

ATHENA'S ADVENTURES  
IN HEALTH POLICY

# GRAB SAFETY BY THE WHEEL



FOR AGES  
12-17

BY ANA RITA GONZALEZ AND AMIT MEHTO  
ILLUSTRATED BY MELINA SUGLIANO

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## CHAPTER I: LICENSED DRIVERS

The parking spaces outside the local driving school looked a bit narrow to Athena, but she pulled effortlessly into the nearest spot and turned off the car. Sighing in relief, she turned to find her driving instructor smiling at her. “Excellent job, Athena,” he said, making a note on his clipboard, “and congratulations. You passed your driving test!”

Squealing, she said, “Thank you so much. I can’t wait to get my license.”

The driving instructor laughed. “I’m excited for you. Just remember what you learned in driver’s education, and you’ll do just fine.”

Athena nodded. She would never forget the things she’d learned during her driver’s education course at school. There were policies about road signs, the consequences of driving under the influence, speed limits, penalties for recklessness and driving without a license, seatbelt and child restraint violations, avoiding texting while driving, minimizing distractions, being aware of traffic patterns, and driving while drowsy.

And if there was one thing Athena could be counted upon to remember, it was the importance of policy.

Over the course of a few months, she and her friends had completed their required driving hours, and now, it was finally time to get their licenses. The only thing standing in their way was the road test, which Athena had just passed with flying colors. She hoped her friends were having an equally positive experience.

Back inside the driving school, Athena's dad was waiting to take her home. "How did it go?" he asked.

"Perfect score," she replied, holding up her certificate. "I just have to go get my license."

"Fantastic," said her dad, leading her back to their family car. "We'll go to the motor vehicle licensing office tomorrow."

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That evening, Athena texted the group chat to let her friends know that she'd passed her test.

*Sameeeeeee,* said Hui, bombarding the thread with celebratory emojis.

*Me too!* Conroy chimed in.

*Mine is tomorrow, but I have a good feeling about it!!!* Saffi replied.

*Congrats, everyone!* Rainier texted. *I passed yesterday!*

Athena smiled. How was it possible that she and all her friends were old enough to have driver's licenses? It felt impossible that they were juniors in high school already.

She scrolled through the text thread again, waiting for her friend Zosia to reply. Sure enough, after a few minutes, her phone vibrated—but it wasn't the news Athena had been hoping to read.

*Guys, I failed mine, Zosia said.*

*WHAT?! Hui replied. How? You're a great driver!*

*The guy who gave me the test was acting strange. I don't think it was my fault.*

*Want me to talk to him?* Conroy texted, and Athena shook her head. Conroy was always volunteering to talk to people in such situations.

*I'm pretty sure the guy fell asleep in the car, Zosia added. But whatever. I can retake the test in a couple of days.*

Athena closed the group chat and opened her personal text thread with Zosia. Frowning in frustration, she typed, *This seems unfair to you. Do you want to come over for dinner? We can talk about it.*

*I don't think talking about it will change anything, Zosia replied, but I'll come over for dinner anyway. Be there in a little bit!*

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When Zosia arrived, Athena opened the front door and wrapped her friend in a hug. Zosia had a habit of pretending she was fine when she wasn't, and Athena didn't want her friend to feel like she needed to put on a performance.



“I never fail anything,” Zosia whispered.

“I know,” Athena said, squeezing her even tighter. “I’m sorry.”

The girls stood on the doorstep for a while, the glow of the living room lights spilling over their shoulders. Athena’s dad was watching the news—she could hear a reporter’s voice droning through the house. After a few minutes of distracted listening, she asked, “Are you hungry?”

“Very,” Zosia replied, and they made their way inside for dinner.

But as they passed the TV, Zosia stopped dead in her tracks. She pointed to the screen, where a man was being arrested. “That’s the guy who gave me my driving test,” she said, her eyes wide.

Without hesitation, Athena’s dad turned up the volume. The reporter was partway through a statement that ended with “arrested for driving under the influence.”

“*Driving under the influence?*” It was so absurd that all Zosia could do was shake her head and laugh. “The professional who gave me my test got a *DUI?*”

Athena couldn’t believe it either. She turned to her dad, hoping he would have more insight, but he seemed hesitant to interrupt Zosia as she processed the information on the screen. It wasn’t until she finished laughing and rolling her eyes in disgust that Athena’s dad said, “Remember girls: DUIs are serious. It’s *never* safe to drink and drive—even if you *think* you’ll be fine.”

“We learned all about that in driver’s education,” Athena told him. “It’s a health policy that keeps drivers and passengers safe on the road.”

“That’s why it’s so important to have a designated driver,” Zosia added. “In a group, someone needs to be sober so they can bring everyone home safely.”

