

ATHENA'S ADVENTURES  
IN HEALTH POLICY

# CAUTION: HANDLE WITH CARE

FOR AGES  
12-17



BY ANA RITA GONZALEZ  
ILLUSTRATED BY MELINA SUGLIANO

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# CHAPTER 1: LEAD PAINT

At school on Friday, Athena and her friend Saffi stood outside their literature classroom, planning for their first project of freshman year.

“We can study at my house this weekend,” Athena suggested, nose in her planner. “Otherwise, we’ll have to meet up in a study hall on Monday.”

“This weekend is fine,” Saffi said, equally absorbed in her calendar. “I can’t believe we have to write a *literature* report about *preventing poisoning*. What a weird topic.”

Shrugging her shoulders, Athena replied, “I think it’ll be fun. Poisoning is mentioned a lot in *The Odyssey*, and I bet there are plenty of health policies we can reference in our paper.”

Saffi laughed. “Yeah, but health policy is your thing, not mine.”

“I should ask my grandpa about poisoning-related policies when I see him today,” Athena said, mostly to herself. The idea struck her like a match, and she quickly jotted it down in her planner. She *loved* talking with her grandfather about health policy.

“Yeah, I guess that could help.” Saffi was now

digging through her backpack, clearly disinterested. “I’ll see you this weekend, Thea.”

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Later that day, Athena sat on her grandparents’ front porch, a glass of lemonade in one hand. Her first week of high school had come and gone, but summer was still in the air, and she smiled as she listened to the gentle music of wind chimes overhead.

In the rocking chair to her right, Athena’s grandfather was sitting with his eyes closed. She knew he wasn’t sleeping—Grandpa always snored—but he looked peaceful, which made her happy.

He had been her biggest cheerleader since she was in sixth grade, encouraging her to pursue a career in health policy. Ever since she became a vaccine advocate, Athena wanted nothing more than to spend her life helping people. She wasn’t sure of exactly what she wanted to study in college, but she knew she planned to contribute to keeping everyone in her community safe and healthy.

Athena’s chair creaked loudly against the old porch floorboards as she stood. Cringing, she looked at her grandfather, whose eyes were now open. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I was just going to get more lemonade.”

He chuckled. “Perfect timing. My glass is empty, too.”

Together, they made their way inside. Athena loved that she could be silent with Grandpa; there was no need for small talk. But as she quietly refilled their glasses, she remembered the note in her planner.

“Grandpa,” she said, “what are some health policies about poisoning that have been really successful?”

He smiled. “What an excellent question, Thea. Are you working on a project?”

She nodded. “It’s a report about *The Odyssey*. My teacher wants us to cover poisoning because it happens a few times in the story.”

“Well, let’s see...” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. At last, he said, “Have you learned about lead poisoning in school?”

Athena shook her head. “No, but that sounds important.”

“Historically, yes.” Taking his full glass of lemonade, he led the way back to the porch. Once settled, Grandpa continued, “Before the 1950s, most homes contained lead paint. It was also found in children’s toys and many workplaces. Auto repair shops, mines, construction sites... It was everywhere.”

“Paint is made from lead?” Athena frowned. “I didn’t know that.”

“Well, it’s not anymore,” her grandfather said. “Exposure to lead paint was making people sick, so by the 1970s, governments banned it. It’s a policy that keeps everyone safe from lead poisoning, particularly children.”



“Wow,” said Athena, her eyes wide. “It’s incredible that a single change can have a global impact.”

“It is. But of course, the world now has *new* challenges that can lead to poisoning.”

Taking a sip of her lemonade, Athena said, “Tell me more.”

“Poisoning in real life is very different than it seems in the movies,” Grandpa began. “It’s often accidental and usually involves medications.”

“Medications?” Athena raised an eyebrow in confusion. “But medicine is supposed to help people, not hurt them.”

“That’s true,” he said, “but when medications are misused, they can be dangerous. Take too little, and they won’t work properly. Take too much, and they can poison patients.”

Athena felt her stomach drop. “That’s awful—I had no idea.”

Her grandfather nodded somberly. “If a child ingests prescription drugs that don’t belong to them, the consequences can be dire.”

