

DISGUISED for **LOVE**
THE STRICKLAND SISTERS

J. B. LIFFLANDER

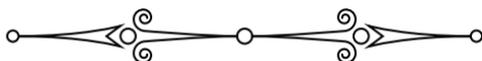
Disguised for Love – The Strickland Sisters
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Alice Jamison rang the doorbell of the Strickland mansion over and over again, but no one answered. Crying, she began pounding on the door so hard that she hurt her knuckles and they began to bleed. She was dressed in a long charreusse and white print dress, which had gotten soiled from the long run she had taken from her parents' house to the Stricklands'. She was tall and willowy with soft brown hair, green eyes, and a delicate, pretty face. But now that face was contorted and her eyes were bloodshot from crying as she sank down at the front door, sobbing. "They probably aren't home," she said to herself in frustration. But just as she finished speaking, the front door opened, and Mr. Standish, the Stricklands' butler, an Englishman of about fifty with snow white hair, looked down on her with curiosity. Suddenly she felt very embarrassed and even disgusted with herself as she realized what she must look like to him—a momentary picture of herself flashed through her mind as she noticed how impeccably he was dressed in his well-tailored butler's suit.

"May I help you, Mrs. Jamison?" he inquired, smiling professionally, but with warmth, and acting so much as if he had not noticed her unusual circumstances that it made her wonder if perhaps he had not. With his eyes stayed on hers rather than on her clothing, nothing in his gaze betrayed the fact that she was crumpled on the doorstep, her

soft brown hair in disarray and sticking to her face because of the tears. Trying to compose herself, she wiped her tears away and pushed her hair back as she slowly stood up. He reached out and offered his hand, and she took it as she arose.

"You are ever the gentleman, sir," she said as she steadied herself. "Are any of the sisters home?"

"Yes, madam, they are all home. May I announce your presence?"

"Yes, please," she answered, as Esther Strickland entered the foyer and noticed her at the door. Mr. Standish moved out of the way to let Esther walk out to her friend. The oldest of the Strickland sisters at twenty-six years of age, she was also the tallest, at about five foot seven inches in height. She had dark brown hair, brown eyes, and her face was attractive and strikingly elegant. It was not that Esther was exceptionally pretty, but her face was distinguished, almost regal, as if she were born cast for the part of being the elder sister of one of the wealthiest families on the East Coast. Her posture added to her prominent features—she walked very uprightly, with an air of self confidence but not haughtiness. Of all the Strickland sisters, she had been the closest to Alice, as they were only one year apart in age. Alice lived close by in the same exclusive Larchmont neighborhood and had met Esther when they were children—their mothers had also been friends for many years. And when Esther's mother died, seven years ago, Alice's mother had helped Mr. Strickland and the girls work through their grief.

Since the two friends had shared their most intimate secrets as they grew up together, Esther knew how particular Alice was about her appearance. She was normally quite well coiffed and always dressed in clean and pressed clothing. This made her wonder all the more what could have happened to make Alice come over unannounced and looking as she did. Alice had recently married and was living

several miles away, so she must have walked from her parents' house, Esther thought. Something devastating must have happened, and Esther wondered if Alice's mother might be sick.

"Alice, is Mrs. Sherrill well?" she asked.

"Yes...yes. Mother is quite well," Alice said as she walked through the door, wobbling a little. "I'll tell you what happened in a minute. Can I sit down for a moment?"

"Of course." Esther guided her friend to the largest couch in the living room—a tufted emerald green sofa that stood out for its finely carved wooden legs and trim. The exquisite carvings were of angels, and Alice remembered how Mrs. Strickland, when she was alive, had told them it was made in Italy in the 1700s. Mr. Standish helped Alice to her seat, and she sat, her fingers outlining the carving of an angel as she looked around the large, sumptuous room, which was graced with a beautiful painting by Claude Monet that hung across from her on the west wall. The room made her feel secure and stable—it was just like the Strickland family, she thought, and it brought back memories of better days. She hadn't appreciated it when she was younger, but now as she looked at the beautiful imported furniture, some of it antique and some modern, and how it blended together so nicely, she realized how much it was a testimony to the taste and talent of Mrs. Strickland.

