

ATHENA'S ADVENTURES
IN HEALTH POLICY

HOOKED ON RESILIENCY



FOR AGES
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BY ANA RITA GONZALEZ AND ANDRES CARBALLO
ILLUSTRATED BY MELINA SUGLIANO

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CHAPTER I: NEW YEAR'S EVE

Athena stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at the tell-tale stain on her favorite blue dress.

“Rae!” she shouted. She could hear her younger sister digging through drawers in the bathroom, probably looking for a hair clip. “Come in here!”

The bathroom door squealed open, and then Rae was in Athena’s bedroom, a toothbrush sticking out the side of her mouth. “What?”

“Look at this,” Athena said, pointing to the stain. “When did you borrow my dress?”

Removing the toothbrush from between her teeth, Rae said, “How do you know I borrowed it?”

“Come on, Rae,” Athena whined. “What did you spill on it?”

Rae sighed, rolling her eyes. “Buttered popcorn. I could’ve sworn I got all the grease out before I put it back in your closet.”

“Well, you didn’t, and now I can’t wear it.”

There was a growl in Athena’s tone that marked the end of the holiday season. She felt as if she’d been to a hundred parties since Christmas, all of them packed with family members and friends. It wasn’t that she hadn’t

enjoyed herself—she had—but she was tired. She had just *one more party* to attend before school started again, and it should've been easy: New Year's Eve at Saffi's house. But Rae had thrown a wrench in her fashion plans.

"Wear my red dress," Rae offered. "It looks better on you anyway."

Athena sighed as she checked the clock. Just twenty minutes until she needed to leave. "Fine. But next time you want to borrow my clothes, *ask me first*, okay?"

The toothbrush was already back in Rae's mouth when she said, "You got it." Her garbled voice was almost enough to make Athena laugh.

By the time Athena pulled onto Saffi's street—fashionably late—parked cars lined either side. She knew everyone from school had been invited to the party, but she didn't think they'd all show up at once. Apparently, there was going to be quite a crowd.

Athena scanned the street for an available parking space, but no such luck. Sighing, she pulled a U-turn and drove up the neighboring road. At last, she was able to parallel park behind a familiar silver sedan.

"Happy New Year!" Conroy said, opening his arms as Athena stepped out of her car.

She hugged him, grateful for a brief respite from

the cold winter wind. “Happy New Year,” she replied. “Let’s get inside before my legs freeze.”

“Are you wearing red?” Conroy squinted at the hem of her dress, barely visible beneath her winter coat. “You never wear red.”

“New year, new me,” she joked as she locked her car. Together, they began walking toward Saffi’s house.

“How’s the rest of your break been?” Conroy asked. “I haven’t seen you since Hui’s Christmas party.”

“It’s been good. Busy, I guess. A little stressful.”

Conroy laughed. “Tell me about it. Spring can’t come soon enough.”

At this point in their high school careers, that was all that needed to be said. They had finally finished applying to universities, and now, their job was to keep their grades up and await their acceptance letters.

“I still can’t believe you applied to *five* schools,” Conroy said. “*Three* was a stretch for me.”

Athena smiled, though she could hardly believe it either. “There are just so many places I can see myself studying. I could stay here, I could move to a different part of the country—”

“Or you could move to a totally different country.” Conroy shook his head in amazement. “Did you *really* apply to an international school, or was that a joke? I couldn’t tell when you texted in the group chat.”

Oh, Conroy. He knew perfectly well that Athena was willing—and excited—to study abroad... but he

would never admit it. He wanted all his friends to stay close to home.

“I really did it,” Athena confirmed. “I think studying abroad would help me understand the challenges of other countries and cultures. That way, I can be better prepared for a career in public health policy.”

Conroy squeezed her arm affectionately. “You’ll do great, Thea—no matter where you go to school.”

“So will you, Con.”

She sighed. She would miss this if she moved halfway around the world. Who knew where she and all her friends would be at this time next year?

“Cheer up,” Conroy said as they climbed Saffi’s front steps. “Maybe this party will be a nice distraction from everything, you know? I think we’re all feeling the pressure, but it’s still the holiday season. We should enjoy it.”

“You’re right,” Athena said as the knot in her stomach loosened just a bit. “This will be fun.”

A chalkboard near Saffi’s front door read: *Happy New Year! Don’t knock—just come in!* And that’s exactly what Athena and Conroy did.

Inside, the walls were covered in tinsel and fairy lights, balloon arches mounted over every door. Paper hats, noisemakers, and glittering confetti were scattered across tables full of snacks and drinks. It was as if an entire party supply store had been moved into the main floor of Saffi’s family home.

