



The Cinderella Scheme Preview

selected excerpt

Looking into the tiny mirror in the break room of Fast Eddie’s Diner, Cassie Turner swept her hair up off her neck and into a pink ponytail holder. She hated its color—a dreary shade of dishwater blond. She grimaced at her reflection and ran her fingers through her thin bangs, trying to make them do something—*anything*—but they merely lay on her forehead looking flat and dull. “Dumb hair,” she muttered toward the mirror.

“What’d you say?” her friend and fellow waitress Jewel asked, approaching from behind. Large earrings dangled nearly to Jewel’s shoulders, their red and purple beads clashing with her pink uniform.

“Nothing,” Cassie replied. “Just wishing...” *for a better job, a better life, a better future.* It was 1996, she was twenty-five years old, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that life was passing her by. The noise of the “L” rumbling past outside the diner blotted out the sound of her sigh. “Just wishing for better hair,” she finally said, still peering helplessly into the glass.

Jewel shook her head, obviously annoyed. “You’ve got great hair, Cassie. You just need to floof it up some.”

“Floof it up?”

Jewel attended hair design school at night, but her terminology often came out sounding less than technical. Now she raked her fingers through her own voluminous dark hair in a manner that suggested lifting and fluffing. “Like this,” she explained. “I could do it for you—”

“No, you couldn’t,” Cassie cut her off. Jewel’s taste was a bit wild, and despite repeated promises of conservatism, Cassie wasn’t sure she could trust her friend.

“Hey Cass, you working today or just playing beauty shop?” their boss Eddie thundered, cutting through the conversation. “Got a table of big spenders out here and nobody to take their order.”

Jewel always claimed that Eddie’s bark was worse than his bite, but Cassie jerked to attention anyway. “Coming, Eddie,” she said, rushing through the grease-laden kitchen, then grabbing a handful of white laminated menus. A glance into the dining area revealed four suits in a booth near the door, so she hurriedly filled four small water glasses, placed them on a tray, and moved toward her customers.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” She briskly placed the glasses on the table, one by one.

“No problem,” replied the smoothest, deepest voice she’d ever heard.

Her eyes subtly made their way toward the voice as she distributed the plastic menus. The suit who had spoken had dark brown hair, cut short in back, but a few wayward locks fell down over his forehead, suggesting that there was more than a professional side to his personality. To call him handsome would have been a gross understatement. *Overwhelmingly, devastatingly* handsome was more like it. His alluring smile made Cassie’s chest tighten with quick desire as his green eyes pinned her in place. And as for his companions, they could have been aliens—Cassie didn’t even notice them.

Was this love? Lust? Cassie couldn’t tell the difference at the moment, and she only prayed her reaction didn’t show on her face. She licked her lips quickly, realizing they’d gone suddenly dry, then attempted to speak. “What would you like?” Though her eyes stayed glued to the object of her desire. So much for subtlety.

“The specials, Cassie!” Eddie bellowed though the window behind the counter. “Tell them the specials.”

“Oh yeah,” she muttered, glancing briefly over her shoulder. Eddie’s booming voice had shaken her from her trance—both a relief and a disappointment. Turning back to the table, she deliberately fixed her gaze on the napkin holder in the center. That would be much safer than

mooning at the man with the fabulous eyes. And it was her only hope of getting through this with any dignity.

“We have a chicken and dumpling plate with two side items for \$5.99 and a pork barbecue sandwich with cole slaw and baked beans for \$6.99. Are you ready to order or do you need a few minutes?”

That was when Cassie accidentally lifted her gaze to Mr. Green Eyes, having already forgotten the effect it would have on her. And oh God—he was looking back. Her heart beat wildly and she knew all attempts at dignity were futile.

“I think I’ll try the barbecue.” He flashed another smile. “And a glass of iced tea.”

Cassie swallowed. “Great,” she mumbled as she scribbled furiously on her order pad. Unbeknownst to him, it was more an observation about the way he looked than a response to his order.

