

ONE

Present Day, Los Angeles

Carly Bennett

Light blue on dirty blonde.

Creative writing professor Carly Bennett did a quick scan of her face from its reflection in the window that overlooked the University of Southern California quad and smoothed a crease in her pencil skirt.

If Carly had known that the dean of the English department would schedule a last-minute meeting with her, she would've picked a better outfit than one that screamed, "I had no time to take this to the cleaner, so I ran a fast iron over it. But thank God the skirt is black so no one can see the stain from when my coffee cup lid jimmied its way free this morning."

Nothing like near first-degree burns on your thigh from an errant Starbucks Pike to jolt a person awake during LA's slog of a commute.

No matter. Here she was.

And she'd be ready. Even though she needed to master her prep on the fly.

Carly turned the corner to the English department's Office of the Dean and forged through her speaking points that she'd deliver to her boss, Bert Scanlon.

"Making the LA Times's 'Thirty-Under-Thirty' list was a complete surprise, but I'm so happy that the article will shine a spotlight on the great work our team is doing under your leadership."

Ack. Too mealy-mouthed. Plus, it made her sound like a big-headed brown-noser. And nobody likes that person.

“Thank you for the kind words. Please know how much I appreciate that you believe in me, and I swear, I won’t let you down.”

Better, and that sentiment was from the heart.

Carly pictured her face, front and center on the page when she’d pulled up the *LA Times* story that morning and hoped that the people she used to know from her early Malibu days saw it too.

Elitist jerks.

As for herself, Carly had read the write-up, over and over, until she could now recite it in perpetuity.

Carly passed by the USC English department’s wall of fame, which showcased its students’ esteemed awards through the years. She paused when she saw her name, capturing a moment in time from freshman year. Her: scared to near speechlessness amongst the far cooler co-eds but finding strength behind her pen.

Winner of the 2018 Undergraduate Writing Prize—First Place: Carly Bennett

Had she really come this far? Most would’ve marked her a losing bet at age twelve, her personal line of demarcation, but sometimes, even dark horses can come from behind and win the whole damn thing.

Four. Three. Two. One.

“You got this,” Carly whispered.

She reached for the security of her inhaler in her briefcase and entered Scanlon’s office.

Gretchyn Olson, a middle-aged woman with salt-and-pepper hair was working the phone with precision. She held up a single finger when she saw Carly.

While she waited, Carly continued to clutch her briefcase in one hand and placed the other behind her back, where she dug a fingernail into a stray cuticle.

After a beat, Scanlon's assistant put the call on hold.

"They're waiting for you," Gretchyn said. "Hang in there, kid. Sometimes, you need to play the game."

They? And what game was she talking about?

Carly's neck felt hot, but she made certain she was smiling when she entered the office, where she locked eyes with Scanlon, who rose to greet her. Scanlon had a Mr. Clean, shiny bald head, and his stomach struggled to stay behind the confines of the clasped gold buttons of his tweed coat.

Seated across from the dean of the English department was an unfamiliar male, who was well dressed, neatly manicured, and appeared to be in his early fifties.

Carly shot the stranger an equally polite smile. Who was this guy?

"Miss Bennett, thank you for taking time to swing by under such short notice," Scanlon said.

"Of course, sir."

Maybe the man was another reporter from the paper who covered the education beat and was writing a follow-up article on the English department.

"I don't believe you've met Franklin Yeager. You taught Frank's son, Landon, last semester."

In that moment, Carly felt like someone had jabbed an ice pick into her high-flying helium balloon.

The room became very still as Carly struggled to find the appropriate response.

“In all due respect, if this is about my former student, I think any further discussion should be held in private and between the administration, but I was under the impression the incident and disciplinary action had been decided,” Carly said.

A robotic delivery, but at least she got the words out.

“There’ve been some developments that have been brought to my attention. I asked Frank to come in so we could clear the air, so to speak,” Scanlon said. “Please, sit, Miss Bennett.”

Carly kept her place, arms folded, standing above the men, but when Scanlon cleared his throat, she acquiesced and found a seat next to her former student’s father.

“Landon didn’t plagiarize the paper,” Yeager said.

Yes, he did! Carly wanted to scream. Instead, she slipped her hands underneath her legs, in case her palms started to sweat.

“If my son did cheat, I’d be the first to request that USC boot him out the door on his fanny,” Yeager continued. “But I know my kid, and I also know a liar, and Landon is beside himself over this false accusation. I’ll be honest with you, when Landon first told me about the whole mess, I was ready to call my lawyer, but since Bert is an old friend, I thought, why not try and hash things out man-to-man first.”

She had to respond. The words were there, ready to make her point, if only she could find the ability and the guts to say them.

“But he did ch-ch-cheat,” Carly said, despising the catch in her voice.

When was the last time she'd stuttered? Probably a year ago, during her annual review with Scanlon. She wondered if the universe would grant her a reprieve, and somehow the two men hadn't picked up on her residual speech impediment, which still ambushed her in the worst possible moments, rising like an unkillable weed despite all her years of work to get rid of it.

She shot a glance at Yeager, whose mouth had turned up into a bow that resembled a smirk or, worse, pity.

If she were going down, at least she had to throw a punch.

"I want all my students to excel, and if they need extra time on an assignment, they know I'll give it to them, and my door is always open if they need additional help. But the paper Landon wrote was a complete replica of one I received from a different student last year. We're talking down to the semicolon."

Carly looked to Scanlon, hoping for some back-up, but the dean kept his focus on Yeager.

