

Athena's Adventures in Health Policy

# LET'S MAKE IT CLEAR

FOR AGES  
12-17



By Ana Rita Gonzalez, Namita Srivastava,  
and Anaaya Ghosh  
Illustrated by Melina Sugliano

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# CHAPTER 1: A PERIOD OF CHANGE



# CHAPTER 1:

## A PERIOD OF CHANGE

Athena hurried into the girls' locker room and pulled on her swimsuit. She was going to be late for practice *again*.

"Mrs. Huette's class gets longer every week," Hui complained, doubled over in pain on a nearby bench. Hui wasn't on the swim team, but it was Friday, so she was riding home with Athena, as usual.

"Maybe you should go to the nurse's office," Athena suggested, observing her friend with a frown. "You're turning green."

"They're just cramps," Hui replied with her head between her knees. "They'll pass eventually."

Athena sighed as she adjusted her swimming cap. "Have you considered that you'd suffer less if you let people help you?"

"Have you considered that you'd suffer less if you didn't care so much?"

Laughing, Athena snatched her goggles out of her locker and closed the door. "Come on. Maybe the poolside air will do you some good."

"Ah, yes." Hui groaned as she stood. "Nothing like the smell of chlorine to make you less nauseous."

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The first semester of Athena's seventh grade year was ending, and she could hardly believe it. So many things had changed since the start of the semester—including her closest friends. Hui had been diagnosed with anxiety and was going to weekly therapy sessions to help her navigate it. Plus, according to Athena's school counselor, her whole class was going through *puberty*. That was one word for the physical, mental, and emotional ways she was transforming.

Another one was *rollercoaster*.

Seemingly overnight, Athena had outgrown all her swimsuits. On its own, that would have been fine—she never liked being short, and now, she was almost as tall as her brother. But the mood swings? The occasional acne on her chin? The *periods*?

Athena was over it.

"I either want to be eight or eighteen," her friend Zosia often joked. "The years in the middle are gross."

But Athena's mom had a different perspective. "I promise, you don't want to skip middle and high school, girls. I know it's uncomfortable right now, but you're going to learn so much about yourselves and your interests before you reach adulthood. *Enjoy it.*"

"That's easy for you to say, Mama," Athena complained. "You're already an adult."

Her mom laughed. “I was thirteen once, you know. I remember how it felt. And I’m confident you can all handle it.”

“Really?” said Hui.

“Absolutely.”

The girls smiled. As long as they had each other, they could handle a few hormonal changes.

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One Saturday morning, just before the holidays, Athena opened her curtains to find snow outside her window. She squealed—this was the best time of year.

Stuffing her feet into her favorite pair of slippers, she hurried downstairs and into the kitchen, where the rest of her family was gathered.

“Good morning, Thea,” said her dad, setting his coffee mug on the counter. “How did you sleep?”

Athena peered out the kitchen window, only half-listening. The snow glittered in the cold winter sun. “Hm? Oh, I slept fine.” Turning to her little sister, she asked, “Do you want to go outside, Rae? We can make snow angels.”

“Actually, Thea, we’ve been waiting for you,” said her mom. She was scooping oatmeal from a pot on the stove. Handing a bowl to Athena, she said, “There’s fruit and nut butter behind you. Be sure to take some please.”

Athena spooned cranberries into her bowl as her

dad announced, “We have some news, kids.”

Odin sighed, and Athena wondered if her brother had already heard the news. Being the middle child was the worst sometimes—Odin usually learned things before she did. But if he knew a big secret, why wasn’t he more excited? At the moment, he was resting his chin on his fist and staring into his untouched breakfast bowl.

Athena glanced at Rae, who was stirring avocado into her oats. *Gag*—but she looked unconcerned. Maybe Papa’s news wouldn’t be a big deal after all.

“My work is about to require several months of international travel,” he explained, “which left us with two options. Either I miss a full semester of your lives—or we all move to a new country together.”

Immediately, Athena’s eyes darted to Odin, whose gaze was still trained on his bowl. Next to him, Rae dropped her spoon on the floor, flinging oatmeal onto the front of the refrigerator. All three children could agree that neither of these possibilities sounded pleasant.

Months without their father or months away from home?

There had to be a third option.

“Are you going to tell us what you decided?” Odin asked. But the way his eyes rolled told Athena that he already knew the answer.

“We’re going to spend next semester abroad!” their mom told them, grinning. “Isn’t that exciting?”

The next several months of Athena’s life flashed

before her eyes. Packing up her belongings, saying good-bye to her friends and teachers, losing her spot on the swim team, moving to an unfamiliar place, eating unfamiliar food...

What if she didn't speak the language? How would she communicate with her peers?

And come to think of it, what about *school*? She would have to transfer to a new one for her last semester of seventh grade.

Oh, this was so not happening.

"Are you two insane?" Athena demanded, heat rising to her cheeks. Her eyes flicked from her mom to her dad and back again. "This is ridiculous. We have *lives* here. We can't just leave."

"It's temporary, Thea," her dad said gently, resting his hand on her shoulder. "We'll be back in time for you to start eighth grade with your friends."

Athena brushed him off, pacing around the kitchen. "Did you think this through—literally *at all*? What if Grandma and Grandpa need us while we're gone? Did you forget that Grandma has cancer? *We—can't—leave.*"

"Thea, try to understand—" Mama began, but Athena wasn't finished.

"I'm going to lose my spot on the swim team, Odin will lose his spot on the basketball team... This isn't fair to us."

"Give it up, Athena," Odin said, pressing his palms into his eyes. "I've already tried."

“They’re ruining our lives!” she shouted, rounding on her brother in disgust. “Say something, will you?!”

“I just did! Now sit down and be quiet. You’re making this even harder.”

Rae glared at their brother, her blue eyes flashing. “We’re allowed to be angry, Odin. You must be angry, too.”

Again, Odin sighed. “I didn’t say I wasn’t angry.”

“Well, I want to know what happens now,” Rae said diplomatically. “We’ve never moved before.”

Tears of frustration pooled in Athena’s eyes as their mom replied, “We’ll need to start organizing this weekend so it’s easier to pack. We won’t be bringing much with us—just the necessities...”

