

Penelo-pig
Written by Ava Swanson

“Did you finish reading ‘*Aqua Frost*’?” Oliver’s voice was full of interest. I almost couldn’t hear him over the voices of the clumps of students crowding the hallways. The voices seemed to echo, bouncing off the rust-colored lockers and murals of our school mascot, Teegan the Tiger. The colors often looked more menacing than friendly to me.

“Yeah,” I replied, pulling out my notebook. The notebook’s many pages contained my fan art for certain books. I turned to a certain page and handed it to Ollie. “I drew Rebecca last night.” He examined the picture on the page, grinning like he always did. Kim looked too, resting the side of her face on his shoulder and holding his hand as they walked. If Ollie noticed, he didn’t show it. They had been dating for two years, so he was probably used to it.

Kim jumped in. “Honestly, Rebecca and Hugo are the most perfect couple. But I also think that Hugo and Cora could have also been a great couple.” She flipped her dark hair off her shoulder, a swift, but confident motion. Not that that wasn’t uncommon. She did everything confidently. “Despite the fact that Cora pretty much hates his guts.”

“I don’t know,” I drew out the words, shrugging my shoulders as I said it. “I think that Cora and Alec make a much better couple-”

Kim gasped and put both hands over her heart, her dark eyes wide and surprised. “How *dare* you cross my judgement! *Especially* with a character as *foul* as Alec!” She fiercely enunciated every word. “Your betrayal feels like a knife to the gut. Ollie, I’m feeling faint. . . .” She stopped and fell backward, the back of her hand pressed to her forehead.

Ollie caught her. He played along, talking dramatically and over-the-top. “Oh dear, she passed out!” He exclaimed, trying desperately not to laugh.

I pressed my hands to both of my cheeks, like in the scream painting. I resisted the urge to giggle as I played along too. “Whatever are we going to do now?”

Kim giggled and got up as we continued to walk, laughing along the way for the next couple of minutes. After our laughs subsided, we decided to continue our conversation.

“How long do you think it will take Carrissa to write the next book?” Oliver brushed a lock of blond hair out of his blue eyes. He was practically glowing with happiness, not that that wasn’t uncommon

I dropped my gaze to the floor as we passed a cluster of students. “I don’t think she’ll start writing another one in that series until she’s done with the next book of *“The Fire Quil”* series,” I dodged a couple holding hands in the middle of the hallway. “People need to find out what happens to Calvin and Toby. Otherwise, fans will riot.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense.” Kim whips out her phone to check the time. “Oh crud! Sorry Penny, we gotta get to class. I still don’t understand why they put two classes on separate sides of the school. Bye!” She grasped Oliver’s hand and they jogged off to History, leaving before I could say anything else.

When Ollie and Kim rushed off, they left me feeling like I was drowning in a sea of people, trying to keep my head above water. People gave me side glances as my notebook fell out of my trembling fingers. Claustrophobia had snatched the air out of my lungs, and I started taking shorter and sharper breaths. Kim and Ollie often distract me from the crowds of people, so when they’re gone, I’m overcome by my fear of small spaces.

I had to grab my stuff and get to my class before I went into full-panic-mode. *Think about something else*, I thought to myself. The rest of my schedule for today floated into my head.

Science, lunch, social studies, study hall, home. Science, lunch, social studies, study hall, home.
Scienc, lunch, social studies, study hall, home...

Suddenly a much too familiar voice shocked me out of my ongoing thoughts.

“Well, well, well...”

I jumped and whipped my head around to face the voice, clutching my books tighter against my chest and closing my rust-colored locker behind me.

There, in the middle of the hallway, stood Axel Smithers and his group of rich snobs.

Axel walked like he owned the school, which, in a way, I suppose that’s appropriate. Not only does he strike fear into the hearts of many nerds and geeks, his father is head of the school board, which means that Axel can do whatever he wants. This, however, is terrible news for the rest of the school, because that means that he’s free to take our money and beat us up at any time. Axel was a blond haired, blue-eyed jock, standing at 6’3”. His only facial expressions seemed to consist of smirks, knit eyebrows, raised eyebrows, clenched teeth, and frowns.

