

ATHENA'S ADVENTURES
IN HEALTH POLICY

CARE FOR MYSELF, CARE FOR OTHERS



FOR AGES
12-17

BY ANA RITA GONZALEZ AND NADIA VRANJAC
ILLUSTRATED BY MELINA SUGLIANO

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CHAPTER 1: THE MENTAL HEALTH BOOK CLUB

Athena groaned as another error message popped up on her phone. Her storage was full—again.

“Move your photos to the cloud,” Conroy said impatiently, not for the first time. “You can’t expect to keep thousands of pictures on there and still have space for other things.”

“But the memories!” said Athena and Zosia at the same time.

Athena glared at her friends. “Don’t mock me, Zo.”

Laughing, Zosia said, “Sorry, Thea, but you’re very predictable.”

“So what if I like storing my photos locally?” Athena demanded, closing the error message so that she could scroll. Her summer album was overflowing with memories. Going to a concert with her friends, swimming in the community pool, visiting her grandparents, going to camp—days that made her heart feel full. “They’re the most important things I save.”

“And now,” said Conroy, snatching the phone from Athena’s hands, “they’re going to be the most important things *in the cloud*.”

“Give it back!” Athena shouted—but she was laughing

as she chased him out of her room and down the hall.

“Not until you let me offload *at least* one album.”

“Make it a big one!” said Hui, who stood in Athena’s bedroom doorway, videoing.

“Ha!” Athena cried as she finally wrangled her phone from Conroy’s grip. Pulling up a photo from her summer album, she said, “You know what? This is going in the cloud first.”

It was a picture of Conroy crossing the finish line of their community’s annual mud run. He was *covered* in muck, arms raised over his head, cheering. Athena expected him to hate it, but when Conroy looked at her screen, all he said was, “Great. Get to it.”

As Athena’s photos began uploading, she sat at her desk to text individual snapshots to Hui, Zosia, and Conroy. Their smiling faces lit up her phone screen like fireworks. It had been the best summer of their lives, and now, it was time to go back to school.

“I can’t believe we’re sophomores,” Zosia said softly. She was smiling at a group photo from the concert.

“We’re so close to college,” said Athena, her heart leaping.

“Ugh, don’t say that.” Conroy was scrolling through photos, too. “I’m not ready.”

“Well, we don’t have to be ready *yet*,” Athena said. But in her heart of hearts, she *felt* ready. She planned to join the ranks of the world’s public health professionals, a goal that her friends fully supported and encouraged.

Not *all* her classmates understood her interest in and love for health policy, but Hui, Zosia, and Conroy did, and that was enough.

“Are you still planning to become a psychologist, Hui?” asked Zosia.

Hui nodded. Ever since she was diagnosed with anxiety in middle school, she’d wanted to do something to help students with mental health challenges. “We need more psychologists, you know? More kids and teens are being diagnosed with mental health disorders every day. They need support.”

“But will they actually seek help?” asked Conroy, his brow furrowed with concern. “There’s still so much stigma around mental health.”

“That’s true,” said Hui. “Stigma does stop people from pursuing care and treatment. But I’m trying to learn more about those challenges so I can help kids overcome them.”

“There are a lot of layers to it, you know?” Athena chimed in. She and Hui had been reading books on mental health and discussing them together—almost like a club—and it was one of their favorite parts of the week. “Stigma can come from others, but sometimes, it has more to do with self-perception.”

Hui nodded. “When I was diagnosed with anxiety, I felt a lot of shame, not because someone told me I should, but because I thought my diagnosis made me weak. Now, I see how I’m a sensitive, empathetic person

—not a broken one.”

“I love those things about you,” Zosia said, giving Hui a hug. “You’re so sweet and kind.”

“That’s why you’re going to be such a good psychologist,” Athena agreed.

But Conroy was still frowning. “I just think you have to be really self-aware to pick a good psychologist and stick with therapy. Most kids our age just won’t do it.”

Smiling, Hui said, “Things are changing, Conroy. Plus, teens can get support from parents and school counselors as they’re going through therapy. I know I have.”

“I want to have good mental health now so I can be a healthy adult,” Zosia said. “That seems way easier than being treated when I’m older.”

“Prevention is the best medicine,” Hui agreed.

“You two read a lot about mental health.” Zosia pointed to Hui and Athena in turn. “What can I do to improve mine?”

“Well, according to this book,” Athena said, tapping one of the titles on her desk, “it’s important to reduce stress, express creativity, spend time outside, connect with loved ones, get enough sleep, and learn to identify, talk about, and manage emotions.”

Conroy shook his head, amazed. “How do you remember all that stuff?”

Athena laughed. “They’re things I practice already. I’m sure you do a lot of them, too, right?”

“I guess. It’s easier to feel relaxed and get enough

sleep in the summer, but I don't know how I'll feel when we get back to school next week."

"Speaking of which," said Hui, checking the time, "can we talk about Rainier for a minute? He was diagnosed with depression this summer, and I know he's being treated, but I'm still worried about how back-to-school season will affect him."

Athena didn't know Hui's friend Rainier very well, but based on her brief interactions with him, he did seem... unhappy, at best. "Maybe we can ask my parents about this at dinner. They know a lot about health policy; they can probably give us some advice on how to support Rainier this year."

Zosia nodded. "I think that's a good idea."

At that moment, as if he'd overheard their conversation, Athena's brother Odin called, "Dinner!"

"Perfect timing." Hui laughed as Conroy hurried out of the room and down the stairs. "We'd better run before Conroy and Odin eat all the food."

"That's funny," Athena said, giggling. "Odin says *you* eat all the food."

Hui's jaw dropped in offense. "Oh, I'm going to give him such a hard time about that," she said, and she ran downstairs.

Zosia looped her arm through Athena's, saying, "Well, this should be entertaining."

Hui had barely finished shoveling potato salad into her mouth when she turned to Athena's mom and said, "Can I ask you a question about my friend Rainier?"

Mama smiled. "Of course. But I don't know Rainier, so I might not be of much help."

Hui was still chewing, so Athena clarified, "It's not about *Rainier*, exactly. It's about his diagnosis. He's being treated for depression."

"I see." Athena's mom set her fork down on her plate. "Are you girls concerned about him?"

"I'm very concerned," said Hui, setting her napkin on the table and shifting her focus to the conversation. "Rainier was diagnosed with anxiety around the same time as me, and I can only imagine having depression on top of it."

"You're a good friend, honey," Athena's mom said, reaching to take Hui's hand. "I understand that you're worried about Rainier, but I think you can trust his psychotherapist with his treatment."

"May I chime in?" Athena's dad asked, and Hui nodded. "It can take several weeks for antidepressants to take effect, so if Rainier's diagnosis is still new, it may be too early to see a difference in his mood."

"So... his medication might not be helping him yet?" asked Athena's little sister, Rae. She was the youngest person at the table, having just started middle school, but that had never stopped her from joining important conversations.

"Exactly," said Papa. "I think the best thing you can

do, Hui, is make sure Rainier knows that you're here to support him. Sometimes, it's small gestures that make the biggest impact, especially when someone is struggling with their mental health."

"You could text him," Zosia suggested. "You know, just to remind him that he's not alone."

Athena nodded. "That's a good idea."

Hui was nodding, too, seemingly to herself. Athena thought she looked a bit lost. Then, perking up, she said, "Okay. I'll text him when we're done cleaning the kitchen. Isn't it your night to do the dishes, Thea?"