Mama kept talking, but Athena tuned out. She could barely see straight for the turmoil in her head and heart. This was not what she’d planned for the rest of the year. In the span of twenty minutes, she’d forgotten all about making snow angels and had instead watched her entire life fall apart.

Devastated, she ignored Rae’s attempts to get her attention and left the room.

Athena could handle a lot of changes, but this was not one of them.

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Monday morning found Athena and her friends huddled

outside the middle school, the hoods of their coats fending off the blustery weather. Hot tears streamed down her cheeks as she explained her parents' decision to move. She still couldn't believe it. Her brain felt overfull.

"Maybe I can talk them out of it," Conroy said. Athena wondered if his face was flushed with anger or cold.

"If Thea couldn't change their minds, what makes you think you can?" Hui demanded. She *was* angry.

Zosia raised her hands pleadingly, swiping away her tears. "Let's all calm down, okay? There's nothing we can do about this right now. Let's just go to homeroom and try not to think about it."

Hui rolled her eyes. "Where exactly is that going to get us?"

"Off the emotional rollercoaster, for starters." And with that, Zosia adjusted her backpack, sniffled, and stomped inside, leaving shallow footprints in the snow. Hui sighed and followed her.

"I'm serious, Thea," Conroy whispered as they headed for the door. "If you want me to say something to your parents, I can probably come up with a good pitch. You could stay here with my family, or Hui's, or Zosia's. Your spot on the swim team would be safe—and so would your dreams."

Athena held her breath so she wouldn't sob. Conroy knew how much she wanted to study public health in college and how scared she was that the move would harm

her chances of reaching that goal. She didn't have to tell him; it was written all over her face.

Tears pooled in her eyes as they entered the building. Facing her friends, she asked, "Will you all come over this weekend and help me pack?"

"Of course," Conroy said. "If that's what you want."

It wasn't what she wanted. This was all happening too quickly. But if Athena had to spend months living on the other side of the world, she was going to hug her friends every day until she left.

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That weekend, Zosia arrived on Athena's doorstep with four to-go cups of hot cocoa, followed by Hui, who had spent days piecing together a scrapbook of photos for Athena to take with her. "I made it so that you don't forget us," Hui said, and Athena laughed.

"I'll be back in a few months, remember?"

Hui shrugged. "Still. I wanted you to have it. There are lots of pictures from the mental health awareness walk in there."

"Thank you," Athena said, giving her friend a hug. "I love it."

Conroy arrived last, carrying a grocery bag full of snacks and the promise of a playlist with no sad songs. "I worked on it half the night, so it better be good," he said, connecting his phone to Athena's speaker.

“All right, people.” Hui clapped her hands together. “Let’s get packing.”

Zosia went straight for Athena’s closet, her eyes widening at the mess. “Thea, you’re usually so organized. What happened in here?”

Athena cringed. Her *emotions* happened. Since she couldn’t continue yelling at her parents, she tore apart her closet instead. Now, most of her clothing was in piles on the floor.

“Sorry,” she said weakly.

Zosia smiled. “No worries. We’ll get this cleaned up.”

“I’ll take care of your school supplies,” Conroy offered. “Pass me your backpack, Thea.”

“I’ve got your books,” said Hui. “I’m sure you’ll want your favorites overseas with you.”

Tears sprang to Athena’s eyes. Her friends were so good to her. Kneeling next to Hui in front of her bookcase, she said, “You guys will call me all the time, won’t you? And keep me updated on what you’re learning in school?”

Hui wrapped an arm around her and squeezed. “Of course we will.”

“You didn’t really think you could escape from us by moving halfway around the world, did you?” Conroy laughed.

Zosia said very little until her parents called her home for dinner. Then, she gave Athena an extra-long hug and said, “Safe travels. Call me if you want to come back early, okay? I’m here for you.”





## CHAPTER 2: A NEW HOME



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Athena had never experienced jet lag before, and she hoped she would never experience it again.

Her first thought upon arriving in her new home was that her stomach hurt. Then, she dropped her suitcase on the floor and decided she had no energy to pick it up again.

And then, as it did every day now, a feeling of intense anger welled in her chest.

“Thea, move your stuff,” Odin said sharply. “It’s in the way.”

Tears sprang to her eyes. She could not do this. She could not stay here.

*“Athena.”*

“I’ll do it,” said Rae. “Stop hounding her, Odin. It’s been the longest day ever.”

“Kids,” Mama said, a warning in her tone. “Why don’t you go upstairs and choose your bedrooms? The rest of our things will be here tomorrow so you can unpack.”

Shooing her little sister away, Athena picked up her suitcase and lugged it toward the stairs. Though she was aware of the floor beneath her feet and the humidity clinging to her skin, nothing felt real but the anger within her.

Her blood boiled, her eyes stinging.

*I should have stayed, she thought. I should have taken Conroy's offer seriously and stayed.*

"Thea?" Rae whispered. "Are you sure you don't need help with your bag?"

Shaking her head adamantly, Athena stumbled upstairs, chose the first bedroom on the right, and closed the door.

*This is temporary, she told herself as she crawled into bed.* The house was already furnished, and though it was morning back home, it was the middle of the night here. How strange it felt to be sleeping in a country that wasn't her own. And in a few weeks, once the holidays were over, she would begin attending her new school.

She sobbed into a pillow to stifle the sound. Celebrate the holidays without her grandparents? She would rather skip them altogether.

A faint knock sounded on her closed door. "Hey, Athena?" came Rae's voice. "Can I come in?"

"Whatever."

Rae cracked the door open and entered. "At least turn a light on," she muttered.

"I'm going to sleep," Athena said. "You should, too."

For a moment, Rae was silent, standing in shadow at the foot of the bed. At length, she whispered, "You're not the only one who's upset, Thea."

And then, without asking, she curled up next to her sister and went to sleep.

Athena sighed. Jet lag was the worst.

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The holiday season was a blur of settling in and exploring a new city. Everything was different here—the food, the transportation, the weather. Athena was disappointed to discover that there would be no snow. Instead, it rained nearly every day.

