

Chapter 1

Cathy North had been teaching U.S. history for four months. She was twenty-two and the youngest teacher at Cascade High School. This morning she was especially looking forward to her class. Today was the first day of student presentations.

It was a presidential election year. And the students had been learning about the political process. In the weeks before, they'd been talking about how the media covered a campaign. They compared online news to TV news.

This election was particularly heated. Both sides were attacking each other. The candidates for president were accusing each other of being dishonest and unqualified.

The polls showed that Americans were split down the middle. One half was for the male candidate, Senator Dean Mason. The other half supported the former vice president Jan Hudson.

The class assignment was to choose a candidate and make a campaign video for either online news or TV news. At the end the students would vote for their favorite video.

The first presentation was going to be from Megan Marie Kane. And Cathy couldn't wait to see it. The sixteen-year-old had actually met with Senator Mason. Her father had paid for her to travel to his headquarters. It would be interesting to see how she used that in her video.

Right now there was no sign of her. But Cathy wasn't worried yet. It could be that Megan was running late. Although even that seemed unlikely. She was always on time. Then the bell rang. And her desk in

the front row was still empty. Cathy didn't remember that the girl had ever been absent.

Megan seemed to be the perfect student. She was smart and respectful. She was always excited about learning new things. Besides having excellent grades, Megan was also a good athlete. She was on the school's soccer team. It was students like her that gave Cascade High a good reputation.

"Has anyone seen Megan?" Cathy asked the class.

Nobody had seen her. After class, Cathy went to the school office. She wanted to see if Megan's parents had contacted the school. Maybe she was sick. But no call or email had come in.

"I'll be calling her parents in a few minutes," the office clerk said.

"Give them my number," Cathy said. "Ask them to call me so she can make up her presentation."

There was a reason the teacher felt so

connected to her student. Megan reminded Cathy of herself at that age. They both had short curly blond hair and blue eyes. And they were both very focused. Cathy had always put school over a social life. Megan was the same way. The two could have been sisters. Cathy went back to the office.

“Let us know if you hear anything,” the clerk was saying into the phone. Then she hung up and looked at Cathy. “That was Mrs. Kane. She said Megan left for school at the usual time this morning. Seven o’clock.”

Cathy nodded. It seemed odd that the girl hadn’t made it to school. Normally Cathy wouldn’t be this worried about a student being late. But this was different. She knew how disciplined Megan was. She even parked in the same spot every day.

“Maybe she had a flat tire. Or she ran out of gas,” the clerk said.

“You’re probably right,” Cathy said. It was time to teach her next class.

Right afterward, she checked again with the office clerk. “I haven’t heard a word,” the clerk said. “But I wouldn’t worry. Kids are like this. They get an urge to skip school. And nothing can stop them.” She smiled. “I remember doing it, don’t you? It wasn’t that long ago for you.”

Cathy wasn’t smiling. Clearly the clerk didn’t know Megan. She would never skip school. She was too responsible. And the idea that she had car trouble didn’t make sense. She would have called road service or let someone know. Cathy was beginning to wonder if something bad happened to her student.