"I'll get them," Odin volunteered as he stood from the table. "You guys should go send that text."

Hui smiled. "Thanks, Odin. We owe you."

"Don't I know it." But he was smiling back.

I know I've said this before, but I'm here if you ever want to talk.

Hui, Athena, and Zosia read and reread the text on Hui's phone. Conroy had already gone home to be with his family, leaving the girls to spend the evening by themselves. They popped a bag of popcorn and put on a movie, silently hoping that Rainier would reply and let them know that he was okay.

But when the movie ended, it was clear that he would not be texting back any time soon.

CHAPTER 2: HEALTH POLICY NERD

The first week of sophomore year hit Athena like a freight train. Everywhere she turned, there were more assignments and higher expectations. Freshman year felt like a drill by comparison.

This was going to be a real race.

“For your first group project,” her biology teacher was saying, “I would like you to brainstorm an appropriate research topic and draft both an essay and a presentation. Any questions before I split you up?”

The class was silent, so the teacher began calling out letters. Athena paid close attention until she was told to join Group C. Sweeping her textbook, notebook, and pencil off her desk, she joined her peers on the floor near the window.

“Hi,” she said pleasantly. Though she wasn’t particularly close to anyone in her group, she knew them all from last year, and that was some comfort. Maybe, by the end of the semester, they would all be friends.

“Hey,” said the boy to her right. She was pretty sure his name was Ethan. “So... does anyone have any topic ideas to get us started?”

“I have one.” Athena opened her notebook to a

blank page and picked up her pencil. “What if we researched biology’s role in public health? I know it’s important when identifying the causes of diseases and how they can be controlled.”

The girl to her left, Michiko, laughed loudly. But when no one joined her, she sobered up and said, “Sorry. I thought that was a joke.”

Athena shook her head, confused. “No. I thought it was a pretty good idea.”

“It’s just that... I kind of thought you’d outgrow this obsession, Athena.”

“Obsession? With what?”

“*Health policy*,” said the other members of her group in perfect chorus.

“Don’t you ever get tired of thinking about it?” asked Ethan.

Tired of health policy? Athena shook her head—never! But this only sparked more of Michiko’s laughter.

“Okay, guys. Let’s come up with a *real* topic now... something with substance.”

A pang in her chest told Athena that she was hurt by her group’s lack of enthusiasm for her idea—but she couldn’t let it get her down. She wrote the date in the top corner of her paper and listened as her classmates brainstormed a new topic for their project. She wasn’t used to feeling belittled by them... but they were sophomores now. Maybe she’d been annoying them since the start of high school. The thought made her cringe.

Before she knew what was happening, the lunch bell rang, causing her heart to lurch. There was nothing on her paper except the date and a few stray tears.

“You didn’t take notes, Athena,” Michiko pointed out. “Do you want a copy of mine?”

Athena nodded silently. She couldn’t risk suffering any more laughter today.

But as she made her way to the copy machine, Athena heard Michiko and her friends whispering to each other behind her back.

“She’s just kind of nerdy,” someone said.

“Like... doesn’t she have another hobby besides health policy?”

Michiko snorted. “Is that even a hobby?”

Tears welled in Athena’s eyes as the copy machine beeped and beeped, spitting out duplicates of Michiko’s notes. Why were her classmates suddenly so... harsh? It seemed unreasonable to be this hostile toward her when she hadn’t done anything wrong.

Or maybe I did, she thought, and I just don’t know it.

When all her copies had been safely stashed in her backpack, Athena turned and headed for the cafeteria. She wanted to run, but that would attract too much attention, so she walked as fast as she could.

“Thea, are you good?” came Conroy’s voice as she sped past him in the hall.

She didn’t answer.

She didn’t want to annoy him, too.

That evening, seated at the dinner table, her dad asked, “How was your day, Athena?”

“Oh!” exclaimed her mom. “Didn’t you have biology today? You were so excited for that.”

Poking aimlessly at her green beans, Athena replied, “I’d rather not talk about it.” And it was true. She still hadn’t read over Michiko’s notes, but somehow, that sounded more appealing than talking about her day. Even now, she could hear her classmates joking about her and was crushed.

After a moment, her mom said, “That’s okay, sweetheart. Odin, how about you?”

Athena still couldn’t believe that her brother was a senior in high school. He was just a year away from going to college on a sports scholarship, and she couldn’t have been prouder—or more envious. After today, all she could think about was graduating and moving on with her life.

“It was great,” Odin said, a huge smile on his face. He was always smiling these days. It wasn’t fair. “Our new coach is pretty cool. I think...”

Athena tried to pay attention to the story, but her mind continuously strayed to the whispering she’d heard earlier. *She’s just kind of nerdy.* Ugh! As if her interests were an irritation to everyone around her!

“Honey, are you okay?”

It wasn't until she met Mama's eyes that Athena realized she was crying again. "I'm fine," she said, standing as if it were so. "I'm going to get started on my homework."

An hour passed, and Athena heard a knock on her door. She was lying on her bed, a textbook open on her stomach, staring at the ceiling, and for a moment, she thought about pretending to be asleep.

But that would be dishonest. Finally, she called, "Come in."

Her mom stood in the doorway, a soft smile on her face. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Athena sighed, closing her textbook. "Okay." And as her mom took a seat on the edge of the bed, she told her about what happened in biology class. "I just don't understand why they were so mean," she finished, her eyes filling once again.

Mama wrapped her arms tightly around Athena's shoulders. "Thank you for telling me," she whispered. Then, pulling away, she said, "Sometimes other people don't understand our dreams, and that's okay. Your vision for the future is unique to you, Thea. You don't need to justify it to anyone—not even me."

Dabbing her eyes with a tissue, Athena said, "What am I going to do? I have biology class twice a week. I can't feel like this *twice a week*."

“No,” Mama agreed, “and you shouldn’t have to. Misunderstandings can’t always be avoided, but bullying is unacceptable. If this happens again, I think it’s best that you tell your biology teacher. And in the meantime, we can practice speaking in an assertive way to set boundaries with your classmates.”

Athena sniffled. “What does that mean?”

Handing her daughter another tissue, Mama said, “Imagine that I’m Michiko and I just called you a nerd. What do you say to me?”

“Probably nothing.” Athena shrugged. “That’s what I did today—nothing but cry.”

Her mom smiled. “Let’s use our words instead. ‘Michiko, please don’t call me names. It’s hurtful and unnecessary.’”

Athena’s eyes widened. “Mama, I can’t say that to her!”

“Why not?”

“Because... because...” Athena floundered. “I’m not an *adult*. I’m not in charge.”

“Anyone can set a boundary,” her mom told her. “Plus, being assertive with Michiko is far healthier than allowing her to continue bullying you.” Before Athena could protest, she continued, “There are always ups and downs in life, and there are so many emotions that come with them. We must be able to flow with our feelings to maintain our mental health and wellness. I think being in this study group will be good practice for you.”

“How?” Athena whined. She felt young, as if she were back in elementary school.

“If you let them, your classmates will help you become more adaptable. Learning how to set boundaries can be a real gift, sweetheart, and this is the perfect opportunity to try it.”

Groaning, Athena said, “But what if I become the bully? What if being assertive makes me look mean?”