“Wow.” Conroy whistled. “She outdid herself this time.”

Athena nodded as she attempted to take it all in. Saffi was an excellent hostess—a fact that their entire school now knew, apparently. Athena couldn’t believe how many people were already crammed into the living room and kitchen, and she could make out more voices coming from the basement. Between the talking, laughing, and holiday music playing over the sound system, it was a miracle that she heard a familiar voice cry, “You made it!”

Turning toward the stairwell, Athena grinned at her friends Hui, Zosia, and Rainier as they ran up to her and Conroy. For a moment, her world became hugs and best wishes for a happy new year, and the noise of the party faded away.

“Who else is stressed about college applications?” Zosia asked, only half-joking.

“I am,” Athena, Conroy, Hui, and Rainier said in unison.

“Well, at least it’s not just me,” said Saffi from behind them.

Athena turned and hugged her. “Happy New Year! What a great party, Saf.”

“Thanks,” she said, giving Conroy a hug, too. “It took my mom and I almost five hours to set everything up. I think these decorations might be permanent now.” She laughed.

“The games are downstairs,” Rainier added, pointing.

“That’s where Hui, Zosia, and I were when we came looking for you guys.”

“I have to stay upstairs in case people miss the ‘just come in’ sign,” Saffi said, “but you should go have fun. And be sure to get plenty of food! My mom doesn’t want any leftovers.”

“Noted,” Hui said. Grabbing Athena’s and Zosia’s hands, she headed straight for the kitchen.

“Have you considered that party food might be your downfall, Hui?” Zosia laughed.

“Have you considered *shhh*?”

For a while, Athena stood in the kitchen, drinking sparkling cider and chatting with her friends. It was pleasant—and crowded. Though it was nice to be reminded of what her life felt like before college prep took over, it wasn’t long before she needed a break.

Tapping Conroy on the shoulder, she said above the noise, “Would you walk outside with me? I could use some air.”

Nodding, Conroy led her through the crowd, back toward the front door. Athena expected to find it closed—it was so stuffy inside—but it was wide open. A frigid gust of winter wind hit her legs as she observed Saffi standing on the porch with a few of their classmates.

“Why can’t people just read the sign?” Conroy said under his breath, but as they neared the door, he paused, holding Athena back. “Wait... I think they’re arguing.”

Athena listened, trying to tune out the dozens of voices behind her. Finally, she heard Saffi say, “Don’t you dare. You think you can bring that here, to my *family’s house*? My little sister is home!”

“Well, how were we supposed to know that?” asked one of the other girls on the porch. Athena caught a glimpse of the plastic bag in her hand, containing a substance she didn’t recognize.

Pointing, Athena asked Conroy, “What’s that?”

Eyes wide, Conroy whispered, “Looks like cocaine.”

What?! Athena’s thoughts swirled. Why would anyone from their school try to bring cocaine *anywhere*, let alone to a party full of people they knew?

Saffi said something that Athena didn’t hear, and the girl with the plastic bag laughed. “You are such a killjoy tonight.”

“Where are Saffi’s parents?” Conroy whispered.

Athena looked frantically around the main floor of the house. “I don’t know.”

“Okay. Stay here for a minute.” Raising himself to his full height, Conroy stalked over to the door to stand behind Saffi, who suddenly looked very small. “I think you guys should leave,” Conroy said to the others on the porch.

Again, the girl with the plastic bag laughed. “Who’s going to make us?”

Conroy laughed, too, though he did not sound amused. “Well, let me put it like this. If you don’t leave, I’ll

call the police. Is that really how you want to start the new year?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Let's go, guys."

Athena watched as their classmates walked away, cocaine in hand, and disappeared into the cold winter night. Shuddering, Saffi turned to Conroy and hugged him. Then, the two of them returned inside. They were talking, but Athena couldn't hear them. Suddenly, all she wanted was to go home and crawl into bed.

"Let's get you some air, Thea," Conroy said, reaching for her hand, but she shook her head.

"I think I should go. I'm really tired and... that was a lot for me."

Saffi hugged her tightly. "Sorry, Thea. I didn't expect that. It really ruined the vibe, huh?"

"It's not your fault," Athena said as she buttoned her coat. "Tell everyone I said goodnight, okay? I'll see you guys at school in a few days."

Saffi nodded at the floor as Conroy pulled on his jacket. "You're not walking all the way back to your car by yourself," he said. "Come on—I'll go with you."