Making her way through a new city was overwhelming for Athena, but for Rae, it was riveting. She had always been the social butterfly of the family. Grabbing Athena's and Odin's hands, she would drag them through new grocery stores, new parks, new restaurants. Even at eight years old, Rae was the sort of person who could carry a conversation with anyone, and she did it all the time.

Though she tried to remain miserable—hoping her parents would change their minds about the move—Athena had to admit that everyone they met was friendly.

There was a *tiny fraction* of a chance that this might not be so bad after all.

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“Does everyone have a water bottle?” Mama asked, ushering Athena, Odin, and Rae into the car. The new year had arrived, and it was time to go to school.

Athena's heart raced. She had her water bottle,

yes, but she lacked confidence. Going to new grocery stores was one thing—going to a new school was different.

Thankfully, she and Odin would be at the same campus. Back home, they attended different schools, but here, seventh and ninth graders were in the same building. It was nice to know that if Athena needed him, Odin would be right down the hall.

Rae, on the other hand, would be at the elementary campus by herself—but she didn't mind. In fact, just before Mama brought her inside, Rae said, "Thank goodness. I was getting sick of you all." Smiling, she leapt from the car and ran for the door, her backpack swinging.

"She's an odd one." Odin laughed, but Athena was proud of their little sister.

When it was their turn to be dropped off, Athena and Odin said goodbye to their mom and walked inside together. The entryway was crowded with mingling students, their laughter echoing in the halls. Trying to look composed, Odin grabbed Athena's hand and guided her toward the front desk. She barely heard him as he told the receptionist the names of their teachers and asked for directions to their classrooms. Her head was swimming, overwhelmed by the crowd.

Before Athena knew what was happening, Odin was marching her down a hallway to their right. "You're in 124B," he said, scanning the doors as they walked. "Ha—here it is. I'm all the way over in 153D, he said, so I have to run. Will you be okay?"

Athena gripped the straps of her backpack to stop her hands from shaking. “I’ll be fine. I’ll meet you outside this afternoon.”

Odin nodded. “Have a good day,” he said, and then he disappeared into the throng of students.

Blinking back tears, Athena entered 124B, where her teacher was waiting. “You must be our new student,” he said, smiling. “I’m Mr. Hakim.”

“Hi, Mr. Hakim. I’m Athena.” She tried to smile, but there were still tears in her eyes.

“Let me show you to your desk,” the teacher said. “I put you right up front in case you have any questions for me throughout the day. How does that sound?”

Athena nodded. Nothing sounded good, but she wasn’t going to say that. Instead, she took her seat as her classmates trickled into the room. She was just unzipping her backpack when Mr. Hakim said, “Class, we have a new student,” and gestured for Athena to join him.

Slowly, Athena rose from her chair to stand next to Mr. Hakim. Eyes on the floor, she listened as he told the class, “This is Athena. She’ll be learning with us this semester. I trust that you’ll all help her feel at home here.”

A chorus of voices arose, saying, “Welcome, Athena.”

When she dared to lift her eyes to the faces of her peers, she found them smiling. Were they... happy that she was here? She didn’t know. Maybe everyone was just being polite.

Back at her desk, Athena felt a tap on her shoulder

and turned to find a girl with long, silky black hair. “I’m Ismaya,” she said, still smiling warmly. “Do you want to sit with me at lunch? It must be hard to switch schools in the middle of the year.”

Athena felt a knot of anxiety loosen in her chest. Everything was going to be okay.

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As Athena navigated her new school, she found herself feeling calmer—but not perfect. Something was off, something she couldn’t identify. She liked Mr. Hakim and her new classmates, and her homework would certainly keep her busy... so what was wrong?

Whatever it was, it was giving her a headache. *Maybe it’s allergies*, she thought to herself. Sometimes, being in a new environment was enough to trigger a reaction... right?

Powering through her pain, Athena made it through her final class of the day and met Odin outside the school. “You look tired,” she observed.

“I have a headache,” he replied, glaring in the direction of the building. “How are you feeling?”

Athena frowned. “I have one, too.”

Before Odin could respond, a boy about his age hurried over to meet them. “Would either of you like a cigarette?” he asked, holding out an open box.

And that’s when it finally hit her—everyone in

school was smoking! The teachers, the students, the receptionist. No wonder Athena had a headache. All that smoke in a confined space... It was too much.

“Thea,” Odin said, “this is my new friend, Farzan. Farzan, this is my sister, Athena.”

“Hi,” Farzan said, grinning. “Nice to meet you.”

Suddenly, Athena understood Odin’s frustration. Head pounding, she met Farzan’s eyes. “Does everyone smoke here?”

Furrowing his brow, Farzan replied, “Most of us do. Is that a problem?”

Shocked, Athena looked to her brother, who appeared to have accepted this fact earlier in the day. *Everyone smokes in school.*

She couldn’t believe it. There had to be an explanation.

“Not a problem, exactly...” she said slowly. “I just don’t think smoking is very healthy.”

Farzan shrugged. “Everybody seems fine, don’t you think?”

*Debatable,* said Athena’s headache.

“We better catch our bus before it leaves without us,” Odin said, grabbing Athena’s arm. “See you tomorrow, Farzan.”

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Back at home, Athena and Odin dropped their backpacks and collapsed on the living room floor. Their heads

ached less now that they weren't enveloped in smoke, but making their way around a new school was exhausting. Athena was falling asleep on a couch pillow by the time their mom entered the room.

"Don't you two look happy," she said, laughing. "How was your day?"

Athena groaned. "Smoke."

"Headache," added Odin.

"I'm going to need a few more words than that," their mom said, sitting in the armchair in the corner of the room. "What happened?"

Athena pushed herself into a seated position against the front of the couch. Odin stayed where he was, an arm covering his eyes. When it was clear that he wasn't going to say anything, Athena sighed and explained, "Everyone at school smokes, including the teachers. We met a lot of friendly people, but it's hard to be there when it's so smoky."

"What's this about smoking at school?" Papa entered the room, frowning.

"It sounds like they've ingested quite a bit of secondhand smoke," said Mama.

"*Secondhand smoke?*" Odin sat up, scowling. "Felt pretty firsthand to me."

"Secondhand smoking is just 'passive' smoking," their dad explained. "It means you weren't the one holding the cigarette, but you were still inhaling the smoke."