“Being assertive is *kind*,” said her mom. “It allows you to communicate clearly and empathetically. Telling Michiko that you’re hurt by her words is *honest* and asking her to stop calling you names is *loving*.” She squeezed Athena’s hand. “You love your friends so well, honey. Don’t leave yourself out.”

Athena could not believe she was crying again. What an emotional rollercoaster of a day. At length, she took a deep breath and said, “Thanks, Mama. I’m going to take a walk around the neighborhood and clear my mind.”

Kissing her on the forehead, Mama replied, “I think that’s a great idea. Bring Rae with you if you don’t mind. She’s having a rough week, too.”

“Really?” Athena frowned, sorry that she hadn’t noticed.

“She’s a bit... off,” Mama said. “I’m going to see if I can get her an appointment with Dr. Diego in the next few weeks.”

Athena’s heart raced. “You think she’s sick?”

“Oh, honey, not like that.” Her mom gave her one

more hug before moving toward the door. “I think she’s struggling to focus on school, and I’d like to find out why. But she’ll be fine—nothing to worry about. Just... give her some patience and support, okay?”

Grabbing her phone from her nightstand, Athena texted her little sister. *Want to go for a walk?*

Sure! Rae replied.

“We’ll be back in half an hour,” Athena told Mama, and she rolled off her bed to find her shoes.

CHAPTER 3: BIPOLAR DISORDER

Within a few days, Athena felt much better about her ability to be assertive. There was something empowering about pure, empathetic communication. She just hoped that if the time came, she could stand her ground with Michiko, Ethan, and the others.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t be in the same science class this year,” Hui said, her fingers tapping against the book in her lap. The girls were chatting about the mental health effects of bullying when Athena mentioned her group biology project and the name-calling she’d endured.

“Me too.” Athena sighed. “I’m sure it’ll get easier. And I won’t be stuck in the same group all year, you know?”

But even as Hui said, “That’s true,” Athena thought, *My whole class probably thinks I’m annoying.*

It was tempting to follow that fear down a rabbit hole, but at that moment, her phone rang. Looking down at the contact photo, she said happily, “Ismaya is video calling. Do you mind if I answer?”

“Go ahead,” said Hui, moving closer to Athena’s left side. “I want to say hi, too.”

Athena hadn't heard from Ismaya in weeks. They met during Athena's semester abroad in middle school and had been keeping in touch for years, but lately, Ismaya seemed... distant. Not just physically—she was halfway around the world—but emotionally, too. It was unlike her, but Athena wasn't sure how to bring it up. What if it was all in her head?

Smiling, she joined the video call. "*Hiiiiiiii!*" all three girls squealed at the same time.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're both around," Ismaya said. Athena noticed the dark circles under her friend's eyes and wondered why she was calling so early. It was barely morning in her part of the world.

But if Hui noticed, she didn't show it. "How are you?" she asked Ismaya.

"I'm... well..." She laughed, seemingly uncomfortable. "That's actually why I called. I was hoping to get Thea's thoughts on something."

"I can leave," Hui offered, but Ismaya shook her head.

"No, stay. You're both more knowledgeable than me about mental health."

"That's funny," Athena said. "Hui and I were just talking about bullying."

Again, Ismaya laughed, though she didn't seem amused. "I think this story might be a little heavier than bullying. Are you two up for it?"

"Of course," said Hui. "Go ahead, Maya."

“Well, it’s like this. My mom took me to see a psychiatrist a few weeks ago, and I just got a proper diagnosis yesterday. They said... they told me I have bipolar disorder. I guess... I mean, do you know anything about that?” Ismaya bit her lip hopefully.

“Oh, Maya,” Athena said softly. “I’m so sorry. That must have been so scary to hear.”

A few tears trickled onto her friend’s cheek, despite her smile. “I just feel so... *alone*. Like no one understands what I’m going through.”

“You’re not alone,” Hui said. “We’re right here with you. Would you like to share more about what you’re feeling?”

Ismaya took a deep breath to recenter. Then, after a moment of thought, she said, “Sometimes, I feel so happy and energetic. It’s amazing. But sometimes, I just feel kind of jumpy and anxious. You know how that is, Hui.”

Hui nodded. “Definitely.”

“I’m also struggling to sleep at night,” Ismaya admitted, and Athena frowned. So her friend *was* as exhausted as she looked. “And it’s weird, but... sometimes, I try to tell a story, and I can’t organize my thoughts fast enough. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” Athena said, though she had no frame of reference for Ismaya’s symptoms. “How has school been?”

She sighed. “Hard. I feel so restless during class, and then I cry for no reason. It’s embarrassing.”

Athena felt as if her heart were being squeezed. It had been mortifying for her to cry in biology class *once*. She could only imagine the mental and emotional burden of crying throughout the school day. But before she could say as much, Hui cleared her throat and asked gravely, "Ismaya... have you had thoughts of self-harm?"

Crying freely now, Ismaya replied, "Yes." Her voice was so small, so remorseful. "But I haven't injured myself, I swear."

"I believe you," Hui said, and Athena did, too—but she couldn't find the words to say that. Or anything else, for that matter.

As Hui continued to comfort Ismaya, Athena got lost in thought. She had never considered self-harming, nor had she ever spoken about it with her friends. *One of my closest friends has bipolar disorder.* It suddenly felt impossible, too heartbreaking for comprehension.

"It's so important to communicate your feelings to your parents and teachers," Hui was saying. "I'm also going to find the phone number for your local crisis hotline, okay? If you need to talk to someone immediately, call the experts... Okay, I just texted you the number."

"Thank you so much, Hui," Ismaya said. "And Thea, thank you for listening. You girls are the best."

Athena felt herself smiling and nodding, but her friends' words were going in one ear and out the other.

One of my closest friends has considered self-harming. Even as Hui hung up the phone and gathered her things to go home, Athena was too distracted to say more than a few words.

“She’ll be okay, Thea,” Hui said, giving her a hug. “Try not to worry.”

Athena nodded. She watched Hui leave the room but was still surprised when, a few minutes later, she was gone.

Once she was alone, Athena found herself lying in bed, her mind reeling with questions.

Why would anyone consider harming themselves? Were things really that bleak in Ismaya’s world?

Were things bleak *all over* the world?

These worries were new to Athena, who usually felt happy and optimistic about life and the future. Even when her grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, Athena had found ways to look on the bright side. But she’d been a kid back then, about to graduate from elementary school. After her call with Ismaya and Hui, she felt... old.

“There must be something I can do,” she whispered to herself. And after a few minutes of thought, it came to her, as it always did: health policy.

Bipolar disorder was no small thing. There had to

be some sort of policies in place that could assist Ismaya now or in the future. Pulling her laptop off her desk, Athena began researching.

Within a few minutes, she was neck-deep in preventive policies designed to help people like Ismaya. She learned that there are policies promoting the use of screening tools and strong leadership teams, ensuring that everyone is respected and valued, regardless of their abilities. She also found that there are medications available for bipolar patients and that psychotherapy and support groups are recommended as treatments.

I bet talking to Hui really helped Ismaya, Athena thought, her mind suddenly at ease. She grabbed her phone, pulled up a few articles on leadership teams and support groups, and started a new text to Ismaya.

Hi! Sorry I didn't say much on our call. I was trying to think of anything that might help and found these...

Athena stopped typing. What was she doing? After listening to the way her biology group made fun of her interest in health policy, was she really going to shove it down Ismaya's throat?

"Thea!" Rae called. "It's dinnertime!"

