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Opening Extract from...

Eligible

Written by Curtis Sittenfeld

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CURTIS
SITTENFELD
Bestselling author of
American Wife
'Sheer joy… Giddy and glam and a hearty update of Pride and Prejudice'
Jessie Burton, author of The Miniaturist
ELIGIBLE
adj; desirable and worthy of being chosen esp. as a spouse

Eligible

CURTIS
SITTENFELD



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1

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Chapter 1

Well before his arrival in Cincinnati, everyone knew that Chip Bingley was looking for a wife. Two years earlier, Chip—graduate of Dartmouth College and Harvard Medical School, scion of the Pennsylvania Bingleys, who in the twentieth century had made their fortune in plumbing fixtures—had, ostensibly with some reluctance, appeared on the juggernaut reality-television show *Eligible*. Over the course of eight weeks in the fall of 2011, twenty-five single women had lived together in a mansion in Rancho Cucamonga, California, and vied for Chip's heart: accompanying him on dates to play blackjack in Las Vegas and taste wine at vineyards in Napa Valley, fighting with and besmirching one another in and out of his presence. At the end of each episode, every woman received either a kiss on the lips from him, which meant she would continue to compete, or a kiss on the cheek, which meant she had to return home immediately. In the final episode, with only two women remaining—Kara, a wide-eyed, blond-ringleted twenty-three-year-old former college cheerleader turned second-grade teacher from Jackson, Mississippi, and Marcy, a duplicitous yet alluring brunette twenty-eight-year-old dental hygienist from Morristown, New Jersey—Chip wept profusely and declined to propose marriage to either. They both were extraordinary,

he declared, stunning and intelligent and sophisticated, but toward neither did he feel what he termed "a soul connection." In compliance with FCC regulations, Marcy's subsequent tirade consisted primarily of bleeped-out words that nevertheless did little to conceal her rage.

"It's not because he was on that silly show that I want him to meet our girls," Mrs. Bennet told her husband over breakfast on a morning in late June. The Bennets lived on Grandin Road, in a sprawling eight-bedroom Tudor in Cincinnati's Hyde Park neighborhood. "I never even saw it. But he went to Harvard Medical School, you know."

"So you've mentioned," said Mr. Bennet.

"After all we've been through, I wouldn't mind a doctor in the family," Mrs. Bennet said. "Call that self-serving if you like, but I'd say it's smart."

"Self-serving?" Mr. Bennet repeated. "You?"

Five weeks prior, Mr. Bennet had undergone emergency coronary artery bypass surgery; after a not inconsiderable recuperation, it was just in the last few days that his typically sardonic affect had returned.

"Chip Bingley didn't even want to be on *Eligible*, but his sister nominated him," Mrs. Bennet said.

"A reality show isn't unlike the Nobel Peace Prize, then," Mr. Bennet said. "In that they both require nominations."

"I wonder if Chip's renting or has bought a place," Mrs. Bennet said. "That would tell us something about how long he plans to stay in Cincinnati."

Mr. Bennet set down his slice of toast. "Given that this man is a stranger to us, you seem inordinately interested in the details of his life."

"I'd scarcely say *stranger*. He's in the ER at Christ Hospital,

which means Dick Lucas must know him. Chip's very well-spoken, not like those trashy young people who are usually on TV. And very handsome, too."

"I thought you'd never seen the show."

"I only caught a few minutes of it, when the girls were watching." Mrs. Bennet looked peevishly at her husband. "You shouldn't quarrel with me. It's bad for your recovery. Anyway, Chip could have had a whole career on TV but chose to return to medicine. And you can tell that he's from a nice family. Fred, I really believe his moving here right when Jane and Liz are home is the silver lining to our troubles." The eldest and second eldest of the five Bennet sisters had lived in New York for the last decade and a half; it was due to their father's health scare that they had abruptly, if temporarily, returned to Cincinnati.

"My dear," said Mr. Bennet, "if a sock puppet with a trust fund and a Harvard medical degree moved here, you'd think he was meant to marry one of our girls."

"Tease me all you like, but the clock is ticking. No, Jane doesn't look like she'll be forty in November, but any man who knows her age will think long and hard about what that means. And Liz isn't far behind her."

"Plenty of men don't want children." Mr. Bennet took a sip of coffee. "I'm still not sure that I do."

"A woman in her forties *can* give birth," Mrs. Bennet said, "but it isn't as easy as the media would have you believe. Phyllis and Bob's daughter had all sorts of procedures, and what did she end up with but little Ying from Shanghai." As she stood, Mrs. Bennet glanced at her gold oval-faced watch. "I'm going to phone Helen Lucas and see if she can arrange an introduction to Chip."