She gripped her pen tightly, palms now sweating, as the other three men placed their orders as well. But oh brother—her concentration had completely evaporated; she had to repeat two of the orders back to make sure they were correct.

After finally getting them right, she made a beeline for Eddie. “Here,” she said, shoving the orders into his waiting fist. Then she rushed breathlessly to Jewel, who sat reading a fashion magazine in the break room. “Help me,” she pleaded.

“Help you what?”

“There’s, there’s...” she could hardly talk. “There’s a gorgeous man in our dining room and I, I...”

“Want me to do your hair?” Jewel suggested hopefully.

Cassie shook her head frantically, ponytail swinging behind. “No. I need a pep talk. Some advice. What to say. How to act. Anything.”

Jewel looked introspective. “What are you trying to get out of this? A good tip, a roll in the hay—what?”

Cassie’s heartbeat slowed when she realized that she had no idea *what* she really wanted. And that this was a response she’d never had to a customer before. After all, she waited on lots of men here every day, but never before had one had this effect on her. There had simply been something about him, about the moment, that she’d felt compelled to grab on to, to not let pass

her by. Even if she couldn't really explain to herself—or anyone else apparently—why. “Just...to make a good impression,” she finally said, for lack of a better answer.

Jewel rose from the table and skirted quickly past Cassie to poke her head around the corner where she could spy on the customers. “Let me guess,” she said. “Tall, dark, and hot, next to the window.”

Cassie nodded.

“Afraid I'm the wrong person to ask about hobnobbing with a suit-and-tie guy, Cass,” Jewel told her matter-of-factly. “I'm more into the black leather type myself. All I can do is slap a little makeup on your face and possibly floof up your bangs some.”

Cassie took a deep breath, considering the offer. “Okay, I'll take it.” Even the vague *floofing* seemed better than nothing at the moment.

Jewel had just reached up toward Cassie's bangs when Eddie's voice broke through their conversation again. “Cassie?”

“What now?” Didn't he know she was in the middle of a stressful situation?

Eddie leaned his balding head into the room. “Drinks,” he said quietly. “Silverware.” He seemed to be trying to new method of reasoning. “The gentlemen at table three need these things. It's the part of the job that comes between taking their orders and serving their food.”

Cassie cautiously raised her eyes. “Sorry, Eddie,” she said. “I'm having a weird day.”

“I noticed,” he muttered, withdrawing back to the kitchen.

“Guess your bangs are on their own,” Jewel said. Then she playfully punched Cassie in the arm. “Knock 'em dead, kid.”

Cassie moved swiftly behind the counter, her back to the four men as she assembled their drinks. At first she wondered if her green-eyed hunk might be watching her, studying her, and her heartbeat quickened with nervous anticipation.

But then reality set in. Why would a gorgeous guy like that look twice at a skinny, dowdy, pink-uniformed waitress like her? She was used to being ogled by the construction guys who came in for lunch, and she knew that Hank, the shy, overweight man who delivered their dairy products, had a crush on her. But Mr. Green Eyes was in a different league altogether.

Wait—what was she thinking? He was in a different galaxy.

Cassie had forced herself into a state of calm by the time she moved back toward the table bearing drinks and silverware rolled in white napkins. This was just another table, after all. Another set of customers. One of them was extremely pleasant to look at, sure, but other than that, this was just another tip. *If* she could start acting a little more courteous and efficient, that was.

She lowered two cups of coffee in front of the men across from Mr. Green Eyes. Then she placed a soda before the man to his right.

She tried not to look at him. She really did. But there he was, his gaze shining up at her like she was the most important thing in the room, and she felt herself begin to tremble. Lord, what was happening here?

That's just how hot he is. So hot he makes you tremble. Never in her life had she suffered such an intense visceral reaction to a stranger.

Taking a deep breath and trying to shore up her nerves, she pulled her eyes away from him and back to the glass of iced tea that remained on her tray. She bit her lip as she carefully picked it up and leaned toward him over the table. And just as she began to wonder if he was able to see down the top of her uniform, the moisture on the outside of the plastic glass made her lose her grip.