Feeling like an annoyance and a nerd, Athena deleted the half-finished text, left her phone on her bed, and went downstairs to eat.

CHAPTER 4: ADHD

As the semester wore on, Athena's self-confidence continued to dwindle. She felt out of touch with her classmates, and worse, she felt out of touch with *herself*.

Meanwhile, her mom took Rae to visit the family physician. Mama was certain that Rae was fine—just a little distracted—so Athena was confounded when Dr. Diego referred her sister to a psychiatrist for further evaluation.

“You said she was going to be okay!” Athena cried one night at dinner. Rae was studying at a friend's house and wasn't expected to be home for hours.

“Thea, she *will* be okay,” her mom insisted, reaching for her hand, but Athena stood up, carrying her plate.

Sure, Rae would be okay—just like Rainier and Ismaya.

Athena wasn't buying it anymore.

But as it turned out, her sister really was fine. Her psychiatrist diagnosed her with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, and gave her a prescription medication to help. “But there are still other ways you can support Rae,” said Mama. “You can talk with her, empathize with her—all the things you usually do.”

To Athena's surprise, Rae seemed... unbothered. At peace with her new routine.

Maybe things will start to feel normal again, Athena dared to hope.

That was all she wanted.

To feel normal.

One Saturday night, as the girls were getting ready for bed, Athena met Rae's eyes in the bathroom mirror and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty awful, to be honest," Rae replied. That's one thing Athena could always count on: Rae's honesty.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Her sister sighed, setting her toothbrush on the counter. "Yeah, I guess. I've already talked to two doctors, but I can talk to you, too."

The girls made their way to Rae's room and spread out, snow angel style, on the floor. They often had conversations like this—staring at the ceiling, finding comfort in each other's presence. For a while, no one said anything, and that was enough.

At length, Rae whispered, "I can't sit still in class."

Athena looked at her sister. "Is that all?"

There was an eyeroll in Rae's tone when she said, "No. I also get angry and bored, even in classes I enjoy. Then, I come home, and I just feel... restless. And irritable."

Like I might not be able to control my emotions or words if I'm not careful."

At this, Athena frowned. Rae was one of the most mature, controlled people she knew. She hadn't realized it required so much effort. "I'm sorry things have been hard. Did your psychiatrist have any recommendations for you, besides your medication?"

"Yeah. She told me to lessen my screen time, which isn't easy, you know. She also wants me to do more physical activities, spend more time outside, and increase my social interaction." Rae sighed again. "Some of those things are fun, and I'm happy to do them, but I'm kind of hoping my medication will do most of the work."

"I'm sure it will make a big difference," Athena said encouragingly.

Rae sat up on her elbows to meet her sister's eyes. "I just don't want anyone to know that I'm taking it."

"All kinds of people are on medication, Rae. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I know, I know." She huffed. "But the kids in my class can be so mean. My friend Evren changed their pronouns to be nonbinary, and they were bullied for weeks for not being 'normal.' Like anyone is *normal!*" Rae took a deep breath to calm herself. Then, she added, "What if everyone finds out that I'm weird and treats me the same way they did Evren?"

Athena reached over and grabbed her sister's hand.

Rae eased back into her reclined position with another sigh.

After a moment of thought, Athena said, “You know, I bet there are some policies to help you *and* Evren have a better time at school.” It had been weeks since Athena had made a statement like this, but the words still felt natural. Of all people, Rae would not make fun of her for talking about health policy.

Instead, Rae whispered, “You’re probably right.” Then, a little louder, “Where’s your tablet?”

Smiling, Athena stood. “I’ll go get it.”

The first thing Athena and Rae found were anti-discrimination policies for students with ADHD. Based on her reactions, they were practically tailor-made for Rae.

“It says here that your teachers should be able to reduce the number of your homework problems and questions without lowering the level of the content,” Athena said. “And you should also have a quiet, distraction-free place to work at school.”

“My teachers have been really good about the second part,” Rae said, her eyes scanning the tablet. “I go to the library a lot because it’s so quiet.”

“Are they giving you clear and simple directions?” Athena asked, still reading.

Rae thought about this. Finally, she said, “Yeah, I think so. Everything feels a little complicated right now,

but I'm sure they're doing their best."

"Well, ask lots of questions," Athena suggested. "Sometimes, you have to be the squeaky wheel to get the help you need."

Nodding, Rae pointed to the screen and said, "I didn't know about this one. I can ask my teachers to break my tests into smaller pieces or give me extra time to take them. Gosh, that *really* would've helped me last week. I didn't finish a single exam."

"This would've helped, too..." Athena was still reading. "Your teachers can record their lessons for you or give you a copy of their notes. Are they doing that?"

"Not yet," Rae said, writing in her planner, "but I can ask them about it next week."

A few minutes later, when her tablet screen went dark, Athena added, "There are other, more general policies that can help, too. I learned about them when I was in middle school, actually."

"You did? What are they?"

"Well, when Hui was diagnosed with anxiety, I learned how important it is to embrace differences. She was being bullied, and our social studies teacher put a stop to it by educating our class about kindness, respect, and empathy. Now, I try to practice those things every day."

"Oh, I know about empathy," Rae said, and Athena wasn't surprised. "That's when you can really listen and understand things from another person's perspective."

You really *feel* their feelings.”

“Exactly. Your close friends should be able to do that for you, so I wouldn’t be nervous about talking to them. And even if your other classmates find out about your diagnosis, your school has anti-bullying policies, you know? You can *always* ask your teachers for help if someone is hurting your feelings.”

Rae nodded, thinking. Finally, she said, “I didn’t know Hui was bullied in middle school. She’s, like... one of the coolest people I know.”

Smiling, Athena said, “Me too. She and I wound up participating in a mental health awareness walk in seventh grade, remember? Things like that help to destigmatize mental health issues, and it’s amazing to see the community come together for such an important cause.”

“You and I should sign up for an event like that!” Rae’s eyes gleamed. “Wouldn’t that be great?”

Athena nodded. It was so nice to talk with someone who understood her passion for health policy. “Let’s do some more research this weekend and find out when the next ADHD awareness campaign is scheduled,” she suggested.

“Okay.” Rae made another note in her planner. “Thanks for this, Thea.”

“You’re welcome,” Athena replied. “Being different is nothing to be ashamed of, Rae. Everyone is unique in their own ways, and everyone has a right to be treated

equally. Diversity is what makes life so interesting, I think.”

“I agree,” said Rae, “and that’s just one reason why I want to help Evren, too. They don’t deserve to be bullied just because their gender identity isn’t the same as someone else’s.”

Waking up her tablet, Athena said, “I know there are lots of policies about sexuality and gender.”

“Do they apply to schools?” Rae asked as her sister opened a new tab.

“I’m sure they do. Let’s see…”

“Right there.” Rae pointed to a paragraph on the screen and read, “*There are anti-discrimination policies in schools, ensuring that students of all sexual orientations and genders are treated with fairness and respect.*”

“And the same goes for workplaces,” Athena noticed. “That will be helpful when Evren starts applying for jobs later.”

“Empathy and anti-bullying policies will help them, too, right?”

Athena nodded. “Definitely. Those things help defend the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, just like they do yours.”

Pulling her hair over one shoulder, Rae said, “I feel pretty good about my rights as a person with ADHD, but I’m not sure Evren is as confident in theirs. It seems like society still has some work to do if we’re going to protect the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community.”