"I have a couple of bottles of nasal spray upstairs,"

said their mom. “It’s not a permanent solution, but it’ll make your sinuses feel better.”

“But what’s the permanent solution?” Athena demanded. “Isn’t smoking dangerous?”

Their mom nodded. “It’s not healthy at all. Smoking has many negative effects and potential consequences, including cancer, heart disease, stroke, lung diseases, and diabetes.”

“Even secondhand smoke is risky,” their dad added. “Some people experience migraines, asthma attacks, heart disease, stroke, and lung cancer just by inhaling it.”

Athena hugged her knees to her chest and groaned. “This is terrible. I can’t imagine having a headache all semester, and I do *not* want these other things. What are we going to do? No one at school seems to understand the consequences of smoking.” She looked at Odin, hoping he had an answer.

“We could work from home,” he suggested. “But won’t that be kind of lonely? I like the people I met today... I just don’t like their habits.”

“That’s how I feel, too,” said Athena. “I want to go back, but I don’t want to feel sick all the time.”

A light entered Odin’s eyes as he smiled at her. “What if you researched some health policies in other countries related to smoking tobacco? You *love* researching health policy.”

Athena’s heart leapt—he was right. Her family had

always enjoyed discussing health policies—rules made by governments to keep everyone in a community healthy—and now, she wanted to study it in college. “I can do that,” she said excitedly. “What do you think, Mama and Papa?”

Their parents smiled. “I think that’s a great idea,” said Papa. “You can compile your research and present it to Mr. Hakim. Maybe he’ll allow you to discuss it in class.”

“Just remember,” said Mama, “it can be very challenging to quit smoking. Have compassion for your new friends and consider our conversations about puberty. Hormonal changes alone can push teens to smoke, so be patient.”

Athena nodded. “I will—I promise.” Swinging her backpack onto her shoulder, she said, “Thanks, everyone. I’m going upstairs to do my homework and some research.”



CHAPTER 3:  
HEALTHY CHOICES



## CHAPTER 3: HEALTHY CHOICES

One week at her new school and Athena was exposed to all sorts of things she'd never seen before.

Students smoked in the cafeteria, teachers smoked in the halls, and parents smoked in the carpool line. So many people were chain smoking—burning through one cigarette after another—that new packs were sold outside the school all day long.

Everywhere Athena went, both adults and children were smoking—even on TV. There was simply no escaping it. After a long day of squeezing nasal spray into her nose, she rode the bus home, opened her laptop, and continued researching health policies regarding the use of tobacco.

Athena now felt that she truly understood the repercussions of smoking and was determined to help her classmates make healthier choices. She knew she couldn't control them, but maybe her research would inspire them to quit.

One day, at lunch, Athena grew tired of watching Ismaya chain smoke and said, "You know, every time you light a cigarette, your health is at risk."

Ismaya frowned behind a cloud of smoke. "What

kind of risk?”

Suddenly hesitant to scare her new friend, Athena replied, “Well, smoking increases your risk of a lot of diseases.”

“Like what?”

Athena sighed. She always did this to herself—got caught between scaring her friends and lying to them. And she absolutely would *not* lie to them. “Diabetes, cancer, heart disease—things like that.”

But Ismaya appeared unconcerned. Shrugging, she said, “I don’t know, Athena. My grandfather has been smoking forever, and he’s perfectly fine.”

“Are you sure?” Athena probed, cringing as Ismaya lit yet another cigarette. “Some health problems need lab tests and imaging. Without those, it can be hard to tell how healthy a person really is.”

Again, Ismaya shrugged. “He seems healthy to me. I’m not worried about it.”

Athena dug the nasal spray out of her backpack. This was going to be much harder than she thought.

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That afternoon, as Athena and Odin made their way to the bus, Farzan caught up with them, holding out a pack of cigarettes. This had become routine for them; Farzan thought it was funny that the new kids didn’t smoke. Athena, on the other hand, was over it.

Eyeing the cigarette wedged between his teeth, she said, “Farzan, did you know that even secondhand smoke is dangerous? That means you’re putting other people’s health at risk, not just yours.”

Farzan frowned. “No, I didn’t know that. What kind of risk are we talking here?” Without waiting for a response, he reached into her backpack to reveal two bottles of nasal spray. “You carry *two* of these now? The air must really be getting to you, huh?”

Rolling her eyes, Athena said, “It’s getting to you, too, even if you can’t feel it.”

“Hey!” Farzan cried as Athena grabbed her nasal spray from his hands and shoved it into her pockets. “I’m sorry this is such an issue for you. I guess... I mean... maybe smoking in the cafeteria is kind of gross. If it matters, I can probably stop doing that.”

Athena gave him a small smile. “Really? I think that would be great.”

Farzan groaned. “You’re lucky we’re friends. Most people here won’t care what you tell them about smoking. They’ve been doing it their entire lives, and they’re not going to quit now.”

*That may be true, Athena thought, but I have to try.*

\*\*\*

Back at her house, Athena diligently researched her home country and why smoking wasn’t such a big problem there.

So far, she had filled half a notepad with health policies from all over the world.

Many countries, she learned, had smoke-free facilities, including schools, businesses, and hospitals. There were even some outdoor spaces where smoking wasn't allowed. Other countries imposed special taxes on tobacco products, age requirements and penalties for underage tobacco use, advertising restrictions, and health warning labels.

Examining Ismaya's pack of cigarettes one afternoon, Athena discovered that it *did* have a health warning label—but Ismaya had never paid attention to it before. Cringing, she read aloud, "Poisonous... organ damage... cancer... harmful... Oh, my... Athena, this is horrible. What is *in* these?"

Athena reached over to tap her finger against the warning label. "Poison."

"I can't believe this," Ismaya cried. "I know you said smoking is dangerous, but I didn't know it was right on the package!" Glancing quickly around the cafeteria, she crumpled up the cigarette pack and hurled it into the nearest trashcan. Dusting off her hands, she said, "We have to do something. Just look at the smoke in here. It's like a toxic cloud."

Athena nodded her agreement, happy to have Ismaya on board. With her help—and maybe Odin's and Farzan's—there was a real opportunity to make a difference at school.