The glass seemed to drop from her hand in slow motion, giving her time to think *why me?*, pray a helpless prayer, and lunge madly for the glass with her other hand, letting the tray clatter to the floor behind her. Despite all that, the glass clunked unevenly on the table, falling on its side and spewing its contents all over her gorgeous customer.

“Oh my God!” she gasped.

Mr. Green Eyes' companion moved quickly from the booth to let his wet friend stand. Cassie clenched her teeth in horror at the sight of the handsome, well-dressed man she'd just drenched in iced tea. This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't. She began shaking her head desperately. “I'm so, so sorry!” she spewed up at him.

Mr. Green Eyes brushed the excess wetness from his shirt and jacket lapels as she watched in dread. Finally it occurred to her to dash to the counter and grab a dry rag. She returned, still mortified, to begin blotting at the man's shirt and tie, trying to somehow fix what she'd done—although, like saving her dignity, this effort was just as useless.

"I can't believe I did that to you," she blurted in a rush, still blotting at him, and at the same time taking in the scent of musk that seemed to emanate from his body. "Your shirt," she went on, "and your suit." His clothes looked expensive—GQ all the way. "How can I...what can I...I'm so sorry!"

Only then did she notice that he was smiling down at her, his eyes nearly glittering beneath the fluorescent lighting. "No harm done," he said. "It's all dry-cleanable."

Oh wow, he was being so nice. But Cassie still couldn't believe what she'd done to him. Her eyes landed on his tie, obviously silk and obviously costly, now stained and soggy-looking. Without thinking, she reached out and touched it. With her fingertips lightly pressed to his chest, she bit her lip and peered up at him. "Even the tie?"

His eyes filled with sympathy, which wasn't exactly what she wanted from him, but it was better than anger or the host of other emotions that he *could* be displaying. His deep voice came out softer than before. "Well, the tie's probably shot," he admitted, "but it's no big deal."

She sighed heavily. How unbelievably awful and embarrassing—she'd ruined the perfect man's tie. "I'm so very sorry." Only then did she realize that she was practically petting the soggy silk tie now, and by association, the chest beneath it, as well. She let her hand drop abruptly and took a step back from him.

But he still smiled down at her. "The tie's not a big thing," he reassured her. "Really. Promise." And then he even winked. Which caused an unexpected twinge right between her legs. Oh my.

She let out another sigh, distraught now in more ways than she could even count. She couldn't believe she was such a klutz. With the most attractive man ever to cross her path. And that even in the midst of her klutziness, ribbons of arousal wove and twisted all through her. "I'm so, so sorry," she said again.

"It's all right. Truly," he insisted. "Probably your first day on the job or something, huh?"

Cassie peered up at him, blinking nervously. She'd been working at Fast Eddie's for almost six months. "Yeah," she said, swallowing.

He nodded in understanding. "Don't sweat it," he told her, his tone that of a consoling camp counselor. "Things are bound to get better."

"Couldn't get much worse," she mumbled.

Then, still affecting his counselor attitude, he gently lifted her chin with one bent finger, the simple touch sending electric sensations soaring through her body from head to toe. “Look,” he said softly, those green eyes boring into her, “this is nothing to get upset about. And I’d feel terrible if I thought I’d ruined your first day on a new job. So it’s forgotten. Okay?”

Had she ever seen eyes any more sincere? She had no choice but to accept his forgiveness. “Okay.”

“Order up,” Eddie called through the window, plunking his palm down on the tiny bell on the ledge.

“Your food,” she said to Mr. Green Eyes, pulling reluctantly away from his touch. “I’ll try not to dump it on you,” she promised as she started toward the counter.

With moves as delicate and painstaking as if she were building a house of cards, Cassie delivered each man’s lunch, lowering the plates to the table with great care. She breathed a huge sigh of relief when the task was completed without mishap. She just hoped he hadn’t noticed that her hands were quivering—a leftover reaction from his touch. “Will there be anything else right now?”

Mr. Green Eyes lifted his gaze and spoke softly. “Could I, um, get another glass of iced tea?”

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