“Yes, that’s what it says here,” Athena said, pointing once again to the screen. “More acceptance, laws, visibility, and representation are needed.”

“Oh! Maybe Evren would want to participate in an awareness campaign with me.” Rae grabbed her phone and started typing. “I’m asking them right now.”

Athena watched silently as her sister double, triple, and quadruple texted her friend. Already, Rae looked lighter than she had in weeks, as if she’d been liberated from something that Athena hadn’t even noticed was there.

That’s policy for you, she thought. She loved that it made space for everyone to feel seen, heard, and understood.

But her next thought wasn’t nearly as cheerful.

I wish my classmates cared about this stuff.

Though Athena’s biology project had come and gone, Michiko’s cutting words still whispered in her mind. *I kind of thought you’d outgrow this obsession.*

Ultimately, Athena knew she wanted a career in public health, but she also wanted to be *liked*. She wanted to be invited to parties with people outside of her immediate friend group. It wasn’t like she didn’t know they were happening—the evidence was all over social media. So, did her classmates exclude her because she was weird or boring... or for some other reason she hadn’t thought of yet?

And what if she was weird and boring? Would she

outgrow it, as Michiko had insinuated? Or was she going to be a social outcast, even as an adult?

“You okay, Thea?” Rae had put down her phone and was frowning at her with concern.

“I’m fine,” Athena told her, pasting on a smile. Rae had enough to think about without worrying that her big sister was being bullied at school. “I’m glad we had this talk.”

“Me too,” said Rae. She gave Athena a long hug. “You’re the best.”

Yes, Athena thought wearily. *I am the best annoyance.*

CHAPTER 5: DEPRESSION

At school on Monday, Athena heard her own name ring out across the cafeteria. Setting her lunch tray on the nearest table, she turned to look over her shoulder and found Hui racing toward her. Flushed and panting, she looked like she'd just stepped off the basketball court—probably because she had.

“Is everything okay?” Athena asked, unsure if she should sit down as she'd planned.

But Hui sat across from her and said, “Yeah, I think so. It's just... I'm really worried about Rainier. He just seems so sad, and tired, and disconnected from his friends, including me.”

As Hui spoke, Athena looked up to find Rainier himself entering the cafeteria. Sure enough, he *did* look sad and tired, shoulders hunched as he secured a spot in line. *He must still be adjusting to his antidepressants*, she thought. But hadn't he been waiting long enough for relief?

Pointing discreetly to the lunch line, Athena said, “I see what you mean. Maybe you should talk to a teacher who knows both you and Rainier. They can give you better suggestions than me.”

Hui nodded. "Okay, I can do that. But will you come with me? I'm honestly nervous about blowing all of this out of proportion."

"Give me five minutes," Athena said, and she shoveled pasta salad into her mouth as fast as she could.

"I think Ms. Vedi, my literature teacher, is probably our best bet," said Hui, leading Athena down the hall. "She usually hosts office hours on Monday afternoons, so she should be around..."

Athena watched as Hui cracked open the door to room 202 and peeked her head inside. "Hi, Hui," said a woman's voice. "Can I help you with something?"

Pulling the door fully open, Hui said, "I hope so. We're worried about my friend Rainier, who's also in your class."

"Who is 'we?'"

"Me and my friend Athena."

Ms. Vedi must have gestured for Hui to enter the classroom because suddenly, Athena was being tugged inside. She felt awkward about discussing Rainier's mental health when she didn't really *know* him, but... Hui had asked for her help. And Athena was nothing if not a supportive friend.

"Tell me what's worrying you," said Ms. Vedi, inviting the girls to sit down with a wave of her hand.

"Well, I'm sure you know about Rainier's recent

diagnosis,” said Hui. She phrased it as a statement, but it sounded like a question.

“I do,” the teacher said. That was all she seemed able to share.

“It’s just that... whatever treatment he’s getting... it doesn’t seem to be helping. He looks more depressed than ever.”

“I agree that he looks unhappy. Have either of you expressed your concerns to him?”

Hui and Athena shook their heads in unison. “He’s been so withdrawn,” Hui said. “I’ve been afraid to say anything that might push him further away.”

Ms. Vedi nodded, writing on the notepad in front of her. “Thank you for telling me. I’ll set up a meeting with the school counselor later today to get some more insight. In the meantime, you girls try to relax, okay? Rainier is on a difficult path, but he’ll be all right.”

Hui sighed as the bell rang, her posture softening in relief. Athena felt her own neck loosen as she stood and said, “Thank you for your time, Ms. Vedi. It means a lot to us to know there are people looking out for Rainier’s wellbeing.”

“Of course.” The teacher smiled. “Now, you two hurry to your next class.”

The girls hurried to world history.

“I just don’t understand what the school counselor is going to do,” Hui said under her breath as they took their seats. “She already referred Rainier to a specialist,

just like she did for me. I mean, that's her job."

It's a health policy, Athena thought. She wanted to research other policies around depression, but watching as Hui slammed her textbook onto her desk, she questioned whether her efforts would be well received. She didn't want to upset anyone—and she didn't want to look like a nerd.

"Gosh, Hui," Zosia whispered from Athena's left side. "What did that desk ever do to you?"

The rest of the week passed in a blur, so that when Athena decided to go to bed on Saturday, she thought it must be midnight. In reality, it was only 9 PM, so she grabbed her laptop, picked a movie, and hit play.

She didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until she heard her ringtone. Grabbing her phone from the nearby nightstand, she saw Hui's contact photo light up her screen. It was now past 10 PM—much later than Hui would normally call. Concerned, Athena turned off the movie and picked up, but all she heard was static.

"Hui? Are you pocket dialing me?"

But even as she asked it, Athena heard the static reorganize into sobbing. Hui was speaking, she realized, but Athena couldn't make out the words.

"Hui, slow down. I can't understand you."

"He—he tried to take his own... Thea, I don't know..."

“Please, Hui,” Athena begged. “I can’t understand what you’re saying. Take some deep breaths and try again.”

There was more static as Hui attempted to collect herself. Then, after a moment of silence, she said, “Rainier tried to take his own life earlier today.”

Athena’s heart hammered so forcefully in her chest that she thought she might be sick. *Tried to take his own life.* Did that mean he was still alive? When Hui didn’t elaborate, she asked, “What happened?”

“He’s in the hospital,” Hui said through her tears. “His sister just called me. I don’t know what to do, Athena.”

But Athena didn’t know either. This was uncharted territory for her, and she could feel the shock of it settling in her bones, making her heavier. Hui was still crying, and she wanted to join her, but the tears wouldn’t come. All she could do was sink onto her bedroom floor, lean her back against the bedframe, and hold the phone to her ear.

Full minutes passed in silence. Athena struggled to find the words for everything she was feeling, and her friend seemed equally lost. Finally, Hui whispered, “I have to go,” and hung up. Athena tossed her phone onto her bed and curled into a ball, her forehead against her knees.

For another hour, she sat by herself. She felt tired and empty, but her thoughts raced as if competing for attention.

How could this have happened?

He should've been getting better.

Why wasn't he getting better?

Even after she and Hui had expressed their concerns to a teacher—almost a full week ago—Rainier continued to struggle. How *alone* must he have felt to attempt suicide? And why couldn't anyone convince him that there were many, many reasons to live?

At least he's in the hospital, Athena told herself, but it wasn't enough. The whole situation was still devastating and unfair. And...

What if it's my fault?