“But we don’t have to worry about that for years. We’re not even old enough to drink yet,” Athena pointed out.

“That’s true,” said her dad, “but it’s better that you understand the consequences of DUIs now, rather than later. They can lead to imprisonment, fines, community service, probation... All sorts of things you don’t want. And most importantly, drunk driving can lead to accidents that can be fatal.”

Athena watched as Zosia’s eyes glazed over. Health policy was a frequent topic amongst Athena’s family members, but it was a lot for Zosia to take in all at once. She was still watching the news report and cringing when photos of the driving instructor appeared on the screen.

“The good news,” Athena’s dad said, “is that health policies are being developed that will make breathalyzers in cars a mandatory feature. That means *all* drivers would be tested before their cars could move.”

At this, Zosia’s eyes lit up. “Really? That’s such a good idea!”

Athena nodded. “It probably would’ve saved you

from failing your test. If the instructor was drunk, the car would've known."

"Exactly," said her dad. "But while we're on the subject, keep in mind that DUIs are also issued for using drugs and driving. Zosia's instructor may have been using something like marijuana, which can impair coordination, distort perception, slow down reaction times, and reduce one's ability to make decisions."

Something the girls had learned in driver's education struck Athena. Frowning, she said, "Drivers have to make over one hundred fifty decisions per mile."

"Yeah, and you need to be clear-headed to do that," Zosia added.

"Just remember these things as you get further into high school," Athena's dad told them. "Avoiding alcohol and drugs is easier said than done. If one of your friends brings drugs into your car and a police officer finds them during a search, you can be arrested simply for having them in your possession."

"But that wouldn't be our fault!" Zosia protested.

Papa didn't argue with her. Instead, he said, "This is one of many reasons why we have to choose our friends carefully."

*No kidding*, Athena thought. Not only did she have to be mindful of her own driving, but she had to be aware of her passengers as well. After all, health policies are designed to keep *everyone* safe, not just those behind the wheel.

“Well, this will keep me awake tonight,” said Zosia, turning her back on the TV. “Growing up is weird. You don’t have to think about DUIs when you’re little, you know?”

“That’s the spirit.” Athena’s younger sister marched into the living room. “Get all your pessimism out now because we’re having macaroni and cheese for dinner, and only happy people eat macaroni and cheese.”

Zosia laughed. “Sorry, Rae. I’ll try to do better.”

“I’m just joking,” said Rae, giving Zosia a hug. “I heard about your test. Sorry your driving instructor was so out of it.”

“He just got arrested,” Athena said, pointing to the TV. “He got a DUI.”

Rae shrugged. “Figures. Zosia is too responsible to fail her driving test.”

This made Zosia smile. She looked lighter already—and she hadn’t even gotten her mac and cheese yet.



## CHAPTER 2: SPEEDING

A few days later, when Zosia retook her driving test, she texted the group chat and announced, *I FINALLY PASSED!!!*

Athena immediately replied with a paragraph of celebratory emojis, grinning as her friends did the same. Everyone now had a license. It felt a bit like Christmas morning.

*We should all meet up and celebrate,* Rainier suggested, and the group began planning their first outing together as licensed drivers.

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Later that week, Athena took her seat in literature class and found Conroy missing from the chair to her right. Odd—he usually arrived early.

But thirty minutes passed before Conroy finally slipped into the classroom and sat down at his desk. He seemed upset, his cheeks flushing as he breathed heavily. Athena wondered if he'd run to school... but that didn't make sense. His parents had given him a car for his birthday, and he had no reason not to drive it.

When the bell rang, she turned to him and asked, “What happened to you?”

Conroy rolled his eyes. “I got a speeding ticket on the way here. Then, I had to get a late pass from the office, which took forever. Honestly, just... don’t even ask.”

But Athena had a million questions. Finally, she said, “At least tell me how fast you were going.”

“I was going forty-four in a thirty-five, okay?”

“Okay.” Athena knew that Conroy’s frustration was with the law, not with her. After a moment, she ventured, “Did you get fined?”

“Oh, you bet I got fined,” he said, swinging his backpack over one shoulder. “Come on, let’s walk and talk. I’m not going to risk being late for algebra.”

Gathering her books, Athena followed her friend into the hallway, then said, “I’m sorry, Conroy. It must have been scary to get pulled over and ticketed.”

“Not really *scary*,” he said, eyes on the floor. “It was just frustrating. I was already running late, and then this happened. I could’ve done without the whole experience, you know?”

“Well, hopefully, you’ll only have to have it once,” Athena said. “I care about you, Conroy, and I want you to be safe on the road.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I get it. I should’ve driven slower, even if it made me late.” Athena nodded as he added, “Getting a ticket takes so long.”