CHAPTER 2: BROTHERLY ADVICE

When Athena got home, the house was mostly dark. There was a single lamp on in the living room—but of course that was the case. Her parents, brother, and sister were all at their own New Year's Eve parties.

She sighed, checking the time. Midnight was still hours away. It was going to be a *very* long night.

Twenty minutes later, in her pajamas and sitting in front of the TV, Athena decided to call her mom. If she picked up her phone, great. If not... well... Athena would figure that out later. She just needed to talk to someone about what happened at the party, and her mom was her first choice. Mama always knew what to do.

Athena muted the TV as she pressed the call button. But after too many rings, she hung up with another sigh. Her mom's phone was probably buried in her purse.

Still determined to talk to someone, she called her dad, but it went straight to voicemail. He had either put his phone on airplane mode for the party, or the battery had died over the course of a hectic day.

"Pick up, Odin," Athena whispered as she called her brother. He was a sophomore in college but was home

for the holidays. If she couldn't reach her parents, maybe she could reach him.

Finally, the ringing stopped, and a muffled voice said, "Hey."

"Oh, thank goodness. Can I talk to you quickly?"

"Can it wait ten minutes? I'm almost home."

Athena frowned. "Really? It's early."

"You know I'm not a big partier, Thea. Are you at Saffi's? I can pick you up if that's what you want."

"I'm already home," Athena told him. "I'll see you in a bit."

"Sounds good. Love you."

Odin hung up, and Athena unmuted the TV. She already felt better, knowing that soon, she wouldn't be alone.

Sure enough, ten minutes later, she heard Odin's car pull into the driveway. The front door unlocked, and her brother's voice called, "I'm back, Thea."

"Want some popcorn?" she asked.

"Definitely."

Athena grabbed a bag from the pantry and dumped it into a bowl. Returning to the living room, she set the food down on the coffee table and hugged her brother. "I'm glad you're back," she said.

"What's this about anyway? You seemed a little wound up on the phone."

Sitting on the couch beside him, she said, "Things got kind of weird at Saffi's party. A few of our classmates

showed up with..."

Odin shook his head impatiently. "With what?"

Athena heaved a breath. "They had cocaine. At least, that's what Conroy thinks. I'd never seen cocaine, but... I trust him."

"Cocaine, huh?" Odin whistled. "I get it. Something similar happened on my college campus recently."

"Really?"

"Yeah. A few students were caught with cocaine in their dorm, and all of them were expelled."

"*Expelled?*" Athena's eyes widened. "Isn't that a bit drastic?"

Odin shrugged. "Not really. It's a school policy that keeps everyone safe. Cocaine is illegal because it's harmful, you know?"

In theory, Athena *did* know, but... "What does cocaine actually *do* to people?"

Dumping a handful of popcorn into his mouth, Odin said, "Oh, it does all sorts of terrible things. It can cause agitation, paranoia, aggression, dizziness, hallucinations, nausea, vomiting, tremors, headaches, and even heart pain. And that's *before* overdosing."

"*Before?*" Athena felt like her head was going to explode. Just *hearing* about cocaine was enough to make her want to avoid it. "Then what happens if you overdose?"

"The worst," Odin said simply. "Seizures, kidney failure, heart attack, stroke... The list goes on."

Athena shook her head. "I can't believe someone tried to bring that stuff into Saffi's house. It's..." She growled in frustration. "It's ridiculously dangerous!"

"Agreed," said her brother. "There's no good reason to have it at a party, in a dorm, or anywhere else."

It was at this moment that Athena realized just how little she knew about drugs and their effects. She knew that substances like cocaine were harmful, yes, but she never thought she'd see them in her daily life, let alone in the hands of a peer. If she was to become a successful adult, she needed to know more about drugs. In the end, she reasoned, it was the only way to keep herself and others safe.

"Odin... have you seen any other drugs since you moved out?"

Her brother sighed, fidgeting as they neared the bottom of the popcorn bowl. "Thea, I don't know if I should talk to you about this."

"I'm seventeen. I think I can handle it." She glared at him to make it stick.

For a while, the only sound in the room was the crunching of popcorn. Then at last, Odin said, "Okay, fine. It's probably better that you learn about drug policy *before* you get to college anyway."

Athena nodded her agreement; she wanted to be prepared.

"The thing is, there are lots of myths floating around about drugs and their uses," Odin began.

“Ketamine is a good example of that. Some people think it’s a ‘magic pill’ for mental health issues, including a few of my friends from high school. They used it illegally and eventually suffered the consequences.”

Eyes wide, Athena said, “This happened when *you* were in high school?”