He fixed his menacing blue gaze on me, and it felt like a hole was being burned into the space between my eyes. When he took a step forward, the temperature in the hall drastically decreased.

He smirked. “Time to pay up, Penelo-pig. I hope you have more than last week.”

Axel’s been taking the lunch money and allowances of every student in this school that isn’t popular. Sadly, I happen to be one of those unfortunate students.

“So,” He clapped his hands together. “What’ve you got for me this week?”

I didn’t know how much longer this bullying was gonna go on for. Probably the whole year.

Just two days ago, I told my father about Axel. He told me to stand up and fight against him. I wanted to tell him how I could never do that without getting a black eye. But instead, I gave him the answer that he wanted to hear.

“Okay, I will.”

He then smiled. “That’s my girl. That’s my Penelope.”

But today wasn’t a good day to start.

I reached into my pocket, trying to avoid eye contact as I fished the bills out of my pocket. My hand came back, clutching three dollars.

Axel walked up to me and snatched the money out of my trembling fingers. After flicking through the money, his face contorted into a sour expression, complete with a scowl and knit eyebrows.

“What is *this*?” He shook the bills in his fist, just inches from my nose. He looked at me coldly. “This is even worse than last week!” He pocketed the money and glared at me.

I gulped and blinked, trying hard to hold back the tears that threatened to flow.

He took yet another step forward, which made me flinch. I tried to back away, but I was stopped cold by the wall of lockers. “You better have more by tomorrow, or else.” And with that, he turned and stormed down the hallway, his group trailing behind him.

And I was left standing there, frozen with fear. The bell rang, but I barely heard it as I slid down my locker and sat with my arms wrapped around my knees. I was close to crying. I could feel the tears building and building, like the dam behind my eyes was about to burst. Finally, the dam collapsed and they glided down my cheeks, each one falling on the books in my hands. I hated crying in public, especially in a building full of people I knew, but I couldn’t help it.

I looked around. The lockers towered above me, large and red. The mural tigers seemed to snarl in my direction, baring their teeth in an alarmingly frightening way. All of it just seemed to close in.

So, instead of going to class, I sat against my locker trembling more than I think I have in my entire life. And I continued to do so, until I gathered enough energy to pick myself up, get my homework out of my locker, and walk home.

Kim called at 3:00 that day. I picked up on the second ring and pressed the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Why’d you cut class?” Kim was practically shrieking into the phone.

I hesitated, thinking of my answer. “I just... needed some... uh... time to myself-”

“It’s Axel, isn’t it?”

To be honest, I was hoping that I wouldn’t have to voluntarily talk to Kim about Axel. I was hoping that she knew, and I wasn’t disappointed. If you have a friend like Kim, you know that she will know about your problem and listen to you talk about it for hours, making you push out every single detail until it was all off your chest. That was one of Kim’s best qualities: she was the best listener in the world.

I sighed as I closed the door to my room. “Yup.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.” Then she hung up, leaving me sitting in silence with my phone still clutched in my hand. I sat on my bed for a while, just thinking. Out of all the thoughts that were swimming around my brain, the one that surfaced almost as much as Axel’s bullying was: *Wow, I haven’t had a turkey sandwich in a while.*

So, I finally lifted myself off my bed and trudged down the steps of my empty house.

I had just gotten the bread out of the pantry when I heard a knock at the door. Placing the bread on the counter, I walked toward the door and unlocked it. As soon as it was unlocked, Kim came bursting through the door, dragging Oliver behind her.

“Alright,” She huffed. “I told Ollie on the way over here.”

My eyebrows knit together. “I thought that it was just going to be you and me-”

Kim waved me off. “Honey, when you have a problem this big, there’s no way all three of us can’t be involved. It’s been that way since first grade.”

Oliver spoke up. “How long has this been going on for, anyway?”

I developed a sudden interest in my shoes. I hesitated before murmuring, “Since the third week of October...”

“Penny!” Ollie ran his fingers through his curly blond hair, something that he did when he was frustrated. “It’s *January*.”

I refused to meet Kim and Oliver’s gaze, even though I could practically feel it burning the top of my head.

One of the most irritating things about being bullied is that everyone expects you to do something, to react then and there. But the truth is: you can’t. Or at least, you can’t without getting plunged deeper into the problem.