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but there’s

a reason we have speed limits in the first place,” Athena reminded him. “The government sets them based on accident records, road conditions, population density, pedestrian and cyclist safety... all the things we learned about in driver’s education. They’re not just a suggestion, Con.”

“Trust me, I remember,” he said, sighing again. “Health policies apply to a lot of different areas of life, huh?”

“All the important ones,” Athena agreed.

“Well, this is probably the end of my driving career for a while,” he said miserably. “My parents are going to flip when I get home. Even if I can cover the fine with the money I earned over the summer, there’s no way they’ll let me drive by myself for a while.”

“Days?” Athena asked.

He laughed, a cynical sound that barely cleared his throat. “I’d say weeks.”

“I’m really sorry, Conroy. I know you were looking forward to having your license more than any of us.”

“That’s true,” he said, “but I don’t know... Maybe this will wind up being a good thing. It’s probably the only way I was going to take speeding seriously.”

To this, Athena said nothing—mostly because it was true. Conroy was something of a daredevil, so speed limits were never going to be his friend unless he experienced the consequences of ignoring them. But she kept these thoughts to herself, offering him a hug



instead.

“Thanks for listening to me, Thea,” he said. “I swear, I won’t speed again.”

“I believe you.” She squeezed his arm. “Now, come on. Algebra waits for no one.”

## CHAPTER 3: TEXTING AND DRIVING

Weeks passed as Athena became more and more comfortable behind the wheel. A few times a week, she was responsible for dropping Rae off at the local middle school, but on mornings when she was alone, she would pull into the drive-through of her favorite coffee shop and order a latte. Somehow, it made her feel more prepared for the challenges of junior year.

It was widely known that junior year at her high school was even harder than senior year, and Athena was feeling the pressure. College was right around the corner, and everyone was talking about it—their top choices, their grades, their test scores. It was inescapable. And no matter how hard Athena studied, there was only so much she could do to ensure her acceptance into a good program.

The lattes helped to remind her that there were still a few things she could control—including her happiness.

But not all her friends were quite so optimistic. Athena frequently received calls from Hui, Saffi, and Rainier, all of them overwhelmed by their studies or the choices they would have to make in the coming months. Which schools would be best for them? What should

they study? It wasn't that Athena could answer these questions on their behalf. Rather, she was a very patient listener.

So, when Hui called her, out of the blue, on a Monday night, Athena took a deep breath and answered. It was safe to assume that her friend was once again questioning her ability to become a psychiatrist, and Athena had already learned exactly what to say. *This is your dream, Hui! You can do anything you put your mind to, so try not to worry about it.*

But Hui's opening line wasn't, "What if I'm not good enough to be a psychiatrist?" It wasn't even "Hello." Instead, she took a shaky breath and said, "Are you sitting down?"

"Yes," Athena said slowly, confused by the tremor in her friend's voice. "Why?"

"My parents aren't answering their phones, and you're the next person I thought of to call."

"Okay. What's wrong, Hui?" Athena's heart hammered.

With a deep breath, Hui replied, "I got in a car accident."

Athena gasped as she sprang from her desk chair. "Oh, my gosh, I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?"

"I'm not hurt, and my car is fine, too. But I hit the car in front of me."

Nodding to calm herself, Athena said, "Okay, what happened? How did you run into the other car?"

A long pause made her wonder if the call had dropped. She pulled the phone away from her ear and checked—still working. Finally, Hui mumbled, “I was... texting. I looked down at my phone for just a second... and then I crashed.”

Anger and relief flooded Athena’s veins in a wave. She was fiercely grateful that Hui wasn’t hurt and furious that she’d done something so reckless. Sighing, she said, “Where are you? Do you need someone to come pick you up?”

“I just need somewhere to go,” Hui told her. “It doesn’t seem like my parents are home, and I don’t want to be alone.”

“Well, come to my house,” said Athena. “My mom is making butternut squash soup for dinner, and we can talk more when you get here.”

“You had me at squash soup,” said Hui. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

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When Hui arrived, Athena hugged her—then shook her. She couldn’t help it. Of all the ridiculous, irrational, risky things to do while driving, texting was among the worst. If she remembered one thing from driver’s education, it was that the probability of crashing increases by ninety-five percent when reaching for a phone. It doesn’t matter if the driver is texting, calling, changing

playlists, or choosing a podcast. Distraction and danger are inevitable.

“Why did you do it?” Athena whispered. “Why did you text while driving?”

“How do you *avoid* it?” Hui answered. “I get notifications while I’m in the car, and I feel like I have to know who’s trying to reach me.”

“All you have to do is stay alive.”

“I *am* alive!”

Athena sighed. “We have to make sure this never happens again, Hui. I have an auto text set up when I’m driving that lets people know I’ll respond later. You’ve seen it before, right?”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how to set it up.”