Remembering how sad the family had been when Mrs. Strickland had died of cancer, Alice was happy to have a reprieve for her thoughts, but then her present situation weighed heavily on her again as Mr. Standish stood over her, waiting for a request. Esther looked over at him, which he instantly took as a cue to leave, and he disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. Esther took Alice's hand and held it, and as they sat silently together, Esther's two sisters walked into the room, a little surprised to see Alice, and at first not realizing that she was upset.

"Did he finally give the little woman a day off?"

Priscilla asked jokingly, but there was no answer. And as she and the youngest and prettiest sister, Anna, got closer, and sensed Alice's distress, they stopped for a moment, their faces sobering. Priscilla then walked over to the couch and took Alice's other hand. "Oh, excuse me for my impertinence. Whatever is the trouble, Alice? What has happened?"

Alice looked up at her and forced a smile. "Oh, Prissy, I know you were joking, don't worry about it."

"Priscilla, would you mind asking Mr. Standish or one of the others to make some coffee? Would you like some coffee, Alice? Or some tea?" Esther said.

"Tea would be nice," Alice answered, haltingly.

"But I don't want the help in here right now—just have them make it and we'll serve ourselves," Esther said.

"Yes, of course," Priscilla said, used to taking orders from her older sister and not resenting them. At one time she had resented Esther for telling her what to do after their mother died, but now she realized how much Esther had gone through for her younger sisters by taking on so many responsibilities that would normally have been beyond her age, and she admired her for it. She walked back to the kitchen, then reappeared quickly, not wanting to miss the reason for Alice's unexpected visit. She had never seen Alice looking the way she did today.

Anna was still standing when Priscilla came back, and Alice was gently crying. "It's my marriage—it's terrible," Alice said. "After two years of marriage it's falling apart."

"If you've just had an argument..." Esther began, but Alice spoke again, interrupting her.

"I wish that's all it was," she said, trying to catch her breath which had escaped her from the crying. "He doesn't love me."

"Of course he loves you. He courted you for years before you married, and he was always the perfect gentle-

man. That doesn't change overnight," Esther said.

"No, he doesn't love me," Alice said, this time with a rising voice tinged with anger. "It was all a charade, all an act to marry me for my money—for my family's money, anyway."

"But Roger is from a rich family himself. He doesn't need your money," Priscilla said.

Alice cried a little more and closed her eyes, opening them slowly. "His family used to be rich. They lost most of their money in the 1929 crash, but they kept up the facade for as long as possible. They will lose their mansion soon, and then everyone will know."

"But you are an attractive girl and a sweet person. Just because he lost his money doesn't mean he doesn't love you. You shouldn't jump to that conclusion," Esther said, squeezing her hand.

Alice looked up at her, and then at the other two sisters. "You are my best friends in the world, but I shouldn't have just barged in here. It wasn't proper, and I have to leave now—I've said too much already." She began to stand up.

"It is very proper," Priscilla said. "That's what friends are for, and I know you'd welcome us if we needed your help. Now please don't leave. Tell us the whole story. You are too upset to go now—you need to tell us."

"No, I'm really not that upset," Alice said slowly, trying to smile. But then her face became even sadder, and she started crying uncontrollably. Esther moved closer and hugged her until she settled down, and Anna gave her a large handkerchief to dry her eyes.

"We had an argument—we've had several since we married. But in the last one he told me that he couldn't stand me and he only married me for my money."

"People say lots of mean things when they are angry. I don't think he meant it," Esther said, stroking her hair.

"I appreciate...the sentiment," Alice said, choking

back her tears. "But if you had heard the way he said it..."

Esther shook her head, not knowing what to say. Everyone was quiet for a moment, and then Priscilla walked over to her.

"Can you get a divorce?" she asked.

"No, never, it would be a scandal. I would never bring that kind of shame on the family. Besides, I made a vow and I will keep it—richer or poorer, loved or unloved, we are joined in holy matrimony."

Esther gave Priscilla a look showing that she disapproved of her asking such a question.