Chapter 2

Mrs. Bennet was always the one to say grace at family dinners—she was fond of the Anglican meal prayer—and hardly had the word *amen* passed her lips that evening when, with uncontainable enthusiasm, she announced, "The Lucases have invited us for a Fourth of July barbecue!"

"What time?" asked Lydia, who at twenty-three was the youngest Bennet. "Because Kitty and I have plans."

Mary, who was thirty, said, "No fireworks start before dark."

"We're invited to a pre-party in Mount Adams," Kitty said. Kitty was twenty-six, the closest in both age and temperament to Lydia, yet contrary to typical sibling patterns, she both tagged after and was led astray by her younger sister.

"But I haven't told you who'll be at the barbecue." From her end of the long oak kitchen table, Mrs. Bennet beamed. "Chip Bingley!"

"The *Eligible* crybaby?" Lydia said, and Kitty giggled as Lydia added, "I've never seen a *woman* cry as hard as he did in the season finale."

"What's an eligible crybaby?" Jane asked.

"Oh, Jane," Liz said. "So innocent and unspoiled. You've heard of the reality show *Eligible*, right?"

Jane squinted. "I think so."

"He was on it a couple years ago. He was the guy being lusted after by twenty-five women."

"I don't suppose that any of you can appreciate the terror a man might feel being so outnumbered," Mr. Bennet said. "I often weep, and there are only six of you."

"*Eligible* is degrading to women," Mary said, and Lydia said, "Of course that's what you think."

"But every other season is one woman and twenty-five guys," Kitty said. "That's equality."

"The women humiliate themselves in a way the men don't," Mary said. "They're so desperate."

"Chip Bingley went to Harvard Medical School," Mrs. Bennet said. "He's not one of those vulgar Hollywood types."

"Mom, his Hollywood vulgarity is the only reason anyone in Cincinnati cares about him," Liz said.

Jane turned to her sister. "You knew he was here?"

"You didn't?"

"Which of us are you hoping he'll go for, Mom?" Lydia asked. "He's old, right? So I assume Jane."

"Thanks, Lydia," Jane said.

"He's thirty-six," Mrs. Bennet said. "That would make him suitable for Jane or Liz."

"Why not for Mary?" Kitty asked.

"He doesn't seem like Mary's type," Mrs. Bennet said.

"Because she's gay," Lydia said. "And he's not a woman."

Mary glared at Lydia. "First of all, I'm not gay. And even if I were, I'd rather be a lesbian than a sociopath."

Lydia smirked. "You don't have to choose."

"Is everyone listening to this?" Mary turned to her mother, at the foot of the table, then her father, at the head. "There's something seriously wrong with Lydia."

"There's nothing wrong with any of you," Mrs. Bennet said. "Jane, what's this vegetable called? It has an unusual flavor."

"It's spinach," Jane said. "I braised it."

"In point of fact," Mr. Bennet said, "there's something wrong with all of you. You're adults, and you ought to be living on your own."

"Dad, we came home to take care of you," Jane said.

"I'm well now. Go back to New York. You too, Lizzy. As the only one who refuses to take a dime and, not coincidentally, the only one with a real job, you're supposed to be setting an example for your sisters. Instead, they're pulling you down with them."

"Jane and Lizzy know how important my luncheon is," Mrs. Bennet said. "That's why they're still here." The event to which Mrs. Bennet was referring was the annual fundraising luncheon for the Cincinnati Women's League, scheduled this year for the second Thursday in September. A member of the league since her twenties, Mrs. Bennet was for the first time the luncheon's planning chair, and, as she often reminded her family members, the enormous pressure and responsibility of the role left her, however lamentably, unavailable to tend to her husband's recovery. "Now, the Lucases' barbecue is called for four," Mrs. Bennet continued. "Lydia and Kitty, that's plenty of time for you to join us and still get to your party before the fireworks. Helen Lucas is inviting some young people from the hospital besides Chip Bingley, so it'd be a shame for you to miss meeting them."

"Mom, unlike our sisters, Kitty and I are capable of getting boyfriends on our own," Lydia said.

Mrs. Bennet looked from her end of the table to her husband's. "If any of our girls marry doctors, it will meet my needs, yes," she said to him. "But, Fred, if it gets them out of the house, I daresay it will meet yours, too."