“Let me see your phone.” Hui handed it over, and Athena began digging through the settings. Finally, she found the autoresponder. “It looks like all you have to do is turn it on.”

“Well, I’ll do it as soon as I’m allowed to drive again.”

“What do you mean?”

Now, it was Hui’s turn to sigh. “My mom finally called me back. She says that once I get home, I’m not allowed to drive for a month.”

Athena gasped. “A *month*?”

“That’s what I said. Plus, my parents are limiting my screen time to basically nothing but homework.”

Now *this* was an unexpected turn of events. Hui had already been in a car accident. Wasn’t that

punishment enough?

But the longer Athena considered the situation, the more she understood things from the perspective of Hui's parents. They wanted her to be safe, to make this lesson a one-time offense. If a month without driving and unnecessary distractions would accomplish that, then...

"It'll be okay," Athena comforted her friend. "A month really isn't a long time. And until then, you can ride your bike to school. You enjoy that anyway, right?"

Hui rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I guess. I just hate that I messed up like this—and so soon after getting my license. My mom said that my car insurance is going to be more expensive now."

"Well, look on the bright side. At least you *have* insurance, you know? If things had been worse, it would have covered any damage."

"That's true," said Hui. She took a deep breath, relaxing. Then, she said, "Is it dinnertime? I'm pretty sure squash soup can fix this."

Athena laughed. She didn't think her mom's soup was that powerful—but it definitely couldn't hurt.



## CHAPTER 4: SNOW DAYS

Autumn turned slowly into winter. Athena woke to still-dark skies and dreaded leaving the warmth of her blankets. Nonetheless, she had to get herself—and Rae—to school on time, so she braced herself against the cold and drove carefully over the snowy roads.

Though her route to school was rarely icy, this wasn't the case for all of Athena's friends. Rainier and Saffi frequently complained about the slick road conditions and how cautiously they had to drive as a result. The thought of either of them sliding on the ice made Athena nervous—but she didn't say that. Instead, she told them, "I'm glad you made it here safely." And then she gave them hugs to prove it.

The roads served mostly to annoy the new drivers. That was, until one Thursday morning, when Saffi's dad dropped her off at school.

"Why didn't you drive, Saf?" Conroy asked, watching as her dad pulled out of the carpool lane. "That's not even your car."

"No, it's not," Saffi said in a small voice.

Athena noticed how tired her friend looked, suddenly concerned by her puffy eyes and sallow skin.



“Are you okay?” she asked Saffi, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

“Yes—which is a miracle,” she said cryptically. Turning to Conroy, she added, “You won’t be seeing my car again. None of us will.”

“Did your parents take away your driving privileges?” asked Hui. By then, the entire friend group knew about her accident and the resulting punishment.

Saffi sighed. “No. I was driving home from dance class last night, and my car slid on the ice.”

“Oh, no,” Zosia whispered. “What happened?”

“I crashed straight into a tree,” Saffi admitted, her eyes hollow. She looked stunned, as if she couldn’t believe her own answer. “I was wearing my seatbelt—thank goodness—and the airbags deployed... but I was so scared, you guys. My little sister was strapped into her booster seat behind me, and I thought for sure she was going to be hurt.”

“But she’s okay?” Athena clarified. She couldn’t imagine being in a car accident with Rae. How terrifying!

“She’s fine,” Saffi said as a few tears trickled onto her cheek. “My car is totaled, but we’re both safe, and that’s what matters.”

“Oh, Saffi, I am so sorry.” Athena hugged her friend and took a deep breath as Zosia, Hui, and Conroy all joined her. It felt important, in that moment, to be together—to remind Saffi that she wasn’t alone.

“What can we do?” Zosia asked.

“Don’t move please,” Saffi said through her tears. “I really needed a hug.”

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Athena and her friends reconvened at lunch to continue discussing Saffi’s accident. She seemed more open to talking about it now that everyone knew what had happened. Plus, Athena thought, if they could all learn from Saffi’s experience, maybe they could avoid similar circumstances in the future.

“So, go back to the beginning,” Conroy suggested. “You’ve been a careful driver all winter. What was different last night?”

Swallowing a bite of her salad, Saffi said, “Well, the roads were fine on my way to the dance studio. By the time I left, it had started to snow, but I didn’t think it would be icy yet. I was driving the speed limit, which I guess was still too fast. I should’ve slowed down, but... I just wanted to get home before the visibility got too bad.”

“That makes sense,” said Hui. “Your dance class only lasts an hour, right? I would’ve expected the roads to be fine, too.”

“I was there for two hours, actually,” said Saffi. “My sister’s class was before mine.”

“And the sun went down while you were inside,” Conroy guessed. “That’ll change the road conditions pretty fast.”