Odin smiled sardonically. “It was only a couple of years ago, Thea. Illicit drugs weren’t invented yesterday.”

“Well, what happened to your friends?”

“Side effects,” Odin told her. “They started hallucinating and vomiting... It was gross.”

“So, ketamine actually made their mental health—and physical health—worse?”

“That’s right.”

Athena took a deep breath. “I hate that people do this to themselves.”

“LSD is another good example,” Odin continued. “Users believe it helps them access ‘higher states of consciousness,’ but LSD is a hallucinogen that gives some people anxiety or paranoia. It’s dangerous and illegal, just like cocaine.”

A heartbeat passed before Athena found the courage to ask, “Odin... have *you* ever done any drugs?”

He groaned. “Why are you like this? Do you have to know everything?”

“You don’t have to tell me. I was just curious.”

“I tried marijuana once,” he admitted, “and it made me so anxious that I never tried it again.”

“Okay,” she said, relieved to know that Odin had discovered his own boundaries. “Thanks for sharing that with me.”

“Yeah, well. It wasn’t my proudest moment, but I learned a lot.”

“Athena picked up the empty popcorn bowl and made her way to the kitchen, where the clock informed her that it was nearly midnight. She suddenly felt bone-tired in a way that one night of sleep might not fix. Nevertheless, she washed the bowl and was drying it off when Odin said from the couch, “Thea?”

“Yeah?”

“No matter how great it might sound, no matter how ‘cool’ it might seem, drugs are never a good idea. Saffi and Conroy did the right thing by refusing to allow cocaine at the party. Remember that when you get to college, okay? If you’re ever caught with drugs—even if they aren’t yours—you could go to jail.”

“I’ll remember, Odin,” she said. “I promise.”

CHAPTER 3: UNDERSTANDING ADDICTION

The holiday season ended in a flurry of snowstorms and goodbyes. On the day Odin went back to college, he pulled Athena aside and said, “You can call me if you have any more questions about drugs or drug policy. I might not have the answers, but we can research them together.”

She hugged him. “Thanks, Odin. Travel safely, and text us when you get back to school, okay?”

Athena was grateful for her brother’s support, but she sincerely hoped she wouldn’t have to think about drugs again any time soon. When she got back to school, she expected the cocaine incident to be a thing of the past. That everything would go back to normal. After all, she and her peers had enough to think about without worrying about side effects and jail time... right?

Sure enough, things at school were normal—as far as Athena could tell. She was happy to be back in class, surrounded by her friends and teachers. She loved the

holidays, but entering her final semester of high school felt even better.

This was it. In less than a year, she would be attending a university. She didn't know which one yet—but she would. And she couldn't wait.

Then, one day, during her lunch break, she left the cafeteria to use the restroom, still laughing over a joke that Rainier had just told. But as she rounded the corner into the ladies' room, her smile faded. Standing in front of the mirror was one of the cocaine girls from Saffi's party, a wad of tissue pressed against her nose. Athena thought the girl would sneeze until a trickle of blood appeared on her hand.

Her nose is bleeding.

"Are you okay?" Athena asked. "Can I walk you to the nurse's office?"

The girl ignored her, tipping her head back to stem the flow. *She should lean forward*, Athena thought, but the words were erased from her mind as she watched the girl stuff a plastic bag into her backpack.

And that's when Athena realized—this girl was snorting cocaine in the school bathroom.

What am I supposed to do? She and Odin had discussed the illegality of drugs, but they never talked about a situation like this.

So, Athena leaned into the only answer she had: kindness.

"Are you okay?" she asked again. When the girl

didn't respond, she added, "I think that substance is harming your health and wellbeing."

This finally got the girl's attention. Offended, she spun on Athena and shouted, "Don't! Don't talk to me, and don't tell me what to do! *Just leave*. I'm fine."

But her dilated pupils and still-bleeding nose said otherwise.

"Cocaine is a *really* bad idea," Athena dared to press. "I don't want you to cause any more damage. Are you sure I can't walk you to the nurse's office?"

Silence. Athena looked on as the other girl stared at herself in the bathroom mirror, transfixed, as if she didn't recognize her own reflection. Covered in horrified goosebumps and without another plan, Athena backed out of the room and headed for her next class.

She was so anxious to get home that she sat through her entire women's history lecture without taking a single note.

After school, Athena had no choice but to fill her parents in on Saffi's party, the cocaine, and the most recent incident in the restroom. She hadn't wanted to worry them, but now that Odin was back at college, it was harder to get ahold of him.