"Then it wasn't a case of cheating but purely accidental on Landon's part," Yeager said. "Or is the word coincidental? You're the English whizzes in here, and I'm a businessman who wouldn't know a semicolon from a hyphen, but I do know mistakes can be made, even by well-meaning young professors. How long have you been a teacher? You look more like a co-ed than a professor, and I mean that in the most complimentary of ways."

Yeager chuckled, sounding to Carly like the laugh was cover so he wouldn't sound like a creep.

Too late.

Carly fought to speak up and defend herself. But she remained still and silent, stuck between two powerful, rich males who were doing a very fine job of reeling in the young, errant female who didn't know her place.

“This is my second year at USC.”

“Miss Bennett is still relatively new to our school as a professor, but she’s a rising star in our English department and did quite well as a student here before joining our professional fold.”

The heat that Carly had felt in her neck earlier had now exploded into a full-blown, five-alarm inferno, despite Scanlon throwing her a pseudo-bone.

Carly had crossed her legs and put a hand to her throat to try and cover her growing rash when she noticed Yeager was staring at something on the bottom of her black high heel. Whatever it was seemed to give him great satisfaction.

“Mr. Scanlon . . .” Carly pleaded, but the dean interrupted.

“I appreciate that you hold your students to the highest of standards, as you should, but since Frank is a trusted friend to the school, this time, we’ll expunge the previous disciplinary action and wipe the slate clean. Landon can resubmit the assignment and finish up the course through independent study, so he won’t lose credit. I have your word that Landon will be more careful in his work going forward, Frank?”

“You bet. My kid is a good boy, and I knew we could wrangle this problem to the ground. You have my word on my kid and on my continued support. Generations of Yeagers have supported this school, and we’ll continue the tradition. *“Fight on for ol’ SC, our men fight on to victory!”* Yeager warbled, hitting the notes of the USC fight song slightly off-key but with great confidence in his delivery.

When Yeager stood to shake the dean’s hand, Carly looked to the bottom of her high heel and saw a Macy’s close-out sale sticker still affixed to its outsole.

Her previous high-flying balloon was now bits of spent plastic that an entitled rich boy and his adult minions had tossed into the dumpster.

“No hard feelings, OK? New teachers can make mistakes with the best of them,” Yeager said.

He extended his hand to Carly.

You sold your integrity for a buck, and to a total cheese bag when you know I'm right!

Carly wanted to scream to Scanlon.

Instead, Carly remained quiet and stared at Yeager's outstretched hand.

Scanlon cleared his throat again.

“Miss Bennett, the matter has been settled,” Scanlon answered.

The dean's eyes narrowed, and Carly followed his cue.

She reached for Yeager's hand, gave it a quick shake, and regretted it the second her skin touched Yeager's.

“That will be all, Miss Bennett.”

This was so unfair. She had to stand her ground.

“Is there something else you wanted to say?” Scanlon pressed.

Carly paused, searching for the words. They were right there, but when she jumped from the platform to catch the brass ring, she missed and spiraled into freefall.

“Miss Bennett?” Scanlon asked.

“Th–th–th–thank you, sir.”

She couldn't remember leaving the office, but there she was, back in the lobby. Carly hurried past Gretchyn, and by the time she reached the corridor, she was certain that she heard the two men laughing from behind the office door.

“HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!”

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After escaping the humiliation-fest in Scanlon's office, Carly lowered her head so she wouldn't have to make eye contact, or worse, engage in fake, idle chitchat after her fall, and continued her fast walk to the USC faculty bathroom. She had ten minutes until her advanced creative writing class started, which was threading the needle a bit, but the familiar vice was constricting her chest, and if she didn't take a pull from her inhaler soon, she'd be in the throes of a full-fledged, not to mention very public, asthma attack.

She struggled for air and rushed into an open stall. Once inside, she slammed the door, snatched her inhaler from her briefcase, and gave it a quick shake. She heard the familiar whistling sound coming from her throat and shoved her rescue inhaler into her mouth.

Feeling like a five-hundred-pound man was now sitting on her chest, Carly fought to stay calm. She closed her eyes, forced herself to hold her breath for the requisite ten seconds between puffs and prayed for the corticosteroid to kick in.

When the tightness in her lungs loosened, she could see, plain as day, her old practice phrase, the one she'd started reciting at boarding school to help conquer her stutter.

When her breathing steadied to a normal inhale-in, exhale-out, she whispered the words aloud to find her center.

"The girl wore her hair in two braids, tied with two blue bows."

Not bad. Her voice was clear and strong this time, unlike her herky-jerky performance earlier.

How had she let herself choke, and on such an epic scale?

Feeling like she was no longer dry-drowning from her asthma attack, Carly took one more hit of her inhaler. She squeezed the metal canister and pictured Scanlon's and Yeager's mugs, having a big old chuckle at her expense.

“Never again,” Carly whispered, not quite believing it, but at least it was a start.

She rose from crouching position in the stall, straightened her shoulders, and then shot her middle finger in the air.

“That’s bravery right there, giving the bird to a restroom door instead of standing up for yourself. Next time will be different.”

Carly exited the stall and was relieved to see the faculty bathroom was still empty.

She splashed cold water from the sink onto her face, then patted her sticky armpits with a wad of paper towels from the dispenser on the wall. A poor girl’s spa day.

Having no idea how much time had passed since the start of her asthma attack, Carly worried that she was late for her next class. She grabbed her phone from her briefcase to check the time and gasped.

On the home screen was a photo memory, which captured a hoped-for promise never to come.

Carly ran her finger over the image of her mother and studied her twelve-year-old self. The photo had been taken by her then soon-to-be stepbrother Julien, on the day she’d met him and the rest of the Whites.

A pang of melancholy cut through her. Everybody would’ve believed her if she were a rich boy.