“Definitely. I’ll just have to drive slower next time. You really have to look and think ahead when it’s snowing... and avoid slamming on the brakes. That’s how I wound up in the trees. I tried to stop the car, but it just spiraled out of control because the pavement was so slick.”

“Did you have winter tires on your car?” Rainier asked.

Saffi shook her head. “My car has—*had*—all-wheel drive, so I thought I would be fine until spring. My parents thought so, too. I guess we were wrong.”

Rainier nodded. “Winter tires changed the game for me. I feel a lot safer now that I have them.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Saffi said. “I definitely want to take *all* the precautions with my new car.”

“Being a safe driver has a lot to do with the little things, you know?” Athena pointed out. “Wearing your seatbelt may have saved your life, Saf. I’m so glad that in your rush to get home, you didn’t skip it.”

“Same,” said Zosia. “Wearing a seatbelt is so simple, but people forget to do it all the time.”

Nodding, Saffi said, “I can’t even imagine driving without my seatbelt, especially now.”

A moment passed. Finally, Conroy asked, “When are you getting your new car?”

“I’m not sure. My mom is going to help me file an insurance claim when I get home today, so we’ll see what I have to work with budget-wise.”

Athena and her friends commiserated about

budgeting for long enough that the bell rang. She looked up at the clock, disbelieving. She'd been so invested in their conversation about Saffi's accident that she'd barely touched her grilled cheese sandwich.

"Thanks for talking this through with me," Saffi said, smiling at each of them in turn. "You guys are the best."

Athena gave her another hug. "Let us know if there's anything else we can do, okay? We can even help you look for a new car once you have a budget."

"That would be great," she said, her shoulders slumping in relief. "Shopping for cars is *hard*. It took me months to find one I liked. I'm really sad that I won't get to drive it again."

"Well, who knows?" Zosia shrugged. "Maybe we can find the same one... in better shape, of course."

"Maybe in green!" added Hui.

"Okay, yeah," Saffi said, nodding as she considered the possibility. "That wouldn't be so bad."



## CHAPTER 5: CHANCHING LANES

Spring arrived slowly—or maybe it just felt that way to Athena. As the ice melted away and flowers began to bloom, she realized how much she'd missed the sunshine.

“Winter feels longer when you have to drive in the snow,” Zosia said one day, and the entire friend group agreed.

But as the roads dried in the heat, Athena grew more confident behind the wheel. Her pauses at stop signs got a little shorter, her turns a little sharper, her speed a little higher. Without snow and ice to distract her, she was free... and a bit less careful.

Driving made Athena feel powerful, like she could go anywhere and do anything. Her parents often told her that they felt safe when she was driving, and though Rae could always find something to nitpick, she was usually quiet on the way to school.

So, it was only when Athena drove alone that she rolled down all the windows and turned up the radio. When no one else was around, she was more likely to roll through four-way stops and drive just over the speed limit. After all, she wasn't going *fast*—not nearly as fast as Conroy when he got a speeding ticket.

And then, one morning, everything changed.

She was on her way to school without Rae, who had taken the bus so she could sit with her friends. Before Athena had so much as left her neighborhood, she made a right turn at a red light and quickly moved to change lanes. She needed to be as far to the left as possible to turn into the school parking lot.

*Screeeeeeech.*

Athena's heart froze as she felt the left side of her car hit something solid. Out of nowhere, a silver SUV came into view next to her.

No, not just *next to her*. It was touching the side of her car.

She gasped and slammed on the brakes, but the other car kept moving. Athena watched in horror as the blue paint of her sedan left a stripe down the right side of the SUV, which finally came to a shuddering stop.

Hands shaking, Athena checked her mirrors before moving back into the right lane and pulling off the road. She then turned her hazard lights on as the silver SUV did the same.

*What now, what now, what now?*

"Call emergency services," she whispered to herself, stepping out of the car. Her door made a slight squealing noise when she opened and closed it—but at least it was working. Athena hoped against hope that the damage was minimal.

Behind her, a middle-aged woman with graying

hair shut the door of the SUV and walked toward her. Athena didn't realize she was crying until the other driver said, "Oh, honey, it'll be okay. Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, her fingers hovering over her phone screen. The whole world felt muffled somehow, like this was just a nightmare. Any minute, Athena thought, she would wake up, and all of this would fade away.

In the meantime, she said to the other driver, "I'm going to call emergency services, and then I'll give you my insurance information. Is that okay?"

The woman smiled gently. "Why don't I call emergency services, and you just grab your insurance card?"

Athena heaved a breath, swiping tears from her cheeks. "Okay. I'll be right back."

Moving slowly—her legs felt so wobbly—she opened the passenger door of her car and dug through the glove compartment until she found her insurance card. By then, the other driver had reported the accident and was waiting for Athena on the sidewalk.