"I just don't know what to do." Her forehead was pressed against the kitchen counter, mostly because it was

hard to meet her parents' eyes. They looked all too shocked by her story and the situation she was facing at school.

Finally, her mom said, "I'm going to email Principal Bowman. Thank you for telling us, honey." She kissed Athena's temple and disappeared into the home office.

Sighing, Athena turned to her dad, who said, "Let's talk about addiction, shall we?"

She nodded.

"It's actually a highly scientific thing," he began. "Genetics, environment, and mental health collide in a brain disorder. It's hard—though not impossible—to overcome."

"So... you think the girl from the restroom is addicted to cocaine?"

"I do," said her dad. "It sounds like she isn't able to go a day without it, which will continue until she has the proper support system in place."

Reeling, Athena asked, "How can an addiction like that be stopped?"

"Well, healing begins with informing loved ones that you want to quit so they can support you. It's also important to change any habits that contribute to drug usage and side effects, such as drinking. Then, those in recovery must find new, positive ways to spend their time. They might exercise, garden, read... anything that brings them true and lasting joy."

"That sounds like a lot of work," Athena said with a deep breath.

“It is,” her dad agreed, “and that’s why it’s vital to have the input of a mental health professional and a support group.”

“Are there any policies that apply specifically to cocaine?” Athena asked.

“Oh, absolutely. Treatment usually starts with detoxing in a drug rehab facility, where the person with the addiction can be monitored and supported by medical staff through withdrawal symptoms.”

“Withdrawal symptoms?” Athena furrowed her brow. “What are those?”

“When an addict stops using cocaine, they usually experience a combination of fatigue, depression, paranoia, and cravings,” her dad explained. “After that, they’re rehabilitated in either an inpatient or outpatient facility, which keeps them from falling back into old patterns.”

Athena nodded, thinking. At length, she asked, “How exactly do mental health professionals help cocaine addicts?”

“Sometimes, they prescribe medications for withdrawal symptoms, but the primary treatment for cocaine misuse is behavioral therapy. Psychiatrists use motivational interviewing, contingency management, community reinforcement, and cognitive behavioral therapy to help patients heal.”

A few of these terms were familiar to Athena. Hui wanted to be a psychiatrist one day and had mentioned that motivational interviewing helps patients become

more thoughtful and empowered. Meanwhile, community reinforcement supports people in identifying their thoughts and behaviors to improve their overall health. But...

“What is contingency management?” Athena wanted to know.

“It’s a type of behavioral therapy where patients are rewarded for making positive changes,” her dad said.

More nodding. It sounded like there were plenty of health policies to help her peers recover from cocaine usage. They had so much life ahead of them; Athena hoped they would receive the support they needed to quit.

“Do you think there will be a lot of drama at school tomorrow?” Athena said, not sure she wanted to know the answer.

“If there is, Principal Bowman and your teachers will handle it,” her dad assured her. “Just go be yourself—be kind—and everything will work out fine.”

CHAPTER 4: PEER PRESSURE

Athena was unsurprised when, the following day, Principal Bowman asked the entire student body to assemble in the auditorium. Though Hui, Conroy, Zosia, Saffi, and Rainier all looked confused, she knew perfectly well what the principal wanted to discuss.

“This better be quick,” Hui complained. “My literature teacher is expecting my extra credit paper today, and it’s still not finished.”

Eyes on the floor, Athena took her seat and waited for Principal Bowman’s speech to begin. But as he performed a quick sound check, she began to wonder if the girl from the restroom was in attendance. She looked up to check, frowning when she couldn’t find her anywhere.

I hope she’s in rehab, Athena thought. She needs help that she can’t get at school.

“Good morning, students.” Principal Bowman’s voice boomed over the microphone, bringing Athena back to herself. “It has come to my attention that a few students were recently pressured into drug usage on campus.”

At this, gasps and whispers circulated around the auditorium. Athena sunk into her chair, feeling as

though her peers were looking for a whistleblower to blame for this announcement. She didn't want to talk about the incident in the restroom or at Saffi's party, and she *really* didn't want to admit that she'd told her parents about them.

"Quiet please," Principal Bowman said. When the noise finally died down, he continued, "I'd like to go over some tips for resisting peer pressure, or the temptation to conform to what others are doing."

Zosia groaned. "We've known about peer pressure since elementary school. We shouldn't have to go over this again."

"Hush," Saffi whispered. "Just listen."

"Always pay attention to how you feel," Principal Bowman was saying, "and know that you can speak with a trusted adult when you're unsure about a situation. Spend time with friends who have similar values and choose those values wisely. It's also important to set boundaries and make choices based on *your* morals, *not* those of others. If your friends don't prioritize your wellbeing, then it may be time to make new friends."