And she now knew exactly where to begin.



# CHAPTER 4: A SMOKE-FREE SCHOOL



## CHAPTER 4: A SMOKE-FREE SCHOOL

Time seemed to pass differently in Athena's new country. A whole month went by, and she hardly noticed. Maybe it was because of the constant rain—or maybe it was because she was so busy. Either way, she wasn't miserable anymore, and that was something.

Of course, she still missed her friends back home. Once a week, they gathered on a video call to catch up. Hui, Conroy, and Zosia brought their notes from school, but after a while, Athena stopped asking them to review with her. She was no longer worried that she would fall behind in her studies and fail to receive a public health degree when she grew up. There was so much to learn here, and her independent research was a bonus.

"My whole life, I've wanted to help people," she told Zosia one Sunday morning, after Hui and Conroy left the call. "Moving here has given me the chance to help my community by introducing the concept of tobacco policies. I know that sounds boring, but it feels so important to me, and I think it'll really impact my new school."

"That's great, Thea," Zosia said, her smiling face lighting up Athena's phone. "I'm so happy you've found purpose there."

Later that day, after much deliberation, Athena decided it was finally time to email Mr. Hakim about her research. Typing quickly so she wouldn't change her mind, she asked if she could present a quick slideshow about tobacco usage and health policy. Then, she closed her laptop and went downstairs to grab a snack.

"I finally did it," she announced, swinging open the pantry door. "I told Mr. Hakim that I'd like to teach my class about smoking tobacco."

Her family members, all seated in the living room, applauded. They knew how hard she'd worked on her research and how much it meant to her.

"Thank goodness," Odin said, dropping his book into his lap. "I can't take one more week of secondhand smoke."

"This could be a real turning point for your school," their dad said proudly. "I hope Mr. Hakim sees the value in your proposition."

Sure enough, a few hours later, Mr. Hakim replied to Athena, asking her to bring her presentation to class the following day. She squealed—this was going to be great! Except...

"Oh, no," she whispered, reading over the email again. "Mr. Hakim smokes, too. What if he hates my presentation?"

Her mom smiled. "Mr. Hakim is a smart man. He's not going to be upset with you for presenting well-documented facts about a dangerous and costly

habit. He might not *quit* smoking, but you may open his eyes to the benefits of a smoke-free school. Is that reason enough to try?"

With a deep sigh, Athena nodded. "Yes—I think so."

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The next morning, though her hands shook, Athena plugged her laptop into Mr. Hakim's projector and pulled up her presentation. Her mouth felt dry, the silence of her classmates closing in around her. What if she was about to offend every single person in the room?

Looking up, Athena saw Ismaya in the front row, smiling at her. Ismaya hadn't smoked since she threw her pack of cigarettes into the cafeteria trashcan.

Athena smiled back. If Ismaya still wanted to be friends after learning about the dangers of smoking, maybe the rest of her peers would, too. And if not, at least Athena did what she could to help them.

"In this presentation," she began, "I will be covering the dangers of smoking tobacco and the health policies that protect children and adults from these risks."

As Athena moved to her next slide, Ismaya raised her hand. "Um, sorry. What's a health policy?"

"Health policies are rules made by governments to keep everyone in a community healthy."

"Got it. Continue."

"With a deep breath, Athena said, "Smoking tobacco

increases one's risk of cancer, heart disease, stroke, lung diseases, and diabetes. Even secondhand smoke is dangerous and can cause migraines, asthma attacks, and even lung cancer."

She paused, tentatively meeting Mr. Hakim's eyes. He had reviewed her presentation before class, but even so, she wondered if it was too blunt. Many of these diseases could be fatal—was she going too far?

But Mr. Hakim only smiled and gestured for her to keep speaking.

Athena moved to her next slide. "In 2004, Ireland became the first country to ban smoking in all indoor workplaces. Since then, many other countries have done the same, giving people the ability to work while breathing fresh air.

"Meanwhile, in the United States, schools are considered smoke-free facilities. Those under the age of twenty-one aren't allowed to buy cigarettes at all."

*This* caused a stir. Her classmates all turned to one another, some of them gasping, others laughing. There was so much smoke in the classroom that Athena suddenly felt the futility of her efforts. Even if she convinced a few of her peers to quit smoking, the difference in air quality would be minimal. Was it really worth it to keep trying?

Yes, whispered a little voice in her heart. *Finish what you started.*

Gathering her courage, Athena went on, "In Ethiopia, smoking is banned in all indoor public places and on public

transport, as well as outdoor areas of schools, government buildings, and amusement parks. And in Brazil, a policy requires tobacco packages to display nine health warnings. They cover the entire back of the box—like this.” She scrolled to the next slide in her presentation for a visual aid.

“Oh, come on,” said a boy in the back row. He was usually very kind, but the longer Athena talked, the more he frowned. “Do these things really make a difference in other countries?”

“Yes, actually,” Athena replied. “These policies mean less illness, fewer deaths, and fewer sales.”

The boy rolled his eyes. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but—who cares? Life is short, and smoking is cool.”

Athena bit the inside of her cheek so she wouldn’t smile. She came prepared for this statement. Scrolling to the end of her slideshow, she revealed a few images of diseased lungs. A hush fell over the room.

“This is what smoking does to your organs,” she said. “Not very cool if you ask me.”

After another moment of silence, Athena scrolled back to the middle of her presentation. “It can be hard to quit smoking, but there are lots of resources available to help. Many teens have successfully quit by switching up their daily routines, staying busy, and exercising more.”

“But...” A girl in the second row paused to think. Finally, she said, “What if we’ve already tried to quit and it didn’t work?”

“That’s normal,” said Athena, giving her a reassuring smile. “If you’re struggling to quit, you can talk to your doctor about a nicotine replacement. I learned about a man who quit smoking in just a few months by using nicotine gum. Quitting is always possible with the right support.”

“This seems like a lot of work,” said the boy in the back row.

Athena shrugged. “Being healthy takes some effort. Do you want to live a long life? I know I do.”

The boy sighed, glancing at the cigarette held between his fingers. After a few moments, he said, “You know what? It’ll be an interesting challenge,” and he tossed two packs into the trashcan behind him.