"I'm Monique," she said as they exchanged insurance cards. "The police should be here any minute to assess the accident."

"Okay. Thank you for calling," Athena said. It felt strange to thank someone for calling the police, but *everything* felt strange at the moment. Nonetheless, she added, "I'm going to take pictures of both of our cars. Did you see any damage besides the paint?"

"Not on mine," said Monique. "Is your car all right?"



“The door is making a weird sound, but I think everything is working. I’ll take pictures anyway.”

Monique nodded. “Good thinking. I’ll take some, too.”

Athena snapped photos of her own car first, focusing on the creaky door and the side-view mirror, which was scratched. She still couldn’t believe she’d been in an accident—especially one where she was at fault. She should have done a better job checking her mirrors before she moved into the left lane.

And when the police arrived, she would have to tell them as much.

More tears trickled onto Athena’s cheeks as she walked over to Monique’s car to take more pictures. Her blue paint cut sharply across the silver of the SUV, a harsh reminder of the cost of overconfidence.

*I should have checked my mirrors,* she thought again. *Now, my insurance will have to cover the damage done to both cars.*

When Athena put her phone down, Monique was standing next to her, a comforting smile on her face. “The important thing is that both of us are safe,” she said. “You know that, don’t you?”

Athena nodded, watching in trepidation as a police car pulled up behind Monique’s SUV. Besides being thoroughly disappointed in herself—and late for school—she was okay. And Monique was right. That was the important thing.

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By the time Athena gave her statement to the police officer and took a few—or more than a few—deep breaths, she had already missed her first class. Hands shaking in overwhelm, she pulled a U-turn and drove home.

For a while, she sat in the driveway, thinking. Her mom was working from home that day, which meant Athena would have to tell her the whole story as soon as she went inside.

*How do I explain this?* she thought, but there wasn't much time to decide. Before she'd even turned off her car, Mama was standing in the driveway, confusion and concern etched on her face.

With a deep breath, Athena pushed open her door—still creaky—and faced her mom.

"Thea? What's wrong? The school just called to tell me that you never arrived."

A sob rose in Athena's throat as she answered, "I didn't. I... I got in a car accident."

Mama gasped, rushing forward to give her a hug. For a moment, no one said anything—just listened to the birds chirping in the trees overhead. Then, when she had collected herself, Athena whispered, "I think my car is okay. The door is making a weird noise, but—"

"Athena, I'm not worried about the car," her mom cut her off. "I'm worried about *you*. Are *you* okay?"

"I'm okay," Athena assured her. "I was nervous to

drive home, but I'm okay."

"I'm glad you came here instead of going to school," said Mama. "Let's get you some tea, and then we can talk about what happened. Your dad can look at the car and call the insurance company when he gets home."

Athena nodded. Tea sounded nice, and if anything was wrong with her car, her dad would find it.

Everything would be all right.

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"Thea! Wait up!"

Athena turned as Conroy came barreling down the school hall. It had been twenty-four hours since the accident—not that she was counting. "Hi," she said, smiling.

"Where were you yesterday?" he asked, panting. "You weren't answering anyone's texts. We thought you must've fallen off a cliff or something."

Rolling her eyes, Athena said, "No cliffs. I... well... I was in a fender bender."

Conroy's eyes widened in shock. "Oh, wow, I'm so sorry. That's not what I was expecting at all. I never would've made jokes if I'd known."

"It's okay," she assured him. "I'm fine, and my car is fine. I drove it here today."

"Weren't you nervous?" Conroy asked.

Athena sighed; he knew her too well. “I was *really* nervous, but my parents told me that I needed to ‘get back on the horse’ and avoid overthinking. I’m going to talk with my therapist about the accident tomorrow, so that will help.”

Nodding, Conroy asked, “What happened anyway? You must’ve been on your way here, right?”

As Athena filled him in on the details, their other friends joined them, until they had formed a haphazard circle in the hallway. No one could believe that Athena had been in a car accident, no matter how minor. It was unlike her to be so careless as to not check her mirrors.

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” Zosia said, giving her a hug. “It sounds like things could’ve been much worse.”

“Definitely,” Athena agreed. Her dad had been able to fix the squeal in her car door, so it was almost as if the accident never happened.

But of course, it *had* happened—and she would remember it forever. A not-so-subtle reminder to keep her wits about her while driving.

Suddenly, the bell rang, bringing Athena back to the present. She thought she was about to be late for her first class—an infraction she couldn’t afford after yesterday’s events—but instead, Principal Bowman’s voice rang loud and clear over the intercom.

“Good morning, students. I’d like to address the entire junior class. If you’re in the eleventh grade, please make your way to the auditorium for a brief discussion.”

“But we’ll miss chemistry,” Zosia complained.

Conroy shrugged. “Must be pretty important if Principal Bowman is handling it himself.”