“We must have policies to help with this... right? It’s too important to ignore.”

“Well, unlike lead paint, governments don’t intend to ban prescription drugs,” he said. “Many people rely on them to treat and manage their symptoms. But there are policies in place to ensure that medications come in special bottles with child-resistant caps.”

“Oh, I’ve seen those!” Athena said eagerly. “You have to unlock them in a certain way, which is hard for little kids to do.”

“Exactly. Sometimes, kids go looking for candy and find medications instead. Child-resistant caps protect them from harm.”

Athena nodded, considering. “I didn’t know special caps are the result of a health policy. That seems like a great solution to a big problem.”

“Agreed,” said her grandfather. And they chatted for the rest of the afternoon.

It wasn’t until dinnertime that Athena’s dad pulled into the driveway, her grandmother in the passenger seat beside him. They had spent the day at the hospital, where Grandma met with her doctor to discuss her cancer treatment. Through the windshield, Athena saw that she was smiling and hoped there was good news.

Leaping off the front porch, she hurried to the car and helped her grandmother step out. “Thank you, dear,” she said, patting Athena’s arm. “How was your day?”

“Perfect,” she replied. “How was yours?”

“Not quite perfect, but I’ll take it.” Grandma kissed Athena’s cheek affectionately. “Did you keep your grandpa out of trouble?”

“Always,” Athena said, laughing.

“Hey! I heard that.” Grandpa stood from his rocking chair to greet his wife. “I guess this means our time is up, Thea. Thank you for keeping me company.”

“Of course—any time.”

“I left some muffins on the counter for you,” said Grandma. “Don’t forget to take them.”

Athena hurried inside, grabbed the container of muffins, and bounded back to the porch to hug her grandparents. She wanted to ask about her grandmother’s treatment plan, but Grandma was in such good spirits... Athena didn’t want to ruin it.

*I’ll wait and ask Papa about it, she decided.*

“I love you the most,” she told her grandparents, hugging them a little tighter. “See you next weekend.”

## CHAPTER 2: MEDICATION POISONING

When Athena woke up on Saturday morning, her heart was soaring. Her grandmother was making progress with her cancer treatment! It was the best news her family had heard all year. Nothing was going to bring Athena down for the rest of the weekend—maybe even the rest of the month.

She rolled over to check the time, her eyes widening as she realized how late she'd slept. Saffi would arrive in thirty minutes to discuss their literature report, and Athena wanted to shower and eat breakfast before then.

“Thea?” Her little sister’s voice suddenly rang through the upstairs hall. “Can I please borrow your bike? Mine just popped a tire.”

“Just don’t pop mine!” Athena called back, hurrying to make her bed. Then, sweeping the remnants of her last study session snack into the trashcan, she grabbed an outfit from her closet and ran for the bathroom.

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Saffi was late, as usual. Athena was annoyed with herself for rushing.

She opened the front door to find her friend in the middle of a thumb war with her phone. “Who are you picking fights with on a Saturday morning?” Athena demanded.

“Wilbur started it,” Saffi growled without looking up. “We’re supposed to study for our science quiz later, but he’s bailing on me.” With a deep sigh, she shoved her phone into her pocket and marched inside.

*Well, this will be fun,* Athena thought. But all she said was, “Can I get you a snack?”

“Do you have any lotus flowers?”

It took a moment for Athena to understand the joke, but when she did, she laughed. “No, I don’t have any toxic plants to make you forget about your problems. But we should include that part of *The Odyssey* in our report. It’s a good example of poisoning.”

“Did you talk to your grandpa about poisoning policies?”

Athena smiled, surprised that Saffi had been listening when she mentioned her grandfather at school. “Yes, actually. I talked to him yesterday.”

“And? What did you learn?”

As the girls made their way to the kitchen, Athena told Saffi everything her grandfather had taught her about lead and medication poisoning. “It’s just amazing how health policies can change the world,” she said, pouring blueberries into a bowl. “I mean, think about how far we’ve come.”

“I can’t believe how easy it used to be for kids to get into medicine bottles.” Saffi shook her head. “We should put that in our report, too.”

“Maybe we can compare it to the way Circe uses poisonous drugs in the book,” suggested Athena. “Remember how she gives Odysseus’s crew amnesia?”