"Are you staying with your family now?" Anna asked.

"Yes. I walked from there. The grass was wet with dew, and I fear I've ruined my dress...my dress...what does it matter?"

"Did you tell your mother?" Esther asked.

"Yes, and she thought I was making something out of nothing. She said I should just be the best wife I can be and make the best of it. But her generation was different—I can't just pretend..." she trailed off crying again.

"I still don't think he meant it. He was just trying to hurt you because you were arguing. I've said things I didn't mean before."

They were interrupted by a knock on the door that led into the kitchen area. Priscilla walked briskly to the door, opened it, took the tray from the main cook, Betsy, and set it down on a large rosewood table near the sofa, then moved the teacups over to the coffee table in front of it.

"You must stay tonight," Esther said.

"No, I couldn't—I would have to go home for a change of clothes and a nightgown, and I don't want to see Mother right now. She doesn't seem to understand why I'm so upset—it just doesn't register with her."

"Nonsense, you can choose from any of our extra nightgowns, and there are scores of dresses that will fit you.

And I'll call her for you. I've missed you ever since you moved away and this is a chance for us to chat, and Father adores you and will be so glad to see you when he comes home for dinner," Esther said, and she walked towards the telephone.

"No, Esther. I'd be imposing, and I'm not good company right now," Alice protested.

Esther ignored her and picked up the telephone.

"Okay, but don't tell your father or your brother—it's too embarrassing."

"Of course I won't. Anyway, Paul is on a dig in the Middle East. He won't be home for a few weeks," Esther said as she began dialing. "Hello, Mrs. Sherrill?" she said into the phone. "This is Esther Strickland. I just wanted you to know that Alice is here and she'll be spending the night.... Yes, everything is fine.... Yes, Father is in good health. Yes... good-bye."

Esther walked back to the couch and sat down next to Alice. "It will be just like when we used to spend the night when we were little girls," she said, smiling.

"Does that mean pillow fights?" Anna asked, also with a smile, but it faded as she watched Alice's face grow somber again.

"You know I must admit I sort of liked being envied by the other girls because we are rich. But now I think it's more of a curse than a blessing."

"Why would you say that, Alice?" Priscilla asked.

"Because you never know if a man likes you for yourself or for your money. There's always that niggling question in the back of your mind: is it me, or is it the money? If he'd met me at a department store where I was a clerk, would he still have been interested? If my family had just lost all their money, would he still have wanted to marry me, or would he have looked for a rich girl?"

"Oh, Alice, it's not a curse. Look at the things our families have. How many girls go to college, and how many

travel abroad and get to live in a home like this? I love living at Eagle's Rest," Esther said, using the name for the Strickland Estate. "How many people have a tennis court, and a swimming pool and horses and stables?"

"At what cost? My father was always working late or out of town visiting one of the factories, and when he got home he was grumpy and had no time for us.... Okay, I'll quit complaining. Anyway, yours isn't like that, is he?"

"No, he always made certain he was home for dinner and spent time with us unless something really urgent happened," Esther said and she looked at the clock. "In fact, he'll be here soon, so why don't we find you a clean dress. Priscilla, would you tell Betsy we have a guest for dinner?"

Upstairs they led Alice to Esther's closet first, and she began looking at the dresses. Alice smiled a real smile for the first time since she had entered the house as she looked at the variety of dresses. "Oh, I think you have as many dresses as Bloomingdale's. Have you been to their new store yet on Lexington Avenue?" She held up one dress after another against herself before a large dressing mirror trimmed with cherry wood on a stand next to the closet.

"No, I haven't, but Prissy's been there, haven't you, Prissy?" Esther said, pleased that Alice was getting her mind off her marriage.

"It's incredible—it takes up a whole block, and it's eleven stories!" Priscilla said.

Alice held up a few more dresses and then looked at the sisters and smiled again. "Okay, I'll take them all," she said, laughing now as if she were her old self. As she finished speaking, Mr. Standish stood at the hallway near the open door to Esther's room.

"Dinner will be served in twenty minutes," he said.

"Is Father home?" Esther asked.