Chapter 3

In the professional realm, Mr. Bennet had done little while supporting his family with a large but dwindling inheritance, and his observations about his daughters' indolence was more than a little hypocritical. However, he was not wrong. Indeed, an outsider could be forgiven for wondering what it was that the Bennet sisters *did* with themselves from day to day and year to year. It wasn't that they were uneducated: On the contrary, from the ages of three to eighteen, each sister had attended the Seven Hills School, a challenging yet warm coeducational institution where in their younger years they'd memorized songs such as "Fifty Nifty United States" and collaborated—collaboration, at Seven Hills, was paramount—with classmates on massive papier-mâché stegosauruses or triceratops. In later years, they read *The Odyssey*, helped run the annual Harvest Fair, and went on supplemental summer trips to France and China; throughout, they all played soccer and basketball. The cumulative bill for this progressive and wide-ranging education was $800,000. All five girls had then gone on to private colleges before embarking on what could euphemistically be called non-lucrative careers, though in the case of some sisters, non-lucrative non-careers was a more precise descriptor. Kitty and Lydia had never worked longer than a few months at a time,

as desultory nannies or salesgirls in the Abercrombie & Fitch or the Banana Republic in Rookwood Pavilion. Similarly, they had lived under roofs other than their parents' for only short stretches, experiments in quasi-independence that had always resulted in dramatic fights with formerly close friends, broken leases, and the huffy transport of possessions, via laundry basket and trash bag, back to the Tudor. Primarily what occupied the younger Bennet sisters was eating lunch at Green Dog Café or Teller's, texting and watching videos on their smartphones, and exercising. About a year before, Kitty and Lydia had embraced CrossFit, the intense strength and conditioning regimen that involved weight lifting, kettle bells, battle ropes, obscure acronyms, the eschewal of most foods other than meat, and a derisive attitude toward the weak and unenlightened masses who still believed that jogging was a sufficient workout and a bagel was an acceptable breakfast. Naturally, all Bennets except Kitty and Lydia were among these masses.

Mary, meanwhile, was pursuing her third online master's degree, this one in psychology; the earlier ones had been in criminal justice and business administration. The plainest in appearance of the sisters, Mary considered her decision to live with her parents to be evidence of her commitment to the life of the mind over material acquisitions, and also to reflect her aversion to waste, since her childhood room would go empty were she not its occupant. By this logic, Mary's waste avoidance was truly exemplary: since she hardly decamped from her room from one day to the next and instead sequestered herself with her studies, stayed up late, and slept in. The exception was a standing Tuesday-night excursion, but if asked about this mysterious weekly outing, Mary would bark, "It's none of your business," or that's what she would have said back when her

family members still inquired. Also, back then, Lydia would have said, "AA meeting? Lesbian book club? Lesbian AA meeting?"

Jane and Liz had always held jobs, but even for them, a certain awareness of the safety net below had allowed the prioritizing of their personal interests over remuneration. Jane was a yoga instructor, a position that might have let her cover her rent in a city such as Cincinnati but did not do so in Manhattan, and certainly not on the Upper West Side, which she had called home for the last fifteen years. While Liz, too, had spent her twenties and thirties in New York, she had for most of them, until a recent move to Brooklyn's Cobble Hill neighborhood, inhabited dingy walk-ups in the outer boroughs. The exception had been the apartment at Seventy-second and Amsterdam that the sisters had shared shortly after Liz graduated from Barnard College in the late 1990s, just a year after Jane's graduation from the same school. Though they had gotten along well as roommates, the sisters' cohabitation had reached its conclusion when Jane became engaged to an affable hedge-fund analyst named Teddy; Mrs. Bennet's uneasiness with Jane and Teddy living together prior to their marriage was allayed by Teddy's degree from Cornell and his lucrative job. Alas, Teddy's dawning awareness of his attraction to other men ultimately precluded a permanent union with Jane, though Jane and her erstwhile fiancé did part on good terms, and once or twice a year, both Liz and Jane would meet Teddy and his toothsome partner, Patrick, for brunch.

Liz had spent her entire professional life working at magazines, having been hired out of college as a fact-checker at a weekly publication known for its incisive coverage of politics and culture. From there, she had jumped to *Mascara*, a monthly women's magazine she had subscribed to since the age of

fourteen, drawn equally to its feminist stances and its unapologetic embrace of shoes and cosmetics. First she was an assistant editor, then an associate editor, then a features editor; but at the age of thirty-one, realizing that her passion was telling stories rather than editing them, Liz had become *Mascara*'s writer-at-large, a position she still occupied. Though writing tended to pay less than editing, Liz believed she had a dream job: She traveled regularly and interviewed accomplished and sometimes famous individuals. However, her achievements did not impress her own family. Her father still, after all this time, pretended not to remember *Mascara*'s name. "How's everything at *Nail Polish*?" he'd ask or "Any new developments at *Lipstick*?" Mary often told Liz that *Mascara* reinforced oppressive and exclusionary standards of beauty; even Lydia and Kitty, who had no problem with oppressive and exclusionary standards of beauty, were uninterested in the publication, likely because they were fans of neither magazines nor books and confined their reading to the screens of their phones.