Saffi nodded, her mouth full of berries. Swallowing, she said, “Okay, let’s draft an outline before we forget this stuff.” She reached to grab something out of her backpack, then paused. “Are we working here in the kitchen?”

Athena shrugged. “Is that okay?”

“Um, yeah, sure.” Saffi retrieved her laptop and plunked it gracelessly onto the counter. “Do you have chewing gum?”

“In my backpack. I’ll go get it.”

Saffi opened a new document and started typing. “I’ll be here.”

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That evening, when Athena got home from swimming practice, Aunt Dara’s voice drifted over from the living room, and she spotted her little cousin Hugo driving a toy car in circles on the floor.

“Thea!” Hugo cried. Abandoning his car, he rushed over to hug her legs.

“Hi, Hugo,” she said, picking him up to give him a

squeeze. “I didn’t know you were coming over today.”

Squirming, Hugo said, “Watch, watch!” Athena put him down, and he ran to retrieve his car, driving it through the air like a plane.

“Did you get a new toy?” Athena held out her hands. “Let me see it.”

But Hugo wasn’t interested in sharing. Squealing with laughter, he ran for the living room and into his mother’s arms. Smiling, Athena followed.

“Hi, Thea,” said Aunt Dara. “I wasn’t sure we would catch you today.”

“Practice ran long,” Athena explained. “It’s been harder now that we’re in high school.”

“That’s right! How has high school treated you this week?” Aunt Dara asked as Hugo drove his car over her toes.

Athena sat on the couch beside her mom and replied, “Pretty well. I like my new teachers, and I have classes with all my friends. I think it’s going to be a good semester.”

“Fabulous. Are you too busy to babysit for me on Tuesday night? Your uncle is out of town, and I’m supposed to be at a housewarming party.”

“I can do that. What time should I be at your house?”

As Athena and her aunt chatted through baby-sitting details, Mama meandered into the kitchen to speak with Papa—and little Hugo simply disappeared.

“Where did he wander off to?” Aunt Dara picked up her purse. “We need to get going.”

Athena grabbed Hugo’s car from where he’d left it on the floor. “Don’t worry—I’ll find him.”

Tiptoeing through the living room, she peeked behind every chair and crouched to check beneath the coffee table. She and Hugo loved to play hide-and-seek when she babysat, so she figured he was just waiting for her to catch him. “Huuuugoooo,” she sang. “I’m going to find you...”

She paused, listening for his laugh. But no sound came from the living room.

Athena turned her attention to the doorway at her back—her brother Odin’s bathroom. Maybe Hugo had wandered in there. Still carrying the toy car, she crept into the room. To her surprise, Hugo wasn’t hiding after all; he was just sitting on the floor.

“Come here, you,” she said, reaching to pick him up—and then she stopped. Her blood ran cold.

In Hugo’s tiny fist was an orange medicine bottle, the one that Odin’s oral surgeon had given him after he had his wisdom teeth extracted last week. There were still pills in there—powerful ones—and Hugo was trying to unscrew the cap.

“Nope, nope, nope.” Athena grabbed the medicine bottle with a slightly trembling hand and exchanged it for Hugo’s toy car. He giggled happily as she shook the container, ensuring that the cap was still on. Sure



enough, the pills stayed locked inside.

*Safe*, she thought, breathing a sigh of relief. Her grandfather had been right; child-resistant caps really worked.

Hugging her cousin to her hip, Athena closed Odin's bathroom cabinet and carried Hugo to the front door, where Aunt Dara and Mama were waiting.

"There you are, little man!" Aunt Dara exclaimed as Athena handed him over. "Did you go on an adventure?"

"You could say that." Athena passed the medicine bottle to her mom. "He got into Odin's bathroom cabinet."

Aunt Dara gasped. "Did he open those pills?"

"No," Athena assured her. "The child-resistant cap kept him safe."

"Thank goodness," Mama said, her face pale. "I'll make sure these either get mailed back or go straight to the pharmacy for safe disposal. I completely forgot Odin had leftover pain medication."

"I drive past the pharmacy on my way home," Aunt Dara said. "I can drop them off for you."