"Yes, he's downstairs. He just walked in, and Mrs. Ingersoll is with him."

The sisters exchanged glances, and as they looked back at Mr. Standish, Esther thought his face betrayed his misgivings about this woman who was pursuing their father.

"Well, there goes what might have been a pleasant dinner," Priscilla said. Esther frowned disapprovingly, and hoped that Alice had not heard, but she had, and from her expression, Esther knew her friend wanted to ask what the comment meant but was too polite to pursue it. Esther decided to tell her.

"Mrs. Ingersoll is a very wealthy widow who has developed a keen interest in charities ever since she met Father."

"Oh, she's one of those Ingersolls," Alice said, referring to the fact that the family name was known. "Well, your father has always been generous with charitable giving."

"Yes, and now Mrs. Ingersoll cannot seem to do without his advice on where to give," Anna interjected. "And she's very pretty—especially for being maybe thirty-eight or forty years old."

"I'm afraid that Father likes the attention he's getting from her—she is quite a bit younger than him. But I doubt he really thinks she's after him. As sharp as he is in dealing with most people, he seems kind of naïve about her," Priscilla said.

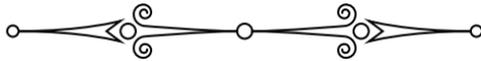
"Are you sure she's after him?" Alice asked.

"We're all sure. Believe me, we're sure," Priscilla said.

"But if she's rich and attractive, what's the problem?"

"You'll find out when you meet her, I think. We'd better get a move on." Esther turned toward the hallway. "Come down when you've changed, and we'll introduce you."

2



From the time they were children, the Strickland girls had always greeted their father when he came home, and they went downstairs to do so now while Alice changed clothes and fixed her hair. Joseph J. Strickland III was fifty-three years old, about five foot eight inches tall, and had gray and white hair that gave him a distinguished appearance. He exercised regularly swimming and playing tennis, which kept him looking healthy and fit, in spite of the many hours he spent working. His presence in any room was instantly noticed, for he had a subtle charisma that was almost like an aura about him.

Unlike many of the industrial barons of his time who always seemed restless and needed the next business deal to feel complete, he normally had a steady peace about him, an inner strength that had a calming effect on people. However, those who had interpreted his peace as a weakness and attempted to exploit it soon saw another side of Mr. Strickland, for he was not a man to trifle with, and his pleasant demeanor could change remarkably when he was angered. Disloyalty would earn his wrath, and if a man tried to deceive him in a business transaction, he would become a tenacious foe, for he dealt with any dishonesty quickly and often harshly. This was a fact that those who knew him, and especially employees, were careful to keep in mind. His children learned this early on—because pun-

ishment had been swift and severe when they were caught lying or cheating.

The girls walked down together into the large living room. Their father was not in the room yet, and Mrs. Ingersoll was sitting down, dressed in what bordered on formal evening attire—a beautiful candy-apple red satin dress with sequins that was tight enough to show off her voluptuous figure. An exquisite ruby and diamond necklace graced her neck, and her matching shoes were ruby red with two-inch heels. Her long auburn hair had been carefully twirled and pinned up with several sparkling diamond clasps, and her makeup was perfect, if a little overdone. Her attire was probably inappropriate for someone visiting just for dinner, but no one could deny that she stood out as a strikingly beautiful woman—especially for one in her early forties. Mr. Standish was standing next to her, and he was listening to her as they entered the room.

“Now please be careful, because if my fur is pressed upon by other clothing, it leaves an indentation. So can you hang it by itself? Preferably in a room with air circulating and not in a small closet?” Mrs. Ingersoll’s tone was what one might use when instructing a child.

“Of course, madam,” the butler said, taking the fur stole from her and hanging it over his arm. He turned to walk away, but she raised her voice as he began to move.

“Oh, no, that won’t do at all—you must not let it lie on your arm. It must be held from the top, as if on a hanger. The fur should not touch your arm.”

“Why is she even wearing a fur in the summer?” Anna asked in a low tone.