What if she had told Rainier about health policies for depression, instead of worrying about looking nerdy? She researched as she processed, opening tab after tab on her laptop. Rainier participated in the mental health awareness walk with their middle school years ago, so he knew there were hundreds of people supporting him. But what if he didn't know that there are multiple kinds of antidepressants available? What if he simply needed a new psychotherapist?

Athena knew that psychotherapy was meant to relieve suffering through a series of conversations with a psychologist or psychiatrist. Did Rainier feel that he couldn't entrust his darkest thoughts to anyone, even a trained specialist? Therapy should have been a healing experience for him, not a burden.

She opened another tab. What if Rainier didn't

know about the availability of crisis hotlines? He could've called one the minute his suicidal thoughts surfaced. "Or he could've called Hui!" Athena said aloud, suddenly angry. She opened yet another tab to stifle the feeling.

Further research revealed that simple things like physical activity can improve symptoms of depression and that more workplaces are creating healthy lifestyle programs. That meant Rainier could still have a fulfilling career. He could find relief in the day-to-day.

But he had to *live*.

Slamming her laptop closed, Athena finally broke down and cried. The sobs seemed to come from somewhere deep in her lungs, and yet, she felt strangely detached from herself. Like this couldn't be happening in real life.

Her bedroom door opened without warning, and there was Odin, gripping his phone with one hand. "I just heard," he said, his eyes wide with shock.

Athena sniffled. "How?"

"I mean, it's our school," he said, sitting down beside her. "Word travels fast. I just can't believe someone we know would attempt suicide."

"Me neither." Tears continued to roll down Athena's cheeks as Odin wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I just don't know what to do. I feel *awful*."

"I'm going to text Mama and Papa," said Odin, pulling up a group chat on his phone.

"Or we could just call for them."

He shook his head. “I don’t want to scare Rae. She doesn’t need to know about this right now.”

The thought of Rae learning about the realities of depression sent Athena into another spiral. Sobs heaved from her chest as Odin hugged her, waiting for their parents to meet them upstairs.

By the time they did, Athena had calmed down a bit. She took deep breaths as Odin explained what happened. Their parents, who initially seemed confused, now looked just as shocked as they felt.

“Oh, honey,” Mama said as she pulled Athena to her feet and hugged her. “I’m so sorry. I know you and Hui tried to help.”

Sniffling, Athena said, “I just wish I’d tried *harder*. Maybe I could’ve—”

“Shhh.” Her mom squeezed her tightly. “We can’t save people, Athena. All we can do is care for them.”

“But I didn’t do enough,” she argued. She could hear her dad and Odin whispering behind her back and wondered what they were saying. But her mom’s voice brought her back to herself.

“Thoughts like that won’t give you or Rainier any relief. Why don’t you research the health policies designed to help after an attempt instead? You don’t need to send them to Rainier, but it might comfort you to know what happens next.”

“Okay,” Athena whispered. “I’ll do it in the morning. Right now, I just want to sleep.”

“It’s after midnight,” her mom pointed out, checking her watch. “We’ll get out of your way.”

“Remember,” her dad said, addressing both Athena and Odin, “people should never be judged for deliberately harming themselves. What Rainier needs now is support and encouragement.”

“And time,” Mama added. “Give him some time to recover.”

Athena nodded as Odin gave her one more hug. Then, he and their parents left the room.

Thoroughly exhausted, she took another deep breath, flicked off her lamp, and was asleep before she could adjust her blankets.

When she woke the following morning, Athena felt as though she were escaping from a nightmare. Only the nightmare was real, and sleeping had been a pleasant distraction.

She rolled over and closed her eyes—not ready to get up. But daylight was already peeking through her curtains, and if she stayed in bed any longer, Rae would come looking for her. She did *not* want to explain herself to Rae.

Launching to her feet, Athena pulled on her slippers and sat down at her desk. She then opened her laptop to find all her tabs from the previous night still

open. She closed them as fast as she could.

“New day,” she whispered to herself. “New day, new information.”

As her mom had suggested, Athena began researching health policies designed to help after an attempt. For a while, her eyes skimmed the search results, unseeing. Although she was technically awake, she hardly felt like it.

But this was important.

Taking a few gulps of water from the bottle next to her, Athena forced herself to focus. Then, once she was more alert, she chose a page and began reading.

The first thing she learned was that the hospital would help Rainier schedule an appointment with his psychiatrist. That seemed like a positive thing. The staff would also give him information on continuing treatment at home, if necessary, and issue referrals to crisis lines. *Thank goodness*, Athena thought. He needed someone he could *always* call, no matter what.

As she continued reading, she learned that Rainier’s support system—including his family, friends, and teachers—was more important now than ever. He needed his people to rally for him. Opening the same article on her phone, she copied the link and sent it to Hui.

Please reply.

Athena couldn’t believe that last night’s call with her best friend had been real. Between Hui’s sobs and

the uncomfortable silences, the whole event felt like something out of a bad movie. But Athena didn't know how to say that, so she said nothing—just sent the link.

After a few minutes of waiting for a response that didn't arrive, she grabbed her water bottle and went downstairs to talk to her mom.

CHAPTER 6: ONLINE THERAPY

“Hi, babe,” Mama said as Athena shuffled into the kitchen. There was a plate of breakfast sausage sitting on the counter, which would have made her happy under different circumstances. As it was, Athena wasn’t sure she would ever be happy again.

“Good morning,” she said quietly. She set her water bottle on the counter and planted herself on a barstool.

Her mom smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay.” Athena shrugged. “I did some research this morning.”

“And what did you learn?”

Sighing, Athena said, “There are a lot of policies to help after an attempt. Rainier might have to continue his treatment at home, but he’ll also get to speak to his psychiatrist. And... he needs his friends, just like Papa said.”

Her mom nodded. “Do you feel a little better, knowing those things?”

Athena thought about this. Did she feel better, or was she just trying to forget last night’s events? Finally, she said, “I was so overwhelmed when Hui called me that I couldn’t even speak. Now, I just feel guilty for not

doing more to help Rainier. Things never should've gotten this bad."

Walking around to her side of the counter, Mama gave her a hug. "I know, honey. I'm so sorry this has been so hard on your class." Tears pooled in Athena's eyes as her mom added, "Would you consider trying online therapy?"

Athena balked. "Me? What do I need therapy for?"

"I think it will help you sort through your feelings—and anything else you'd like to discuss." Her mom shrugged. "No pressure, but it's an option."

Tapping her fingers against the counter, Athena asked, "Would you make an appointment for me?"

"Absolutely, if that's what you want."

Athena thought for a moment, trying to imagine herself in the middle of a therapy session. Finally, she said, "It's worth a shot I guess."

Her mom set an appointment for her right there, on her tablet, in the kitchen. Athena felt as though she had just made a big decision, one that would ripple out into the rest of her life. But if therapy did nothing but ease her guilt, she figured it would be worthwhile.

The following day, after school, Athena brought her laptop into her parents' quiet home office and clicked the link from her therapist. A video conference opened,

and she waited, heart hammering, for her first session to begin.

A few minutes later, a woman with long, dark hair and brown eyes joined the call. “Hi, Athena,” she said warmly. “I’m Dr. Phoebe Morales, but you can call me Phoebe. How are you today?”

“I’m okay,” Athena replied, quickly relaxing into her mom’s swivel chair. “It was a hard weekend.”