Athena hugged her relatives goodbye, took one of Grandma's muffins from the container, and went outside to sit in the day's last bit of sunshine. She'd had enough excitement for one week.

*You'll never guess what just happened*, she texted Saffi, and they chatted until dinnertime.

## CHAPTER 3: CARBON MONOXIDE

As Athena and her mom cleaned up the kitchen that night, Mama said, “Thank you for your quick reaction earlier. If Hugo had gotten into those pills, we’d have an emergency on our hands.”

Athena shrugged off her mom’s gratitude. “Of course. But I think it was the child-resistant cap that protected Hugo, not me. Grandpa and I were talking about medication poisoning yesterday, so I know medicine bottles are designed to keep little kids safe.”

Her mom smiled. “That’s very true. What else did you and your grandfather discuss?”

“Well, it started with lead paint,” Athena explained. “Saffi and I are working on a literature report about poisoning prevention. I asked him about some health policies we could mention, and banning lead paint was one of them.”

“I see. Did you two talk about carbon monoxide poisoning?”

Athena shook her head as she began drying the dishes. “No. What’s that?”

“Carbon monoxide is a poisonous, flammable gas,” her mom said. “It’s also nearly impossible to detect

without an alarm because it's colorless, odorless, and tasteless.”

Glass clattered as Athena stacked the dinner plates in the cupboard and turned to face Mama. “That sounds super dangerous. We must have health policies to help with that, right?”

“Of course. There are policies in place to ensure that houses, hotels, and dormitories are equipped with carbon monoxide detectors. Just like a smoke detector is activated in case of fire, carbon monoxide detectors alert people of poisonous gas.”

“So, what should I do if I hear a carbon monoxide alarm?”

“You would evacuate, just as you would during a fire,” her mom told her. “Then, someone would need to call emergency services to report the incident.”

Athena nodded, taking this in as quickly as she could. “And what if someone has already been poisoned? What would happen to them?”

“People with carbon monoxide poisoning usually have headaches, dizziness, and vomiting as their initial symptoms, so you’d want to watch out for that.”

Athena frowned, a new thought striking her. “Do we have a carbon monoxide detector? I’ve never seen it.”

Mama laughed. “I’m sure you’ve seen it. You probably just didn’t recognize it.” Drying her hands, she said, “Come on. I’ll show you.”

Together, Athena and her mom walked upstairs

and stood in the hallway between the bedrooms. Plugged into an outlet on the wall was a white box. “That’s our carbon monoxide detector,” Mama said, pointing. “We keep it here so that if there’s an emergency in the middle of the night, it’ll wake everyone up.”

Athena crouched to take a closer look at the white box. She had, in fact, seen it before, but she never knew what it was—until today. “Thanks for showing this to me, Mama. It’s nice to know that we’re protected, especially when we’re sleeping.”

Her mom smiled as she pulled Athena into a hug. “I’m so proud of you, sweetheart. Your interest in health policy is going to help a lot of people someday.”

Sighing happily, she replied, “I hope so.”



## CHAPTER 4: VAPING

Several days later, Athena filled a bowl with pretzels, grabbed her backpack, and led Saffi to her room so they could continue working on their report. Rae had already claimed the kitchen table, and Athena knew her little sister would talk for *hours* if she and Saffi joined her. No one would get anything done.

Flicking on her bedroom light, Athena dug through her backpack until she found her literature notes. “I think we should start by finding a way to address the poisoned arrows in our report,” she said, flipping through her copy of *The Odyssey*. “Homer mentions them multiple times, you know? Maybe we can connect them to a present-day form of poisoning and prevention.”

“Sounds good to me,” Saffi replied as a cool blast of air entered the room.

Athena looked up to find that her friend had opened the window and was sitting on the sill. “Saf, it’s cold...” she started to say, but she stopped short. In Saffi’s hand was a vape, and she was raising it to her lips.

*Oh, no. Gross.*

Vaping wasn’t new to Saffi—Athena had watched her do this in public before—but it felt different now, in

Athena's room. She knew her parents would never stand for it under their roof.

Like a poisoned arrow to the lungs, vape is toxic.

Trying to keep calm, Athena asked, "Where did you get that?"