Together, Athena and her friends made their way to the auditorium and chose seats near the back of the room. The rest of the junior class continued to file in as Principal Bowman raised the mic stand and performed a quick sound check. Then, once everyone was seated, he said, “Thank you for gathering. It has come to my attention that there have been an inordinate number of driving mishaps amongst you this year. Would you agree with that statement?”

Athena looked reluctantly at Conroy, Hui, and Saffi. Yes, there had certainly been enough misadventures behind the wheel for one year.

“I think it’s time to course-correct,” the principal said. “If you have a license—whether or not you’ve been involved in an accident—I’d like you to write an essay on your experiences as a new driver. It doesn’t need to be long, and it won’t be graded, but please deliver it to my office in one week.”

Hui groaned quietly, and Athena was tempted to join her. An extra essay? To describe her fender bender? This felt like cruel and unusual punishment for something that was already awful.

*My accident must have been the last straw*, she thought, looking apologetically at her friends. But they didn’t appear to be blaming her for anything. Rather,

they were fixated on Principal Bowman as he added, "Once I receive everyone's essay, I'll compile them in a book for the next class of driver's education students. Any objections?"

A hush fell over the auditorium as the students considered. "That's actually a pretty good idea," Zosia whispered.

"It could help a lot of new drivers," Athena agreed. She still wasn't thrilled at the prospect of writing about her accident, but if it reminded others to check their mirrors before changing lanes, it would be worth it.

"Excellent," the principal said. "I look forward to reading your essays. Please make your way quietly to your first class. No need for a late pass today."

Athena followed Zosia out of the auditorium and into the hall. What a bizarre way to begin an otherwise normal day at school... but everyone seemed excited to see the finished book.

"I bet there are lots of accidents that we haven't even heard about yet," Conroy whispered. "I mean, the *entire* junior class? That's a lot of boring essays to read if only a few of us have made mistakes."

"I sure wish my essay were going to be boring," Saffi said. "I'm not looking forward to reliving my accident just so I can write about it."

"Maybe it'll be good for us," Athena said hopefully. "We can write our stories and let them go."

"I want to reference a few policies from driver's

education in my essay,” Hui said, grabbing a notebook from her locker. “Can I text you about that later, Thea?”

“Oh, me too!” said Zosia. “Things have been uneventful since I got my license, so I want to write mostly about policies for new drivers.”

Athena smiled. “Sure, I can help with that.” She was glad to know that even post-accident, her friends still trusted her with matters related to health policy.

“Drop your essays in the group chat when they’re done,” Conroy suggested, heading for chemistry class. “We can help each other get them ready to publish.”

“Good idea,” Athena said. “I think this might end up being fun.”

## CHAPTER 6: A YEAR IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Conroy

### Driver's Education Essay

When I first got my license, my biggest goal was to avoid getting in an accident. I figured it would be easy; I did well in driver's education and passed my driving test with a perfect score. What I failed to recognize was the importance of obeying the speed limit. Speeding seemed like such a small thing compared to being in a car wreck, but as I later discovered, the law still takes it seriously.

I guess I am a bit of a daredevil. I grew up riding snowmobiles and ATVs, so speed has always been part of my life. Driving a car felt like the next level of my desire to go fast. Still, I did not want to get pulled over and ticketed, so I was careful during my first week on the road.

Then, that week passed. I was driving to school and knew I was going to be late, so I picked up speed, confident that I would be safe. I was going nine miles per hour over the speed limit when I finally got pulled over by the police.

At first, I was frustrated. Not only was I late for



school, but now, I had to pay a speeding ticket using the money I saved while working over the summer. It seemed unfair until I realized it was totally my fault.

Back in driver's education, I learned that the government sets speed limits based on accident records, road conditions, population density, and pedestrian and cyclist safety. As a friend reminded me when I finally got to school that day, speed limits are *not* suggestions. They keep drivers, passengers, and those outside the car safe from harm. I should have kept all these things in mind before I decided to race to school.

In closing, my best tip for new drivers is to take the speed limit seriously. It may look like "just a number," but it is actually an important policy that has real consequences when ignored.

## Driver's Education Essay

Everyone knows that car accidents happen, but no one thinks about what it feels like to be involved in one. That is, *I* never thought about it—until I had no choice. A few weeks after I got my license, I was involved in my first (and hopefully only) car accident, which was due to texting while driving.

In driver's education, I learned that the probability of crashing increases by 95% when reaching for a phone. It does not matter if the driver is texting, calling, changing playlists, or choosing a podcast. Distraction and danger are inevitable, and that was definitely my experience.