Athena looked at her friends and smiled. They were kind, supportive, and encouraging, and she couldn't imagine her life without them.

Yes—it was very important to choose one's friends wisely.

"A final note," said Principal Bowman. "Bringing drugs to school is a criminal offense—period. Sometimes,

policies are made to protect you from yourself, and this is one of them. Pressure and circumstances can be too much to make a wise decision, but we can always rely on policies to keep us in check.”

Athena’s heart swelled. She *loved* this message. It was one of many reasons why she was excited to study public health in college. Now more than ever, she knew just how powerful—and healing—policies can be.

CHAPTER 5: MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

After the assembly, Athena and her friends convened in the hallway, a bit disoriented by the unusual start to the morning.

“Is it just me, or was that long and unnecessary?” Conroy asked. Without waiting for a response, he continued, “Obviously, the cocaine addicts have been sent to rehab. Why should the rest of us have to suffer through a speech about drugs and peer pressure?”

Athena wasn’t sure what to say—but Saffi was livid. Face reddening in fury, she turned to Conroy and shouted, “You never know who might be struggling with substance abuse *outside* of school. Don’t be so insensitive!”

Shocked by this uncharacteristic outburst, Conroy sputtered, “Gosh, Saf, I’m sorry—” but she silenced him with a wave of her hand. Athena thought she saw tears on Saffi’s cheeks as she walked away, toward her first class.

Later that day, Athena followed Saffi out to her car. She was walking quickly, clearly disinterested in conversation,

but Athena was too concerned to back down. “Are you all right?” she called after her friend, watching as Saffi’s shoulders slumped in a sigh.

“Get in.” Saffi opened the passenger door of her car. “I’ll drive you home.”

And she did—silently. Athena bounced her knee in agitation as Saffi pulled into the driveway, leaving her car running. The air between them thickened with uncertainties until finally, Athena said, “I guess I’d better go inside.”

Saffi took a deep breath. “Thea, the reason people brought cocaine to my party is because I’ve been using it, too.”

Athena nodded. She’d begun to wonder about this several hours ago, when Saffi snapped at Conroy. Finally, she said, “I’ve never seen you use it.”

“I don’t think I’m an addict... yet. But the mental health burden of applying to universities has been heavy, you know? Falling back on drugs was... easy. Even easier than I expected.”

Closing her eyes, Athena remembered how Saffi became addicted to vaping in middle school and successfully broke the habit. “You quit once,” Athena whispered. “You can do it again.”

“I know,” Saffi replied. “But it’s going to be harder this time.”

Recalling her conversation with her dad, Athena added, “I think you should talk to your parents about

quitting cocaine. There are other, healthier, *legal* ways to deal with your stress. Like... would you consider speaking to a therapist?"

"I *have* considered it," Saffi said, "but I don't know if it'll do me any good. Sitting in front of a stranger and spilling my guts seems scary."

"That's understandable," Athena empathized. "But I connect with my therapist online, remember? It's kind of nice. I can sit anywhere in my house, drink a cup of tea, and talk about... anything. Whatever feels important."

"Yeah, I guess that doesn't sound so bad." Saffi sighed again. "Thanks, Thea. I'll talk to my parents when I get home." Shaking her head, she added, "I'd better call Conroy first. I owe him an apology for shouting earlier."

"Well, come inside," Athena suggested, gathering her things. "You can call him while I make us a snack."

"Okay," Saffi said softly.

Athena wanted to tell Saffi that she was proud of her for taking these steps—but that would only make Saffi uncomfortable. So, instead, Athena gave her a hug, hopeful that she could build new habits before the old ones became an addiction.

CHAPTER 6: RESILIENCE AND ADVOCACY

That night, when Saffi went home, Athena sat down with her parents to discuss her concerns. “She’s broken an addiction before,” Athena reminded them, “but this one is different.”

“You’re absolutely right,” her mom said. “I’m going to text Saffi’s mom. Cocaine usage is a big deal, and I want to make sure Saffi is safe.”

Her dad nodded. “It’s like Principal Bowman told you: some policies are created to protect you from yourself, and the illegality of cocaine is one of them.”

“I think the worst part is that Saffi turned to drugs to manage her stress about applying to universities,” Athena told them. “I know we’re all wound up, but there are better ways to cope.”

“She likely doesn’t realize that drugs *worsen* stress and anxiety in the long term,” said her dad. “That’s another reason why it’s important to avoid them.”