"Ordered it with my mom's card," Saffi replied shamelessly, puffing aerosol mist into the evening sky.

*Of course*, Athena thought. Even though there are health policies to stop teens from buying vapes, Saffi had found a way.

"Vapes have nicotine, you know," Athena had explained to her in the past. "They're super addictive. Plus, they have cancer-causing chemicals, heavy metals, and toxic flavorings. Don't you think those things are worth avoiding?"

Saffi had only shrugged. "Life is short, Thea. We should enjoy it while we're young."

Frowning, Athena replied, "But you'll want to quit someday, right? Don't you think it will be tougher when you're older? Nicotine withdrawal can be hard, especially on your mental health."

At this, Saffi laughed. "Vaping *helps* my mental health, okay? Let it go."

Now, watching Saffi vape in her bedroom, Athena wondered if her friend was depressed. She was so reliant on vaping—*on poisoning herself*—to feel better. It wasn't healthy.

Athena bit the inside of her cheek. She could only

solve one problem at a time, and stopping her friend from vaping in the house was the first goal. She hated to make Saffi feel bad, but she valued her health and that of her parents and siblings. It was time to draw a boundary.

“Saffi, if you’re going to do that, please take it outside. I don’t want the chemicals landing on my stuff.”

Looking down at the vape as if for the first time, Saffi said, “Gosh, I’m sorry, Thea. I wasn’t thinking.” Stuffing the vape into her backpack, she added, “It’s a nasty habit, I know. It just *happened* one day.”

Athena gave her friend a sad smile. “It’s not too late to quit, Saf. I can help you... if you want.”

Saffi sighed, frowning in thought. Her fingers tapped the zippered pocket where her vape was stashed—the same pocket she’d been reaching for on Saturday morning, in the kitchen. At length, she said, “Okay. I guess it’s worth a shot.”

Putting their homework on hold, Athena pulled her laptop from her backpack and immediately began researching ways to overcome nicotine withdrawal. “It sounds like you’re going to need some distractions,” she said after a few minutes of reading, “and things that will keep you motivated to quit.”

“Like what?” Saffi asked. Already, she sounded less than thrilled about her decision.

“Physical activity might be good,” Athena said. “You run, don’t you? That seems like a great distraction.”



“Yeah... I guess that could work. What else?”

Athena scrolled further down the page. “You could try breathing exercises or chewing gum. Both of those would keep your mouth too busy to vape.” She sucked in a breath. “Oh... that’s why you asked me for gum on Saturday.”

“Well, I know better than to vape in your parents’ kitchen.” A glimmer of hope lit up Saffi’s face. “I can try breathing exercises, too. But how am I going to stay motivated when it gets hard?”

Grabbing her phone, Athena said, “What if we text our friends and tell them you’re trying to quit vaping? We can let them know that you’ll need all the support and encouragement you can get over the next few weeks.”

Saffi cringed. “I don’t know, Thea. It’ll be so embarrassing if I fail.”

“You won’t fail,” Athena said confidently, “and we’ll be rooting for you either way.” Handing her phone to Saffi, she added, “What do you think of that?”

Her friend read aloud, “*Hey guys! Saffi just decided to quit vaping. Let’s hype her up!*” After a pause, she asked, “This is for our regular group chat, right? The one with only our close friends?”

“Yes,” Athena confirmed.

With a deep breath, Saffi said, “Fine. You can send it. But I don’t think it will make much of a difference.”

“Whatever you say.” Athena sent the text—and received a reply almost immediately.

Yesssss, *Saf!* Zosia encouraged.

*SO PROUD OF YOU!!!* Hui texted.

*You can do this, Saffi!* Conroy added.

“Wow.” Saffi’s eyes widened as her phone chimed with text after text. “You know, Thea? This might actually work.”

“I think so, too,” Athena said. “And I just figured out how we can connect the poisoned arrows from the book to our daily lives.”

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Later that night, when their outline was updated to include a comparison between poisoned arrows and vaping, Athena and Saffi went downstairs to wait for Saffi’s mom to pick her up. A few minutes before she arrived, Athena whispered, “Are you going to tell them?”

Saffi raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“I mean, are you going to tell your parents that you want to quit?”