My phone was buried in my backpack, but the volume was on, and I heard my text tone while stopped at a traffic light. I reached into my bag as the light turned green, pulled out my phone, and was reading the text as I accelerated. Unfortunately, the car in front of me had not moved yet, so I rear-ended it. I was going so slowly that my airbags did not even deploy, but the whole event was still really scary. I had no idea how angry the other driver would be or how upset my parents would be when I got home. Thankfully, the driver was kind and forgiving, but my parents took away my driving privileges for a month.

After the accident, I went to a friend's house, and she showed me how to turn on my autoresponder. Now

that I can drive again, it lets my friends know when I am behind the wheel so I can reply to them later. This is important for my safety *and* the safety of others on the road. After being in an accident, I can see that very clearly.

I used to think I had to reply to my texts immediately, but the truth is that texting and driving can mean the difference between life or death. I always want to choose life, so the autoresponder has been great. Sadly, it did not stop my car insurance cost from being raised.

So, whether you are a new driver or have been driving for years, my best piece of advice is to keep your eyes on the road, not on your phone. Your texts can wait, but your life cannot.

## Driver's Education Essay

After being in a car accident this past winter, I can honestly say that our town needs to work on taking care of the icy roads. All of this could have been avoided with a plow truck and some salt. But I digress. All new drivers should be aware of the dangers of driving in the snow.

It happened like this: I was driving home from dance class with my little sister, who was buckled into her booster seat behind me. We had been at the studio for a couple of hours, and in that time, it had begun to snow. I figured the roads were probably fine, but I was extra careful about my speed and followed the signs exactly. Unfortunately, the roads were icier than I expected. My car slid, I slammed on the brakes, and I crashed into a giant tree.

This accident is easily the scariest thing that has ever happened to me. I was wearing my seatbelt, the airbags deployed, and my headrest stopped me from getting whiplash, but I was terrified that my sister would be hurt since she is so petite. Thankfully, we were both fine (though we were also crying). My car, however, was totaled. Insurance covered the cost of a new one, and this time, I made sure it has all-wheel drive *and* snow tires.

If I could give new drivers just one piece of advice, it would be to avoid driving in the snow. But if you must, be sure to drive *under* the speed limit to *avoid* slamming

on your brakes. It is worth being late to your next event rather than wrecking your car and possibly being hurt.

**Driver's Education Essay**

In my wildest dreams, I never expected to be in a car accident. For years, I have been interested in health policy, and driver's education felt like a natural progression of that interest. I wanted to know every law and regulation pertaining to driving. So, by the time the course ended, I felt well-equipped to sit behind the wheel. In fact, I grew so confident in my driving abilities that I made a grave mistake: neglecting to check my mirrors before changing lanes.

I was on my way to school one morning when I made a right turn at a red light. My speed was a little higher than it should have been, but I was unconcerned. I had made this drive dozens of times without problems, and that knowledge made me too confident. So, when I moved over to the left lane, I quickly glanced in the rear-view mirror and failed to notice the car driving up next to me. We collided, and my side-view mirror left a blue stripe down the side of the other vehicle.

Thankfully, the other driver was incredibly kind. She called emergency services while I found my insurance card and took pictures of our cars. Then, after the police assessed the damage, I was able to drive home. It was nerve-racking to get back behind the wheel after this fender bender, but I knew I had to do it.

I think the moral of my story is that one can never be too careful on the road. No matter how long one has

been driving or how confident they are, it is vital to stick to the basics: checking mirrors, using blinkers, wearing a seatbelt, etc. Driving a car is a huge responsibility and should always be treated as such.

Like all health policies, road rules are designed to keep *everyone* safe. They do not discriminate based on “good” drivers or “bad” drivers. We are all just *drivers* who must continually practice good driving habits. So, keep your eyes on the road and stay safe out there!









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THANK YOU SO MUCH TO MY TEAMMATES FOR HELPING ME CONCEPTUALIZE AND WRITE EACH BOOK; TO OUR AMAZING EDITOR, AQUINNAH BREE; AND TO OUR TALENTED ILLUSTRATORS, MELINA SUGLIANO AND RODRIGO PALACIOS. IN CREATING THIS SERIES, WE HAVE ALSO CREATED A LIFELONG BOND.

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# GRAB SAFETY BY THE WHEEL

ACCIDENTS ABOUND AS ATHENA AND HER FRIENDS  
PASS THEIR DRIVING TESTS AND EARN THEIR LICENSES.

WHETHER IT'S SPEEDING, TEXTING WHILE DRIVING,  
OR COLLIDING WHEN CHANGING LANES, THEY  
CAN'T SEEM TO AVOID ROAD SAFETY MISHAPS.

BY THE END OF THE YEAR, THEY COULD WRITE  
AN ENTIRE BOOK ON THEIR MISTAKES AND LESSONS  
LEARNED—AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT PRINCIPAL  
BOWMAN WANTS THEM TO DO.