“There are so many healthy ways to manage stress,” her mom added. “You and your friends can exercise, get enough sleep, take deep breaths, make time for your hobbies, talk with loved ones, and speak with a therapist.”

“I know,” Athena said, and it was true. She was already practicing all these things. “Maybe I should send a list in the group chat, just to remind everyone to take care of themselves this semester.”

“That’s a great idea,” said her dad. “You could even consider participating in a community initiative to raise awareness for substance abuse prevention.”

At this, Athena’s heart leapt. Her class had been trying to come up with a senior gift for their school, and now, she had the perfect idea.

“What if my class painted a mural to promote healthy living, including avoiding drugs? I know I’m not very artistic, but Saffi, Zosia, and Rainier are. If I can get them on board, it would be a great way to leave our mark on our school and guide future generations to make healthy choices.”

Her mom smiled. “I think that’s a lovely idea, honey.”

“Agreed,” said her dad.

Athena smiled back. This was going to be fun.

That evening, she emailed the senior class president to pitch her idea and within the hour, received an overwhelmingly positive response.

I LOVE IT!!!! I'll draft a group email to the rest of the class right now!

Athena watched as replies bombarded her inbox. The more artistic students were immediately excited,

and the others agreed to help plan the elements of the mural. Struck by everyone's support, Athena replied in the thread: *Based on Principal Bowman's recent speech, we could have an entire section dedicated to substance abuse prevention. Thoughts?*

I'll cover that part of the mural, Saffi replied almost immediately.

Meanwhile, Zosia volunteered to paint a section about road safety, and Rainier suggested a mental health section. Other students chimed in, too, proposing topics like recycling, planetary health, nutrition, vaccines, and physical activity.

This is going to work, Athena thought, grinning.

It sounds like we have a solid plan, the class president wrote. *I'll email Principal Bowman tomorrow to see what he thinks. Thanks for your input, everyone!*

Two days later, Athena and her classmates stood before a blank gymnasium wall, gears turning in their minds. Principal Bowman had given them the green light, so now, all they had to do was start painting their mural.

"This is going to be a big job," Rainier said, eyes wide.

"Yeah, but we've got a lot of hands here," Zosia pointed out. "We can have it done before graduation."

"We got this," Athena echoed. "Let's start mapping out the different sections."

CHAPTER 7: GRADUATION

Spring arrived like an old friend. Everywhere Athena looked, things were ending and beginning again.

With the support of her family, friends, and behavioral psychologist, Saffi was no longer using cocaine. Neither were the other students from her party, who had returned from rehab and were doing much better. Granted, they would have to participate in summer school to graduate, but they were also allowed to help with the senior mural, which was now complete. Together with Saffi, they decided to paint a group of students leaving a party where drugs were present.

Athena thought it was the most beautiful and impactful section of the wall.

Meanwhile, she had been accepted into every university to which she applied and had accepted an offer—but she didn't want to announce where she was going until her graduation party. Only Hui and their long-distance friend Ismaya knew about her decision because—Athena smiled to herself—they had made the same one. All three girls were planning to be roommates. Athena could hardly believe her luck.

This is it, she thought for the umpteenth time.

Everything was about to change, and though she didn't feel *ready*, per se, she was giddy with excitement.

"Thea, can you help me get the chocolate out of my gown?"

Zosia stood in line behind Athena, pointing to the stain on her graduation gown. Pulling the stain stick out of her pocket, Athena quickly removed the chocolate. This was her third gown rescue of the day—and the party hadn't even started yet.

"Thank you," Zosia whispered.

And it was those two words that sent Athena's heart into her throat. It was almost her turn to receive her high school diploma—a moment she'd been waiting for since middle school—but now that she was here, she felt... kind of sad.

It was hard to imagine *not* returning to this school next year. She'd spent so many hours wandering these halls, powering through assignments, and attending assemblies. She'd made new friends here, learned how to drive here, left her mark on the gymnasium wall here...

And now, she had to say goodbye.

Tears filled her eyes as a feeling of gratitude washed over her. Yes, this was another ending, but it was a beginning, too. She was so proud of herself and her friends, who were all going to great universities. They had

worked hard for this, not as a stopping point, but so they could take the next steps toward their dreams.

When her name was called, Athena ascended the stairs of the auditorium stage, received her diploma from Principal Bowman, and moved her tassel to the left.

She caught the eyes of her dad, mom, and sister in the audience and smiled.

She was a high school graduate.

The following day, while setting up her graduation party, Athena found herself fighting the urge to tell Rae about her college plans. Her sister had been poking her for weeks, trying to figure out where she would be moving, and the pressure was almost too much... Almost. Not quite.