Athena applauded, thrilled that another one of her classmates was on board.

“I’m done, too,” said the girl in the second row. “I’ll need some help from my doctor, but...” She hurled a half-empty pack of cigarettes into the trash.

Just like that, Athena’s classmates were on their feet, huddled around the trashcan, emptying their desks and backpacks of tobacco. Mr. Hakim looked on, wide-eyed.

*He didn’t think this would work,* Athena realized. But if the smile on his face was any indication, he was happy to be proven wrong.

When she was sure no one else had any questions, Athena said, “I propose that we turn our school into a

smoke-free facility. All in favor?"

To her surprise, even amongst those who had not disposed of their cigarettes, the consensus was clear: Tobacco should be banned from school. Ismaya stood and applauded. Athena closed her presentation and returned to her desk, her mission accomplished.

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"Athena, could you come here for a minute?"

It was lunchtime, and everyone was on their way to the cafeteria. Shrugging at Ismaya in confusion, Athena set down her lunchbox and met Mr. Hakim at his desk. "Yes?"

"I was very impressed by the results of your presentation," he told her. "Would you care to join me for lunch with Principal Eirdis? I think she'd like to see your slideshow, too."

Athena nodded—this was perfect! The principal would be able to turn the school into a smoke-free facility. "I would love that."

"Good. Follow me."

Pulling her laptop from her backpack, Athena grabbed her lunch and followed Mr. Hakim down the hall. *Should I be nervous?* she wondered. Presenting to the principal was a big deal. But then again, her research had already produced big results.

"Principal Eirdis," said Mr. Hakim, entering the

office, “this is Athena, one of our new students. She’s agreed to present her slideshow on smoking tobacco to you.”

“Wonderful! Please come in.”

Athena observed her new principal for the first time—her golden hair pulled back into a bun, her gray eyes bright. Somehow, her thin smile looked both friendly and cold. But she wasn’t smoking, which Athena found comforting.

Connecting her laptop to the projector, she said, “It’s nice to meet you, Principal Eirdis. Thank you for this opportunity.”

“Of course,” the principal said warmly. “I love hearing from students, especially regarding important topics.”

Smiling, Athena said, “Okay, here we go.”

The second presentation of her slideshow felt even better than the first. This time, there were no interruptions—questions, laughter, or otherwise. Athena spoke as clearly and as confidently as she could, and by the time she was finished, the hint of coldness in Principal Eirdis’s smile was gone.

“That was beautiful, Athena,” she said, standing from her desk. “Go ahead and eat your lunch. I’m going to draft a proposal to the school board about turning our campus into a smoke-free facility.”

Grinning, Athena said, “Thank you, Principal Eirdis. This means so much to me.” *Odin and I will feel so much*

*better! But...*

As she opened her lunchbox, Athena asked, “Would it be possible to make the elementary campus smoke-free, too? My little sister goes there.”

For a moment, Principal Eirdis was silent. Then, she said, “I’ll have to give that some thought. I don’t have much sway over the elementary school—but I’ll see what I can do.”

Athena went home that day feeling proud. If nothing else, her classmates were going to attempt to quit smoking. That was a good start—and the rest was out of her hands.





## CHAPTER 5: TEAMWORK



## CHAPTER 5: TEAMWORK

A few days passed, and though her school was still largely filled with secondhand smoke, Athena's classroom was slowly improving. More than half of the students had yet to buy more cigarettes, and a few had made plans to speak with their doctors. Better still, *no one* from Athena's class was smoking in the cafeteria anymore. If they all sat at the same table, they could put some distance between themselves and the secondhand smoke.

"Thea, can I borrow your presentation?" Odin asked her mid-week. "I promise I'll give you credit for it. I'm hoping my classmates will stop smoking, too, once they know the risks."

Athena smiled. "Of course. I'll email it to you as soon as we get home."

But when she opened her inbox an hour later, she had a message from Principal Eirdis. *Finally*, she thought—but her excitement was short-lived.

"Mama, look at this." Athena marched into the kitchen and slid her laptop onto the counter. "The board doesn't think they can make our school a smoke-free facility. Principal Eirdis says, 'So many of our students are chain smokers that asking them to quit may mean they

drop out of school.' What am I supposed to say to that?"

Her mom wrapped an arm around her as she read Principal Eirdis's email from the beginning. At length, she said, "Well, honey, the board has a point. Unfortunately, it's not a healthy one." She sighed. "I don't like the thought of you, Odin, and Rae continuing to ingest secondhand smoke. You may need to work from home for the rest of the semester."

"Work from home?!" Athena cried. "After all the progress my class has made? I'm not ready to give up."

Still frowning at Athena's inbox, her mom said, "My suggestion would be to forward Principal Eirdis your research on how to help chain smokers quit. If the board's response is the same... well, we'll see."

Immediately, Athena found her notes on how to quit chain smoking and sent them to Principal Eirdis. Then, she emailed Odin a copy of her presentation.

"Got it!" he called from upstairs.

Athena buried her face in her hands. "This is so frustrating. I can't believe that after all this work, the answer is just... no."

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That night, Athena went to bed with a heavy heart. She hadn't heard back from Principal Eirdis about the resources she'd sent, and the suspense was crushing her. What if her research changed nothing?

It had the potential to change *everything*.

*Ugh*—she hated waiting.

There had to be something more she could do, some plan she hadn't thought of yet. But what was it? And why wasn't it coming to her?

After hours of sleepless tossing and turning, Athena went to school in a smoky daze. She and Ismaya were supposed to present a book report together, but Athena barely had the energy to stand. Ismaya would have to do most of the talking. The last thing they needed was to put their final grade at risk.

But as the girls stood to address their classmates, inspiration finally struck. In an instant, Athena knew exactly how to convince the board to make their school a smoke-free facility.

All she needed was a little help from her friends.

So, as soon as class was dismissed that afternoon, Athena and Ismaya met Odin and Farzan outside. "Here's what I'm thinking," she said, tripping over her words in excitement. "The four of us can make a presentation for the entire school. We can invite the board members, every teacher, every student, and even the parents to learn about smoking and tobacco policies. If we all work together, I think we have a real chance at making this a smoke-free facility."

