his world. He gazed at the computer screen, daring it to feed his hunger for more knowledge on his newfound passion. Noelle fed it to him, opening documents of notes she had taken in an effort to create lesson plans for her hungry student. His pen dashed over his notebook in sharp lines that only he could interpret. Black ink stained the white page where the tip scratched out new knowledge.

*"We could have been happy together."*

Two hours passed. Noelle's arm cramped smashed up against the wall, and her leg had fallen asleep long ago trying to allow space for Oliver's incessant search. He dotted his last period and threw his notebook to the side. His hands rubbed his eyes, and he yawned, so Noelle yawned and took the opportunity to stretch her sleeping limbs. Pins and needles, but still the presence of Oliver's leg against hers. She tried to reposition it, but her room closed the desk and wall back in on her, forcing her leg back into Oliver's. Oliver lay down, obviously exhausted from studying.

"That was so much. I need to let that process," Oliver said with a laugh. Noelle chuckled slightly in return, still focused on finding a position where her leg could breathe. Her student rolled his head over to look at her in the eye, his glasses falling farther back against his face. "Thank you," he said.

"Thanks," she replied, nearly instantly, then laughed and rubbed her own eyes. "I mean, you're welcome. Wow, I must be really tired."

When she looked back at him, his eyes squinted through his glasses with curiosity.

"You know those signs we went over for knowing if you have powers?" Oliver asked.

"Yes?" Noelle replied.

"Kiss me," he said.

It was only as she leaned over and kissed him that she realized she didn't want to.

*"I tried to make you want me, but now I'm telling you: Want me."*

Oliver made his way to the front of the class with his homework. She held in her breath, but he merely dropped it on her desk and strode to the door with the rest of her students. A sigh of relief escaped her lips a bit louder than she intended. Oliver stopped, pushed up his glasses, and turned to face her.

"Answer me truthfully," he said. "Did you forget?"

Noelle frowned. "Forget what?"

Oliver smiled. "Good."

He left.

*“I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to you. And don’t you forget it.”*

The burly student’s homework hit the desk, and he took a step towards the door. Then he turned around and looked Noelle straight in the face.

“Hey professor, can I get some *private* tutoring like Oliver?”

The boy’s lackeys joined in on his gravelly laugh as he sauntered out of the classroom. Noelle’s cheeks flamed, but Oliver strode by and said, “Don’t say anything.”

“*No, don’t talk. Just shut up and listen.*”

“Just follow the procedures and take notes on *everything* you notice.” She stopped and faced the class as a whole. “And if I hear *anything* unrelated to this lab, you will leave my class and receive no credit for the day.”

Noelle spent the full lab surveying every experiment with a watchful eye, only taking time to speak when a student couldn’t tell a test tube from a beaker. Oliver kept his eyes on her, but she didn’t dare check on his table.

Time ran out before she knew it, and everyone scrambled to pack up their equipment. Still she avoided Oliver. When he did happen to pass by, she managed to shout, “Good work today!” before he could open his mouth. The following week, she collected the lab reports and graded Oliver’s immediately. D+. He had it coming to him, what with making her do his homework for a full week. He had it coming to him.

“*Listen to me.*”

“Listen to me,” he said.

He had her before she could even notice he was standing at her desk.

“I deserve better than a D+.”

She shook her head but remained silent, listening intently to his heavy breathing.

He exhaled in agitation, pushed his glasses deep into the bridge of his nose, then tried again. “Give me a passing grade,” he said.

He stood by and watched her log in to her online gradebook and give him a zero on the lab, dropping his overall grade to a C-.

“Hilarious,” he said. “Now give me full credit on the lab.”

She painstakingly typed in his full score for the lab, then quickly lowered other scores to send his grade spiraling back down.

Oliver grabbed Noelle’s wrist, forcing it still against the edge of the keyboard. “Give me a one hundred percent on every assignment ever assigned in this class,” he said.

Noelle did as she was told, then dropped his participation and attendance grades to zero.

Oliver grabbed her computer and smashed it on the ground. Keys crunched underfoot as he paced in front of the desk. He grabbed the sides of his head, massaging the frames of his glasses into his temples. “I will not lose control. You do not have power over me. I will not lose control.”

Noelle opened her mouth to speak, but he kicked the desk.

“Shut up,” he said. “Don’t make a fucking sound. Grab your keys and follow me.”

“*Fucking. Jump.*”

Clouds dotted a beautiful blue sky, the kind of blue that had to be seen in person rather than through a photograph or even a window. The door swung closed and automatically locked behind them. A ringing sounded as her keys dropped against the concrete roof. He pushed her, then pushed her again, forcing her bit by bit, backing her up until her keys were out of reach, the air conditioners were out of reach, her safety was out of reach. She turned around, standing at the edge of a precipice, looking down at the crowd, a game of connect the dots that never looked up. They learned at her school in her class but never learned to look up. What good is biology if she couldn’t change human biology to look up, see her, notice her, save her, be the superhero she needed right now.

*She tries. She listens to him and tries. She tries so hard. She wants to jump. She wants to fall. She wants to fall and feel the arms of the superhero that would catch her. She wants to jump and fall into the embrace of her hero, someone who can save her and fly off away from the school. But more than anything, she wants Oliver to be that hero. Because he said that she wanted it. Wanted him.*

*But she can’t. She tries and she can’t. She wants to and she can’t.*

*She looks over her shoulder and sees Oliver, face a fiery red, panting with exertion, glasses slipping farther and farther down his nose as sweat accumulates under the bridge, threatening to fall. He steps closer, takes them off, and stares her in the eyes.*

*“Jump,” he says.*

*But she can’t.*

*“Jump,” he pleads.*

*But she can’t.*

*“Jump,” he snarls.*

*And she doesn’t.*

*She takes his hand, looks him in the eye, and says,*

*“No.”*