“Rae, I will tell you *at the party*, with *everyone else*. Just relax and pass me another balloon.”

“I can’t relax,” Rae complained. “It was hard when Odin moved out, but it’s going to be even harder when you leave. We have a *bond*, Thea.”

“Rae, don’t guilt trip your sister,” their mom said from the kitchen. She was working on the cupcakes that Athena had requested: vanilla and chocolate with strawberry frosting.

“I’m not guilt tripping her,” Rae said sweetly. “I’m

encouraging her.”

Athena laughed, mostly because Rae was onto something. It was going to be hard for her to leave home. Maybe even harder than saying goodbye to Odin for months at a time. After all, Athena wasn’t sure *when* she would be home again.

“Balloon, Rae,” she repeated. There were tears in her eyes—ugh.

“Fine,” Rae moped. “I’ll wait for the news like *everyone else.*”

Athena’s grandparents, her Aunt Dara and cousin Hugo, and all her friends attended her party. Even after the expected guests had arrived, there was another knock at the door, but when Athena went to answer it, she couldn’t believe her eyes. There, on the doorstep, was her brother, a bouquet of daisies in his hands, having flown in to celebrate with her.

“You’re just in time!” she squealed. “I was about to tell everyone where I’m going to college.”

“Wherever you go, they’ll be lucky to have you,” he said, giving her a hug.

Athena squeezed Odin as hard as she could. She was so, so happy to see him after months apart. But within a few moments, she felt her phone ringing in the pocket of her dress.

It's time.

"That's Ismaya," she said as she picked up the video call and greeted her friend. "Hold on just a minute. I have to find Hui."

"Present!" Hui shouted, half of a cupcake in her mouth.

Laughing, Athena gave Odin one more hug and then pulled Hui onto the back deck, her phone aloft so Ismaya could see the crowd in the backyard. "Attention please!" the three girls said together. It took a few tries, but they finally found a spot where everyone could see and hear them.

"We have an announcement," Hui said, nodding to Athena.

She grinned, taking in the faces of her family members and friends. No turning back now. "Hui and I will be studying abroad, in the same country where I lived for part of seventh grade."

"We're going to be roommates!" Ismaya squealed. Even though she was calling in over video, Athena felt as though Maya were on the deck with them.

Applause engulfed the backyard until Athena's grandfather shouted, "Tell us what you're going to study, girls!"

"I'm going to study psychology," Hui said. "I'd like to be a psychiatrist one day."

"And I'm not sure yet, but I'll figure it out," said Ismaya.

Finally, to no one's surprise, Athena announced,

“I’m going to study global public health policy. I want to make the entire world a safer and healthier place, and no matter how big or small my contributions are, I want to know I made the effort.”

“Can’t you do that here?” Rae and Conroy protested at the same time. But they were both smiling proudly.

“I’m choosing to study abroad to make sure I learn about the challenges of other countries and cultures. Then, when I finish my bachelor’s degree, I’m planning to come back for my graduate studies, including a doctoral degree, at Johns Hopkins. It’s an amazing school for public health, and I’m going to work hard to get in and make my dream come true.”

This was all Athena had wanted since she was in middle school: to learn about, explore, implement, and teach public health policy. And now, all she wanted was to know that her family wasn’t upset with her for choosing to move so far away.

But when the applause picked up again, she realized she had nothing to fear. They were smiling, clapping, cheering her on—and no one was louder than her grandfather. He had been her biggest supporter all these years. It was almost too much to see how proud he looked, how much love he had for her.

Waving goodbye to Ismaya, Athena hung up her phone and ran onto the lawn to give her grandpa a hug.

“Thank you for inspiring me,” she whispered through her tears.

“Oh, Athena,” he whispered back. *“Thank you for inspiring us.”*

You can practice health policy just like Athena. Make healthy decisions that align with your values, including avoiding illicit drugs. You might consider writing a personal mission statement to keep yourself on track as you move from high school to higher education. No matter your goals and dreams, hold yourself accountable, and give them your all.



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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ATHENA AND HER CLASSMATES ARE BUSY—AND STRESSED.
WHAT THEY NEED IS SOME TIME TO UNWIND.

BUT WHAT BEGINS AS A NEW YEAR'S EVE CELEBRATION
QUICKLY SPIRALS INTO A DRUG PROBLEM.

CAN ATHENA AND HER FRIENDS RESIST PEER PRESSURE
AND GO ON TO PURSUE THEIR DREAMS?