Shaking her head, Saffi whispered, “They don’t know I’ve been vaping in the first place. No reason to freak them out now.”

Athena looked out the front window as Saffi’s mom pulled into the driveway. “I think they can help you quit, Saf. They can hold you accountable, you know? And I’m sure they’ll be proud of you for making a healthy decision.”

Squinting doubtfully, Saffi said, “Okay, I’ll tell them—

but only because I *really* want to quit. My mom will be so mad that I won't have a choice."

"Let me know how it goes." Athena hugged her friend tightly. "And anyway, *I'm* proud of you."

Saffi opened the front door and stepped onto the porch. Smiling over her shoulder, she said, "Thanks, Thea."

As Saffi's family car disappeared around the corner, Athena sighed. She was so relieved that her friend was making a positive change—but she still needed to clean up any evidence of the vape. Saffi hadn't been using it in Athena's bedroom for long, but... poison was poison. Athena wanted it gone.

She was about to head for the kitchen, where the cleaning supplies were stored, when her phone chimed with a text. Glancing at the screen, she saw a message from Saffi. *Are you sure I can't tell YOUR parents instead of mine?*

Athena laughed as she replied, *You can do this!!! Just get it over with!*

*Fineeee.*

## CHAPTER 5: CLEANING SUPPLIES

Crouching to get a better look in the cupboard, Athena began digging through the cleaning supplies. She wasn't exactly sure *what* she was looking for, but she hoped she'd know it when she saw it.

"Thea? What are you doing?"

Her mom stood behind her, mild confusion on her face. Athena didn't often go through this cabinet; she kept disinfecting wipes in her bathroom and rarely needed anything else. She didn't want to tell her mom why she needed something stronger—but there was no getting around it now.

"I'm looking for something to clean up after Saffi."

"Oh. Did she spill something on the carpet?"

"Not exactly." Athena sighed. "She was vaping in my room—just for a few minutes. I asked her to stop, and she did."

Her mom frowned, clearly displeased. "That was quite rude of her. I'm sorry she put you in that position."

"Me too," Athena said, grabbing a bottle of bleach and a canister of air freshener. It was easier than meeting Mama's eyes. "But she's planning to quit, so that's good."

"I understand that you want to clean up the toxins,"

her mom said, watching as Athena rose to her feet, “but let’s hold off on the bleach.”

Frowning, Athena finally looked at her mom. “Why? Isn’t it powerful?”

“It is, and it’s very harsh. When it’s used incorrectly, bleach can cause burns, chest pain, stomach pain, and vomiting, so I’d rather you choose something else.”

Athena held up the air freshener. “Well, can I use this?”

“I’ve actually been meaning to throw that away,” her mom replied, taking the canister so she could skim the label. “Air fresheners have toxic ingredients that can cause breathing problems.”

Huffing, Athena asked, “Then what am I supposed to use?”

Her mom laughed gently. Reaching under the sink, she grabbed a glass spray bottle and handed it to Athena. “This is a water and vinegar mixture that will work perfectly. And this”—reaching into a different cabinet—“is a beeswax candle to help with the smell.”

“I’m sorry,” Athena said, “but are you telling me that even *cleaning supplies* are poisonous?”

“Many of them are, yes. But these products are non-toxic—and they’ll still get the job done.”

Sighing, Athena took the candle. “How do you know all this stuff?”

“Well, there are health policies in place to help us choose cleaning supplies,” her mom explained. “Product

labels must include a signal word like ‘warning’ or ‘danger’ if they’re poisonous.”

“But what’s the difference between ‘warning’ and ‘danger?’”

“A warning label means that a product is *potentially* harmful,” Mama told her, “but a danger label lets us know that a product is immediately hazardous. That’s what you’ll see on the bleach bottle.”

Setting aside the glass bottle and the candle, Athena reached once again for the bleach. Sure enough, it had a danger label, and... “There’s other stuff here, too,” she said, skimming the text. “It looks like more detail.”

“That’s correct,” said her mom. “Labels must also include more detailed hazard and precautionary statements, so we can understand the risks and how to prevent them. There are also response, storage, and disposal statements, which help us respond to emergencies, store the product, and eventually dispose of the bottle.”