Ismaya, who had already heard about Athena's plan during lunch, was grinning. "I'm definitely in."

"I am, too," said Odin. "A bunch of my classmates

quit smoking after seeing Athena's presentation. Just imagine what will happen when the whole school hears it."

"But... what would we have to do?" Farzan asked, rubbing the back of his neck. He seemed skeptical.

"All you have to do is learn a few parts of my tobacco presentation so we can make the case for a smoke-free school."

Farzan sighed. "I don't know, Athena. Your presentation was pretty detailed. I might not have time to memorize all that stuff."

Laughing, Odin said, "Farzan, you have a photographic memory—you'll be fine. You're just worried that everyone will hate you, and they won't. This is important, okay? Give us a hand."

"All right, all right," said Farzan, rolling his eyes. "If you're going to be pushy about it..."

"Let's meet at our house after school tomorrow," Athena suggested. "I'll work on splitting up my research into four parts tonight."

"See you tomorrow," said Ismaya, giving her friend a hug. "I have a good feeling about this, Thea."

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By the end of the week, Athena and her friends had their presentation down to a science. Everyone felt ready to speak before an audience—no matter how large or small. If they could reach even one more student with

the concept of tobacco policies, all their efforts would be worthwhile.

“That’s that,” said Athena, sending yet another email to Principal Eirdis. Though she’d never received a response to her last message, Athena felt sure that this time would be different.

And sure enough, a few hours later, there was a reply waiting for her. “Principal Eirdis is going to arrange a school assembly for us!” she squealed, giving her brother a hug. “We did it, Odin. The board is going to give us a chance.”

“We’d better call Farzan and Ismaya,” said Odin, his expression serious. “We’re only going to get one shot at this.”

Athena agreed. They had to make this assembly count.





# CHAPTER 6: A BREATH OF FRESH AIR



## CHAPTER 6: A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

The following Friday, Athena, Odin, Ismaya, and Farzan arrived at school together, dressed and ready for their presentation. There had been a great debate over whether everyone should wear matching colors—the boys said yes, the girls no—but on the morning of the assembly, everyone was too nervous to care. Athena and Ismaya showed up in dresses, the boys in collared shirts, and they walked to the school auditorium in silence.

As early as they were, Athena expected the room to be empty. Instead, a crowd was gathering before the projector screen, which already displayed the first slide of their presentation. “A Breath of Fresh Air,” read the title page. That was Farzan’s idea—Athena thought it was brilliant.

“Good, you’re all here,” Principal Eirdis greeted them. “Mr. Hakim is waiting for you in the wings. He’ll tell you when it’s time to go onstage.”

Thanking the principal, Athena and her friends walked swiftly behind the curtain. They didn’t want to watch as people continued to funnel into the auditorium. To think that hundreds of people had been invited to listen to them speak!

“I feel sick,” whispered Ismaya, but Mr. Hakim still heard her.

“Don’t be nervous,” he comforted them, smiling. “You know your stuff. This is the easy part.”

“Tell that to my hands,” said Farzan. “They’ve been shaking since I got up this morning.”

Mr. Hakim nodded. “I understand. Just try to remember why you’re doing this. You believe our school should be smoke-free, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, this is what it takes to get there.”

Farzan sighed. “How long do we have?”

Glancing at his watch, Mr. Hakim replied, “About twenty minutes.”

“Let’s go over our notes one more time,” Odin suggested.

Athena could hardly stand to think about this presentation again, let alone practice it. But if it would make everyone else feel better, so be it.

Twenty minutes later, after a brief introduction by Principal Eirdis, Athena and her friends took their places onstage. Blinded by the overhead lights, she could just make out the sixth graders seated in the first three rows of seats. Behind them, she knew, were the seventh graders, including her classmates. Somewhere in the back, behind the rest of the students, were her parents, and along the edges of the auditorium sat each of the teachers and members of the school board.

*No pressure*, she thought to herself. Because this was a lot of pressure.

When the applause died down, Athena said into the microphone, “Thank you all for coming and for leaving your cigarettes outside. As you can see, today’s presentation is called ‘A Breath of Fresh Air.’”

Stepping up to the microphone, Odin continued, “We will be covering the dangers of smoking tobacco and the health policies that protect children and adults from these risks. For reference, health policies are rules made by governments to keep everyone in a community healthy.”

Looking slightly green, Ismaya stepped forward. “Smoking tobacco increases one’s risk of cancer, heart disease, stroke, lung diseases, and diabetes,” she said quickly. “Secondhand smoke is also dangerous and can cause migraines, asthma attacks, and even lung cancer.” Heaving a breath, she practically ran from the microphone and watched, relieved, as Farzan took her place. Just as Athena did in her original presentation, he covered the history of smoke-free facilities in other countries and the policies that were working for them.

“These policies mean less illness, fewer deaths, and fewer tobacco sales,” Athena summarized. Odin then covered her research on how to quit smoking—particularly chain smoking—and the importance of seeking appropriate support.

To drive their points home, Farzan scrolled through

the images of diseased lungs that had made an impact on Athena's classmates. A hush fell over the auditorium.

*Oh, no, Athena thought. Maybe that was too much.*

But then, to her surprise and delight, a chant began to circulate around the room—quiet at first, then louder.

“Let us breathe! Let us breathe! Let us breathe!”

Ismaya turned to Athena, her mouth open in shock. Odin and Farzan leaned in for a high five. The students, teachers, and parents in the audience cheered relentlessly as members of the school board left the auditorium, seemingly to deliberate. Athena and Ismaya watched them go, then joined Mr. Hakim in the wings.

“That was flawless,” he told them, smiling proudly. “If that didn’t convince the board, nothing will.”

Athena cringed—her teacher was right. This was their final stand. If the school was still filled with second-hand smoke after today, she and Odin would have to spend the rest of the semester working from home.

She gave Ismaya a hug. She desperately wanted to stay with her new friends.

Half an hour passed with no word from the school board. Athena and her friends sat together backstage, slouched uncomfortably against a wall. The longer they waited, the less certain they felt that their efforts would prove worthwhile.