Kim took a careful step closer, placing her hand on my shoulder. Her voice was softer this time. “You shouldn’t have to take any of Axel’s crap. You have a voice. I know it. Ollie knows it. And I know you think that you don’t. But you do. You can stand up to him.”

Ollie appeared on my other side. “All you have to do is say no.”

And that was when I broke down. Tears glided down my cheeks as we hugged each other.

I didn't feel alone anymore. The walls inside my mind keeping me from accepting my friends' help crumbled. I immediately felt stronger than before. Their words echoed inside my head reassuringly, reminding me that I was capable of standing against Axel.

After my tears dried, we all broke apart. Oliver was smiling as bright as ever, and so was Kim. For a few minutes, we stood there, just grinning from ear to ear.

Kim was the one who broke the silence. "I think that this happy occasion calls for a celebratory movie marathon." She turned and walked toward the cabinet next to the TV. For the next three hours, Kim, Oliver, and I watched *Lord of the Rings*.

Our movie marathon ended an hour after my mother came home from work.

Mom walked into the living room. "Alright. Sorry guys, but you gotta go. Penny's gotta do her homework."

Kim got up. "That's fine, Mrs. Snow" Oliver got up too.

After we said our goodbye's, my friends left and my mother continued making dinner. I got up and jogged up the stairs to my room, thinking that I might as well do something productive while I wait for dinner.

As I worked to complete my science essay, Ollie's words swam around in my mind, circling over and over again.

All you have to do is say no....

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The day rushed by in a blur. I hadn't seen Axel at all yet, so I often stole glances behind me in the hallways to make sure that he wouldn't catch me off guard.

Hours of paranoia passed. I did my school work, but barely paid attention. My hands knew what to write, my feet knew where to go, but my brain was flooded with faces and words. Memories from the first months of the year, things that I could have said and done. Before I knew it, the bell rang, signaling the end of the last class.

The double doors leading into the cold and snowy outside world burst open, students pushing and shoving out of the narrow doorway. I was swept out with the crowd, trying desperately to keep my cool in the massive sea of people.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the sea dispersed. Different students joined different clumps of people. Some, like me, started their journey home.

I quickly walked toward the busses, never breaking eye contact with the yellow beast. Axel hadn't confronted me yet, but I'd be lucky if I could get to my bus without being seen by the few members of his group. *Just a little farther, just a little farther, just a little-*

"Penelo-pig, there you are!"

My heart jumped into my throat and my stomach sank down to my toes. I could run from here, could make it to my bus without being caught.

But then again, he was right behind me.

Axel jogged in front of me and stopped only a few feet away, making me stop and face him.

He chuckled. "I've been looking for you all day! So, I still need my money."

By now, a couple of the people walking to their busses and cars had gathered in a loose circle around Axel, his group, and I. They were murmuring, refusing to take their eyes off the scene before them.

“You have my money, right? Because, if you don’t, you can always give it to me tomorrow. But I think I might have to give you a reminder, just so you remember...” He cracked his knuckles, and I flinched.

I knew that I had options, I could walk around him and risk him beating me up. I could give him the money tomorrow and get beat up. I could always give him the two dollars in my backpack...

I could say no.

Penelope, why would you even think that? Standing up to Axel is like committing suicide! I scolded myself for even thinking such a thing, but the thought floated around in my mind just long enough for me to consider the option.

“Well? Where’s my money?” Axel’s harsh voice shocked me out of my thoughts.

I trembled with fear so badly that I thought that I was going to fall over. I took in long, shaky breaths and clenched my fists inside my pockets. Seconds felt like hours, as nobody spoke. The only things that I could hear were the whispers of the bystanders, and my own heart pounding.

I knew that I had to do something. I could feel the gaze of every pair of eyes burning into my body. I knew that everyone watching was predicting what would happen, waiting for me to say or do anything. I knew that I hid from any kind of help when it came to the bullying. I knew that everyone thought that Axel would get what he wanted, no matter what.

This was my chance to change all of that.

I took a deep breath, slow and steady, and unclenched my fists. Though fear gripped my stomach, I looked up and held Axel's glare with one of my own.

“No.”