In a moment of clarity, something her grandfather had told her returned to Athena. “*Unlike lead paint, governments don’t intend to ban prescription drugs,*” he’d said. Instead, new poisoning problems had to be addressed in new ways, such as child-resistant caps and age restrictions.

“So, labels are a form of prevention,” she said, mostly to herself. “They’re kind of like child-resistant caps.”

“Exactly,” said her mom. “And remember how

Hugo was prevented from accessing Odin’s medication? Labels work the same way. They help to stop us from using bleach and other chemicals incorrectly.”

“But...” Athena heaved a breath. A terrible thought had occurred to her, and she wanted to ignore it. Even so, she forced the words out: “What if Hugo *had* gotten into Odin’s medicine? Would we... would we have been able to save him?”

Mama pulled Athena into a hug, rubbing her back as if to wipe away her distress. “Oh, honey. He would’ve been okay.”

“But how do you know?”

“In case of poisoning—or even *suspected* poisoning—the safest thing to do is call the poison control center for help. That’s what we would’ve done had Hugo managed to open the medicine bottle. The phone number is on the refrigerator—see?”

Athena looked over her shoulder at one of her family’s many refrigerator magnets. Stationed between random letters of the alphabet was a list of emergency phone numbers, including one for the poison control center. She’d seen the magnet a hundred times, and yet, she’d never really *looked at it* until now. With another deep breath, she asked, “What happens when you call poison control? Is it like calling for an ambulance?”

“Kind of,” her mom replied. “An expert answers the phone, asks a series of questions, and makes recommendations. They might suggest calling emergency

services, driving to the hospital, or managing things at home. But no matter what, it's important to stay calm and listen carefully."

Holding her phone close to the refrigerator, Athena snapped a picture of the magnet so she would always have access to the emergency numbers. She felt that a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Turning back to her mom, she said, "Thanks, Mama. It's good to know that there's always someone we can call for help."

"Of course, babe. Now—" handing her the spray bottle and candle "—go take care of the chemicals in your room."

Athena grabbed a cleaning rag and headed upstairs, a smile on her face. She couldn't wait to see her grandfather that weekend so she could tell him all the new things she'd learned about poisoning. She hoped he could teach her even more.

Just as she was about to spray the water and vinegar mixture on her windowsill, Athena heard her text tone. Picking up her phone, she saw a new message from Saffi.

*I told my parents. They're happy I'm quitting and want to help. Thanks, Thea.*

Athena smiled. As she was constantly being reminded, health policy is transformative.





## CHAPTER 6: PREVENT POISONING

A week later, when the first draft of their literature report was due, Athena and Saffi sat in a crowded study hall, giving their paper one final review before submitting it.

“I can’t look at this thing for another second,” Saffi complained, her hands pressed against her temples. She was chewing three pieces of gum in an effort to distract herself from vaping, but the process was giving her a headache.

“Maybe you just need a break,” Athena suggested. “Or a snack. I have an extra protein bar if you want it.”

Saffi shook her head, glancing around the room as if for rescue. Then, suddenly, she perked up. Standing so the other students could see her, she asked, “If Athena and I read our literature report aloud, could you guys give us some feedback? I promise it’s more interesting than whatever you’re doing right now.”

Athena shook her head, laughing. Saffi had no shame.

But their peers only shrugged and nodded. “Is this the one about poisoning?” asked Wilbur, who was seated in the front row.

“Yes,” Saffi replied.

“Cool. Let’s hear it.”

Together, Saffi and Athena made their way to the front of the room, each holding a copy of their report. “It’s called, ‘Caution: Handle with Care,’” Athena said.

Saffi immediately plunged into the introductory paragraph. “In his epic poem, *The Odyssey*, Homer addresses themes such as justice, fate, memory—and poisoning.”

“Poisoning is mentioned throughout the poem,” continued Athena. “Poisoned arrows, poisonous drugs, and poisonous fruit are all included in the story. Unfortunately, though Odysseus’s tale is fiction, the dangers of poison are real, both historically and in the present. Today, preventive health policies are our strongest defense against poisoning.”