Phoebe gave her a sad smile. “That’s what your mom told me. Why don’t you tell me a little bit about yourself, and then we’ll get into it?”

Athena introduced herself without hesitation, confident that she could trust her new therapist with whatever came to mind. She told Phoebe about her interest in health policy and how she planned to study public health in college, plus a few anecdotes about her high school and close friends. She also mentioned her grandmother’s cancer diagnosis and how it impacted the way she thought about her own health and wellbeing.

“You’re a very smart girl,” Phoebe said when she was finished. “I’m excited to work with you. Are you ready to talk about what happened over the weekend?”

Athena took a deep breath. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Great. Start wherever you feel most comfortable.”

While reliving her phone call with Hui wasn’t comfortable at all, Athena told Phoebe as many details as she could remember: what was said, how she felt, and everything that transpired afterward. She talked about

her conversations with Odin and her parents, as well as the research she did to ground herself. Finally, she said, “I just feel so guilty for not offering to help Rainier. There are so many things I could’ve told him, but I didn’t.”

For a moment, Phoebe was silent, scribbling on the notepad in front of her. At last, she said, “Here’s what I tell people in similar situations: just because you couldn’t help one friend does *not* mean you can’t help someone else in the future. This was a really hard situation, Athena, and you did what you could, given the circumstances. Do you see that?”

Athena couldn’t see anything for the tears in her eyes, but she nodded. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“What I’m wondering is why you didn’t feel confident in helping Rainier. Tell me more about that.”

For the first time since her session began, Athena was hesitant to tell Phoebe *everything*. This—her fear that she was a nerd—was at the root of many of the hardships she’d encountered during her sophomore year thus far. It felt so personal, so amplified compared to her other thoughts and feelings. If she opened this can of worms, would she be able to close it again?

“We can wait until next time if that’s better for you,” Phoebe chimed in, sensing Athena’s distress.

But Athena was already in the weeds—no turning back now. “I think my classmates see me as an annoyance,” she said in a rush. “Some kids from my biology class made fun of me earlier this semester,

and I haven't stopped thinking about it since."

Phoebe smiled encouragingly. "You know, Athena, I think it's beautiful and *vital* for you to be your full self. We all have a role to play, and by leaning into your interest in health policy, you can help yourself and others. That's nothing to be ashamed of, right?"

Athena gave her a small smile in return. She *did* love to help people.

"I'd like to catch up with you in about a week," Phoebe said, turning her attention to a separate monitor. "What's your schedule like next Monday?"

As she flipped through her planner, Athena thought, *Mama was right. Therapy was a good idea.*

That night, Athena pulled up her thread with Ismaya and texted her the bipolar policies she found weeks ago. It was time to stop being afraid of expressing her interests and start embracing her "full self," as Phoebe put it.

To Athena's surprise, Ismaya responded almost immediately. *Thank you so much for this!*

Are you free? Athena texted back.

Yes! Want to do a call?

Athena called her friend without hesitation, grinning as Ismaya's face lit up her phone. "It's so nice to see you!"

"I'm so glad you reached out this morning!" Ismaya

squealed. "I have so much to catch you up on."

"Hit me," Athena said.

"I've been going to therapy, and I'm learning so much."

"Me too!" Athena cried. "I just started today."

"Oh, Thea, it's *life changing*. I feel *much* better than I did at the start of the semester."

"Tell me everything."

CHAPTER 7: WELCOME BACK

When Rainier returned to school a couple of weeks later, Hui was the first to greet him, barreling down the hall to give him a hug. Athena stood a few meters away, watching, unsure of what to expect. But when Rainier overcame his surprise, he simply smiled and hugged Hui back.

Hope sparked in Athena's chest. Certainly, Rainier was still struggling, but he made it to school and would spend the day with his friends. Maybe that was just the medicine he needed.

The hallway was flooded with students as the bell rang overhead. Sighing, Athena gripped the straps of her new backpack—she'd spilled tea all over her old one—and turned toward her biology classroom.

Ever since her first session with Phoebe, Athena felt... different about biology class. For weeks after their project was complete, she'd dreaded facing Michiko, Ethan, and the others, afraid of what they might say to or about her. But now, Athena walked to her desk with confidence, knowing that one day, her interest in health policy was going to help many, many people. And until then, all she could do was be herself.

“Is that a new backpack, Athena?” Michiko’s voice rang out across the room. “I love all the different colors.”

“Thanks.” Athena smiled. The difference she felt on the inside must have been obvious on the outside, too.

Later that day, at lunch, Athena looked up to find Rainier sitting down beside her. Surprised, she said, “Um, hi. How are you doing?”

He laughed dryly. “No one knows what to say to me today, but that was almost normal. Thanks.”

She felt herself blush. “Sorry. Coming back must be weird for you.”

“It is, but people have been nice. I was actually hoping to ask you for a favor, if you don’t mind.”

A favor? Was there a favor she could do for Rainier? “Okay,” she said, anxious for more information.

“Would you mind helping me with a social studies project? I’m writing an extra credit paper, and I’d like to discuss the impact of a national mental health strategy. I don’t know where to start, but Hui said you might.”

Heart soaring, Athena blurted, “Yes, of course, I’d love to help.”

“Okay, great. Can we meet up in study hall after school today?”

“Yes.” Athena didn’t even check her planner. This project was too important to delay.

“Awesome. Thanks, Athena.” He unwrapped his sandwich as Hui, Conroy, and Zosia joined them, and they chatted until it was time to go back to class.

But Athena’s mind was elsewhere. She was overwhelmed with gratitude for a second chance to help Rainier.

“One of the coolest things about national mental health strategies is that they help to define complex conditions.” Athena and Rainier had been sitting in the study hall for less than five minutes, and already, she was on a roll. “They also examine mental health throughout the life course, which helps people of all ages get the help they need.”

As she talked, Athena opened her browser to show Rainier even more ways that a mental health strategy could impact a nation. “It says here that they create new avenues of prevention and treatment and advance mental health services. Amazing, right?”

Rainier nodded as he read over her shoulder. “I like the part about advancing mental health services. Does that include expanding access in schools?”

“It does,” she said, pointing to a paragraph on her laptop screen. “We definitely need more mental health services in schools.”

Jotting down a few notes, Rainier said, “Hey, do

you think I could also address race in this paper?”

Athena turned to face him, mild confusion on her face. “I’m sure you could. What exactly do you want to address?”

Rainier shrugged. “I mean, I’m a black teen who has depression. I know as well as anyone that systemic racism can worsen mental health issues.”

After a beat, Athena said, “I’m listening.” She’d never heard a friend speak so openly about race before.

“Well, the black community faces a lot of challenges in accessing care and treatment. We want to find doctors with shared experiences and backgrounds, but that can be hard. And even when those challenges don’t exist, getting mental healthcare is so stigmatized that progress feels slow.” Rainier sighed. “You look stressed. I’m sorry—that was a lot.”

Athena shook her head, her heart breaking. “You have nothing to be sorry for. *I’m sorry* that your experience with mental healthcare has been so hard.” She turned back to her laptop. “Let’s find some policies related to race that will fit in your paper, okay?”

And they did. Together, they found policies prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, or national origin in schools and workplaces. *Everyone* has the right to equal opportunity, they read, regardless of their race.

“That’s perfect,” Rainier said as he wrote it down. “I can point to those policies when I talk about how students should feel optimistic about the future.”

“I think that’s a great idea.” Athena grinned.