Ismaya’s phone lit up, and she groaned. “That’s my mom. She’s ready to leave.” Standing, she said to Athena,

“Call me later, okay? I want to know—”

But at that moment, Principal Eirdis burst through the stage door, strands of hair falling loose from her bun. “You did it!” she cried, pulling Athena to her feet. “The four of you convinced the board to turn our school into a smoke-free facility.”

Athena and Ismaya cheered as Odin and Farzan leapt to their feet.

“But before you leave”—the principal held up her hands—“I was hoping to ask you for a favor.”

Farzan frowned. “What kind of favor?”

“This policy won’t extend to other campuses without our help. Would you all be willing to speak at the elementary and high schools in the area? It will make a big difference for students like Athena and Odin’s little sister.”

Athena turned to her friends. She knew Odin and Ismaya would agree to help, but... “Farzan?”

He sighed. “Of course, Athena. I’m not going to bail on you now.”

Smiling, Athena told Principal Eirdis, “We’re happy to help. When can we start?”

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With two elementary school visits behind them, Athena, Odin, Ismaya, and Farzan entered the local high school with confidence. Their presentation was ingrained in

them now; they could say the whole thing backward without half trying.

But of course, no one was asking them to say it backward. They wrapped up their usual speech to a round of applause and walked swiftly backstage to meet Principal Eirdis.

“You sound like public health professionals,” she said, giving the girls a hug. “I’m so proud of you all.”

“I can’t believe that was the last one,” said Odin. He sounded disappointed. When everyone got over their nerves, presenting became fun—and now their job was complete.

Principal Eirdis smiled. “I have a surprise for you. There were a couple of legislators in attendance today, and they’d like to speak with you all. Would that be okay?”

“Legislators?” Athena gasped. “You mean people who create laws?”

“That’s right. They seem quite impressed by your presentation.”

At the principal’s direction, Athena and her friends made their way into the auditorium to meet with the legislators, a man and a woman. Dressed smartly in suits and each carrying a notepad, they addressed the students as they would their own colleagues.

“What an excellent presentation,” said the woman. “I learned so much from you all.”

The man nodded his agreement. “We appreciate

your research and passion for creating smoke-free environments.”

“It was our pleasure,” Athena said, glancing at the notepads. She wondered what the legislators had written down... but she didn’t have to question it for long.

“We’re going to do everything we can to ban smoking in schools all over the country,” the woman promised. “This is a matter of public health and safety, and we’re fully invested.”

“Thank you again for your efforts,” said the man. Both legislators shook hands with each of the students, then left the auditorium, their phones already pressed to their ears.

“Do you think they’re telling other legislators about our presentation?” whispered Ismaya.

“Maybe,” said Odin. “Wouldn’t that be cool?”

It was better than cool. Athena was reeling with excitement, pride, hope. Nothing compared to the feeling of helping others through health policy—nothing.

“I’m going to call Hui,” she told Odin, then ducked backstage, where it was quieter. Athena had never been so satisfied with a project, nor so certain of her future. She held her breath as she waited for Hui to pick up, anxious to tell her friends back home about the legislators.

“Hi, Thea,” Hui answered.

Athena squealed. “Are Zosia and Conroy there? I have so much to tell you.”





# CHAPTER 7: GOING HOME



## CHAPTER 7: GOING HOME

By the end of the semester, Athena's school felt like a totally different place. She no longer had to carry nasal spray in her backpack or spend her days wishing away the tightness in her chest. The air was clear, and so was her conscience.

"How does it feel to make that kind of impact?" Conroy asked her over the phone.

Athena sighed, at a loss for words.

"I'm happy for you," said Conroy.

She was happy, too. Athena could hardly believe there was ever a time when she didn't want to move. This semester had so thoroughly transformed her that she wasn't ready to go home. She thought she would be excited, but when Ismaya came over to help her pack, all she could do was cry.

*This is ridiculous, she scolded herself. I don't belong here. This was always going to be temporary.*

"You can come back any time, you know," Ismaya said, squeezing the last of Athena's clothes into her suitcase. "This is your second home now."

Athena smiled through her tears. "Do you mean that?"

Laughing, Ismaya said, “Of course. Because of you, everybody at our school has a better chance of living a long, healthy life. Did you really think you wouldn’t be welcomed back?”

“What if it takes years for me to visit?” Athena buried her face in her hands. “I might go home and forget all the ways I’ve grown.”

“I don’t think so, Thea. Besides, I’ll call you all the time.” Ismaya smiled. “Now, come sit on this bag so I can get it closed.”

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Moving day was bittersweet. As Athena and her family made their way through the airport, she was overcome with anticipation. She would fly home, and she would miss her life abroad—but she would also get to see her grandparents, Hui, Conroy, and Zosia. And that would be more than enough until she was ready to travel again.

When would that be? She still didn’t know. But one thing was certain.

Athena was going to study public health in college. She couldn’t believe she ever thought twice about such an obvious choice. Her adult life would be dedicated to advocating for policies that help people live longer, healthier lives.

The sadness drained out of her as she imagined telling her grandfather this news. He had been encouraging

her to pursue a career in public health since she started middle school. When she saw him at their family dinner in a few days, she would tell him all about her recent accomplishments and plans. He would be so happy.

Rae took Athena's hand, bringing her back to herself. "You okay, Thea?"

She smiled. "Yes, just thinking."

"Well, save it for the plane." Rae groaned. "I forgot about jet lag. This is going to be awful."

Athena laughed, pulling her sister toward their gate. "Come on, Rae. Let's go home."



*Writing this series of storybooks is a dream come true and is more rewarding than I ever could have imagined. I want kids of all ages to know that working in health policy is as viable as becoming a doctor, an architect, a teacher, or a farmer.*

*Thank you so much to my teammates for helping me conceptualize and write each book; to our amazing editor, Aquinnah Bree; and to our talented illustrators, Melina Sugliano and Rodrigo Palacios. In creating this series, we have also created a lifelong bond.*

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If there's one thing Athena doesn't want to do this year, it's move halfway around the world. Unfortunately, she doesn't have a choice. Faced with attending a new school, she's shocked to learn that nearly everyone smokes tobacco.

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