From there, Saffi covered the dangers of lead paint and why it’s no longer used in homes, toys, or workplaces. “Like the poisonous lotus flowers in the poem,” she concluded, “toxic paint was harming the health of the population. But now, thanks to restrictive policies, people are safe from illnesses caused by lead.”

“Similarly, policies have been created to combat medication poisoning,” Athena read. “Though Circe uses drugs to poison adults in *The Odyssey*, real-world medication poisoning was a problem for kids before the invention of child-resistant caps.” She went on to explain how small policy changes can make a big impact, then turned the discussion over to her friend.

With a deep breath, Saffi read, “Poisoned arrows, while terrifying to imagine, aren’t a concern in daily life. Rather, the world faces a quieter, more sinister form of poisoning: vaping.”

When Athena looked, Saffi’s hands were shaking, very slightly, almost imperceptibly. She wrapped an arm around her, encouraging Saffi to continue.

“Vapes are a danger to one’s heart and lung health,” she read. “They contain cancer-causing chemicals and nicotine, which can be addictive. They may also contain flavorings, which, despite being toxic, are particularly appealing to teens.” She paused again, her face pale. Turning to Athena, she said quietly, “I need more gum—your turn.” And Saffi ran for her backpack.

Quickly scanning the final page of their report, Athena read, “By increasing the price of vapes, implementing age restrictions and smoke-free policies, and prohibiting the sale of vapes near schools and parks, communities can protect teens from the harmful effects of poison. This is the power of prevention.”

Athena looked up to find Saffi spitting gum into the trashcan. Not two seconds later, she was sticking three new pieces into her mouth. Athena powered through their concluding paragraph, intending to take her friend outside for some fresh air, but instead, Saffi rejoined her at the front of the room and asked, “Does anyone have any questions or comments?”

“Yeah. Are you okay?” Wilbur was frowning at Saffi with concern.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just... recovering from a poisoned arrow... sort of.”

Eyes widened around the room as the other students realized what Saffi was insinuating. Athena squeezed her friend’s hand—to remind her that she wasn’t alone.

After a long moment, Wilbur asked, “Is it hard to quit vaping?”

“Yes,” Saffi told him honestly, “but I have a plan and lots of support. I’ll be okay.”

“I’m sure you will be,” he replied as the bell rang overhead.

Athena and Saffi hurried to collect their things and walk to their literature classroom, but before they could leave, another girl stopped them. “Can I ask you something?” she said, fidgeting nervously beside Saffi’s desk.

Saffi shrugged. “Sure. Was part of our report confusing?”

“Not really. I’m just wondering...” She sighed. “What are you doing to quit vaping? I just started a few months ago, and I didn’t know it was poisonous. If that’s true, I want to stop, no matter how hard it might be.”

Smiling, Saffi said, “I can meet you back here at the end of the day, and we can talk about it as much as you want.”

“Really? That would be great. I’ll see you then.”

As the girl disappeared into the hallway, Saffi turned to Athena and said, “I can’t believe someone is asking *me* for advice about quitting. I’m not even out of the woods yet.”

Athena gave her friend a reassuring hug. “You’re past the worst of it, Saf. *Of course* she wants to talk to you.”

“It’s true what they say, you know. Prevention *is* the best medicine.”

“Yes,” Athena agreed. “But recovery takes courage—and you’re doing great.”

Saffi smiled. “Thanks, Thea.”

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You can practice health policy just like Athena. Prevent poisoning by safely storing medicines, being aware of carbon monoxide detectors, avoiding vaping, and using cleaning supplies according to their labels.

IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, PLEASE CALL YOUR  
LOCAL POISON CONTROL CENTER.





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# CAUTION: HANDLE WITH CARE

ATHENA HAS NEVER THOUGHT MUCH ABOUT POISON,  
BUT ACCORDING TO HER GRANDFATHER,  
IT'S AN IMPORTANT HEALTH POLICY ISSUE.

AS SHE BEGINS HIGH SCHOOL,  
SHE LEARNS ABOUT THE DANGERS OF LEAD PAINT,  
CARBON MONOXIDE, TOXIC CLEANING PRODUCTS,  
AND OTHER POISONOUS SUBSTANCES.

BUT ARE PREVENTIVE POLICIES ENOUGH  
TO KEEP HER AND HER LOVED ONES SAFE?