Setting down his pencil, Rainier asked, “So, why are you so passionate about health policy anyway?”

Athena’s smile instantly dissolved. She’d thought that she and Rainier were becoming friends, but clearly, that wasn’t the case. He was poised to make fun of her, just like Michiko, and it was going to hurt just as badly.

She was still trying to remember Phoebe’s words of encouragement when Rainier added, “You don’t have to tell me, obviously. I was just curious. You’re really well informed about this stuff.”

Taking an involuntary deep breath, Athena slowed her heart rate. So, Rainier *didn’t* think she was weird. He thought she was... smart. She hardly knew what to say. After months of telling herself that she was an annoyance and a nerd, this felt like foreign territory.

At last, she answered, “Policy gives us proven ways of preventing, detecting, diagnosing, and treating health issues. Plus, things like a national mental health strategy raise awareness of conditions. And more awareness means a healthier environment for policies to be created.”

“And more health policies mean more help for those in need,” Rainier finished.

She nodded, thrilled to be understood. “Exactly.”

“Thanks for sharing with me,” he said, tucking his notebook into his backpack, “and thanks for your help. You’re awesome, Athena.”

“So are you, Rainier.”

She didn't yet know if he considered her a friend.
But she knew they'd made each other feel better.

And that was enough.

CHAPTER 8: CLASSROOM POLICIES

The following week, Athena received a text from an unsaved number. But the moment she read it, she knew exactly who was reaching out to her.

I got a perfect grade on my paper!!! Thanks again, Athena.

You're welcome, Rainier! she replied. His enthusiasm made her smile. *I knew it would be great!*

A few minutes passed before he added, *My social studies teacher showed it to the school principal. It sounds like every grade level is going to come up with their own mental health policies!*

Athena gasped, her fingers flying across the keyboard. *What?! That's amazing!*

Yeah! We'll all get a chance to practice mental health at school!

This was better than any outcome Athena could've imagined. To be able to discuss mental health with her entire class... It felt too good to be true. Closing her conversation with Rainier, she texted Hui to tell her the news.

No way!!! her friend replied immediately. *I can't wait!*

Snow fell in sheets of white outside the windows of the school gymnasium. The entire sophomore class had gathered to create their mental health policies, but most of the students seemed resistant to contributing. No one spoke as the principal tapped his foot on the floor, waiting for someone to raise their hand.

Finally, Ethan, one of the boys from Athena's biology class, said, "Is Athena here?"

She waved. She hated to be called out in a crowd, but at least someone had broken the ice.

"You know a lot about health policy," he said. "Why don't you start?"

She blushed as several other students said in chorus, "Yeah, let Athena do it!" Turning to Hui, she whispered, "Will you help me?"

Hui nodded as she stood, and together, the girls walked toward Principal Bowman. He handed Athena his microphone, and she turned to face her class. "Hi, everyone," she said, her heart pounding. For a moment, she thought she was nervous, but she *loved* teaching others about health policy. The feeling in her chest was *excitement*. "I'm really glad we're doing this as a school. Hui and I have been studying mental health policies this year, so we have some thoughts on what our class policies should be. Hui, do you want to go first?"

"Sure." Hui took the microphone and began, "There

are a few things we can all do to protect and improve our mental health, both at school and at home. The first one is reducing stress. I do that by practicing yoga, but you can do whatever works for you.”

“Another one is expressing creativity,” said Athena. “We have so many options here at school, you know? Art class, music class, dance, theater... You really can’t go wrong.”

“It’s also important to spend time outdoors,” Hui added, “which can be hard to do when you’re in classes all day. That’s why it can be nice to ride your bike to school or take a walk when you get home. You can even bring your lunch outside to get a few minutes of sunshine.”

“And of course, we all need to connect with our loved ones.” Athena smiled at her class. “Make it a point to say hi to your friends at school, and be kind to everyone, even if you don’t know them very well. We have to see each other for another two and a half years, so we might as well enjoy it.”

“And get enough sleep!” said Hui, just a bit too loudly. The feedback from the microphone was piercing. “Sorry, sorry. It’s just really important to get eight to ten hours of sleep every night. I think we can call that a school policy because it’ll stop people from falling asleep at their desks.”

Laughter erupted amongst the sophomores as Hui handed the microphone back to Athena. Happy to see her peers enjoying themselves, she said, “The *most*

important thing is that we learn to identify and manage our emotions. If we don't know what we're feeling, it's hard to communicate our needs to friends and teachers." Turning to Principal Bowman, she added, "Could we go over our school's anti-bullying policies? Those have a lot to do with mental health, too."

He nodded, handing her a copy to read aloud:

- 1. Every student and teacher is worthy of respect and kindness.**
- 2. Think before you speak. Think before you act.**
- 3. When in conflict, use your words. If you need assistance, ask a teacher for help.**
- 4. Your words are powerful. Use them to encourage one another.**
- 5. If you are concerned about yourself or a classmate, speak to your guidance counselor.**
- 6. If you experience or witness bullying on school grounds, report it to a teacher.**

"Here's the thing," Hui said in closing. "Everyone has the right to be treated equally, no matter their differences."

Meeting Rainier's eyes in the crowded room, Athena added, "That includes race, sexuality, and gender identity. There's space for everyone at our school."

The gymnasium exploded in applause, as if this was the message for which everyone had been waiting. Athena grinned—they really cared!

Principal Bowman, who had been jotting down notes, took his place in front of the microphone and said, "I'm very proud of all of you. These are excellent mental health policies that will serve as a guide for future classes as well."

Future classes. Athena and Hui hugged each other. These mental health policies were going to have an impact on hundreds and hundreds of students, including Rae and her friends when they got to high school.

"We're making waves," Hui whispered.

That night, Athena emailed Principal Bowman a list of digital therapy resources, as well as the number of the local crisis hotline. She knew now how important those things were, and she wanted to make sure her classmates had access to them.

Could we add these to our mental health policies? she wrote. *They have the potential to save lives at our school and beyond.*

Her phone vibrated, and she picked it up to find a new group chat with Rainier and Hui. *You two were great today, he said. Thanks for educating our class on mental health!*

You bet! Hui replied.

Let's do this every year!!! Athena texted.

You can practice health policy just like Athena. Work with your class to create your own mental health policies and be sure to find the number of the crisis hotline in your area. Even if you never need to use it, you might be able to give it to a loved one. It could save a life.

In addition, you can research other types of services and rights that are available in your area for certain diagnoses. Look for policies that define what your school should have in place to support you, such as counseling. Remember, we can only care for others if we take care of ourselves!



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.

- ANA RITA GONZALEZ, PRESIDENT & CEO,
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AS SHE BEGINS HER SOPHOMORE YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL,
ATHENA DREAMS OF JUST ONE THING:
A CAREER IN PUBLIC HEALTH.

IT'S ALL SHE CAN TALK ABOUT, AND IT'S STARTING
TO GET ON HER CLASSMATES' NERVES.

HURT BY THEIR ANNOYANCE, ATHENA TRIES TO KEEP QUIET
ABOUT THE HEALTH POLICIES SHE LOVES SO MUCH.
BUT WHEN HER FRIEND RAINIER ATTEMPTS SUICIDE,
ATHENA IS DESPERATE TO HELP.

NOW, SHE MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN SUPPORTING
THOSE SHE LOVES AND BEING LIKED BY THOSE
WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND HER PASSION.