And yet, if Liz's job underwhelmed those close to her, its flexible nature was what had allowed her to remain at home during her father's convalescence, and the situation was similar for Jane, who had taken a leave of absence from the yoga studio where she was employed. Five weeks earlier, the two sisters had traveled to Cincinnati unsure of the outcome of, and greatly rattled by, Mr. Bennet's surgery. By the time it was clear that he would make a full recovery, Liz and Jane were deeply involved in both his recuperation and the day-to-day proceedings of the household: They grocery shopped and prepared cardiac-friendly meals for the entire family; they took turns transporting Mr. Bennet to his doctors' appointments, including to the orthopedist treating the arm Mr. Bennet had broken when he'd

lost consciousness during his original heart incident and had fallen at the top of the stairs in the second-floor hall. (Because he still wore a cast on his right arm, Mr. Bennet was unable to drive himself.) Additionally, though they had made little progress so far, Liz and Jane intended to address the cluttered and dusty condition into which the Tudor had deteriorated.

While their sisters could in theory have performed all such tasks, the younger women appeared disinclined. Though also clearly rattled by their father's heart incident, they weren't rattled in a way that caused them to alter their daily schedules: Lydia and Kitty carried on with CrossFit and leisurely restaurant lunches, while Mary emerged from her room erratically to attempt to engage family members in discussions of mortality. In the kitchen, observing her father drinking the powdered-psyllium-seed-husk-based liquid meant to offset the constipating effects of his pain medication, Mary had announced that she considered the Native American view of life and death as cyclical to be far more advanced than the Western proclivity for heroic measures, at which point Mr. Bennet had poured the remainder of his beverage down the sink, said, "For Christ's sake, Mary, put a sock in it," and left the room.

Mrs. Bennet expressed great concern about her husband's plight—indeed, she could hardly speak of the evening on which he'd been hospitalized without sobbing at the recollection of the fright it had caused her—but she could not act as his nurse or chauffeur because of her many Women's League luncheon duties. "What if you ask somebody else on the committee to take over and you're the chair next year instead?" Liz had inquired one day when Mr. Bennet was still in the hospital. Her mother had looked at her in horror.

"Why, I'd never hear the end of it," Mrs. Bennet said. "Lizzy,

all those items being solicited for the silent auction—*I'm* the one keeping track of them."

"Then how about creating an online spreadsheet that everyone can see?" Because Mrs. Bennet wasn't proficient with a computer, Liz added, "I can help you."

"It's out of the question," Mrs. Bennet said. "I'm also the one who's been talking to the florist, and I'm the one who had the idea to do napkins with the league's insignia. You can't pass off things like that in midstream."

"Does Mom secretly hate Dad?" Liz asked Jane the next morning when the two sisters were out for a run. "Because she's acting really unsupportive."

"I think she just doesn't want to face how serious things could have been," Jane said.

After Mr. Bennet's return home, however, Liz wondered if she'd been wrong not about her mother's antipathy for her father but only about its being secret. Although her parents resumed their regular lunches together at the Cincinnati Country Club as soon as Mr. Bennet possessed the energy, the couple led largely separate lives within the Tudor. In fact, her father no longer shared the master bedroom, instead sleeping in a narrow sleigh bed in his second-floor study, a setup that predated his hospital stay. When Liz asked Mary how long the arrangement had existed, Mary squinted and said, "Five years? Or, I don't know, ten?"

Reinforcing Liz's dismay was the fact that, although Dr. Morelock had explicitly talked about the importance of Mr. Bennet embarking on a diet low in red meat, salt, and alcohol, Mrs. Bennet had welcomed her husband home with a cocktail hour of Scotch and Cheetos followed by a steak dinner. When the subsequent night's entrée was roast beef, Liz discreetly

asked her mother afterward if she might consider making chicken or salmon. "But Kitty and Lydia like beef because it's caveman food," Mrs. Bennet protested.

"But Dad had a heart attack," Liz said.

For all the nights since, she and Jane had taken turns preparing dinner. They had also agreed to stay in Cincinnati until the weekend after the Women's League luncheon. Liz had little confidence that her mother would step in and provide care for her father at that point; rather, with his cast off by then, his physical therapy well under way if not complete, and his ability to drive likely restored, she hoped he'd be able to care for himself.