“Because she’s got to show it off—that and the family jewels. Just to discuss a benefit! I’d say she’s dressed to kill,” Priscilla said. Esther turned to both of them with a cross look, concerned that they might be overheard. Suddenly Mrs. Ingersoll’s attention was turned to the girls, and she smiled at them. Alice had since walked down the stairs

and was a few feet behind them.

"Hello, girls, it's so good to see you again. And who is this with you?" she asked, looking at Alice. As she did, the girls looked back at Alice and then back to Mrs. Ingersoll.

"This is Alice Jamison," Esther said.

"Are you George Jamison's daughter-in-law?"

"Yes, I am," Alice answered politely.

"Well, then, it is very good to make your acquaintance," Mrs. Ingersoll said, as Mr. Strickland walked back into the room. When he saw Alice, he smiled warmly.

"Alice! What a pleasure it is to see you again. It seems like it's been such a long time. You used to visit regularly before you married, and we miss you," he said kindly.

"And I miss all of you."

Mr. Strickland, who was looking into the girl's eyes, noticed a small grimace. "Is everything well with your family, Alice? Mrs. Sherrill has not visited for a long time."

"Yes, sir, everything is fine. Mother is in good health," Alice said unconvincingly.

"Well if I can be of assistance in any way..."

He was interrupted by Mrs. Ingersoll, who seemed bothered that she was not the object of his attention. "Shall we go over the plans for the charity gala now, Joseph?"

He turned towards her, slightly disconcerted by the interruption but not wanting to offend her. At that moment, Mr. Standish announced that dinner would be served in five minutes.

"Let's discuss it after dinner, Betty. I take it you've been introduced to Mrs. Jamison already?" he asked.

"Oh, yes—my pleasure. She and all your daughters look so beautiful." Mrs. Ingersoll took his arm, indicating her readiness to walk into the dining room.

The long, teakwood dinner table with inlays of other fine woods and a strip of gold which encircled it in an ob-

long shape, could seat twenty people, but it was set for six that evening, and everyone sat at one end of the table, with Mr. Strickland sitting at the head of the table. Alice noticed that the dining chairs, which were upholstered in a rich crimson-colored satin, appeared to have a slightly deeper color than the last time she had visited, so she knew they had been recently redone. She looked at the ornate engraving on the legs and arms, which was filled with gold paint, and remembered how Mrs. Strickland had given the girls a history lesson on the table and chairs when they were in elementary school. She normally did not like history, but the way Mrs. Strickland described the historic period in France, it made her appreciate the subject and changed her attitude about it in school.

How thoughtful and caring Mrs. Strickland was, she thought. Her wealth had not gone to her head, and she never put on airs—she was always down to earth, and yet sophisticated. How unlike Mrs. Strickland was the woman now sitting across from her, who she noticed was staring at Mr. Strickland at that very moment, trying to keep his attention—and giving the impression that she did not want to share him with anyone else. Suddenly, almost as if she might have discerned Alice's thoughts, Mrs. Ingersoll turned and looked at her curiously, then she smiled in a way that seemed superficial to Alice.

"Alice, I remember reading in the society page about your wedding several years ago. It sounds like it was a wonderful affair, and, knowing who you married, I think you made a very wise choice. That's a wonderful family you married into—my congratulations."

Esther looked over at Alice sheepishly, and Alice held down her head for a moment, but when she raised it she was smiling. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Ingersoll," she said, and Esther let out a slight sigh of relief.

"Joseph, did you get a chance to look at that list of charities I had sent over last week?" Mrs. Ingersoll asked,

but Mr. Strickland looked as if he were taken by surprise at the question.

“Last week...” he said, trying to remember.

“Father, we did receive the list,” Priscilla said. “You gave it to me, and I researched some of them, but I haven’t finished.”

“Oh, very good, dear. Then you must join us after dinner and advise us.”

“You gave the list to Priscilla?” Mrs. Ingersoll asked, with surprise in her voice.

“Oh, yes—she is my business gal—can’t do much without her. She knows everything about the business, and her advice is always excellent. Last year she went over the books for the steel mill in Pennsylvania and found errors that no one else had caught. She even helped the engineers redesign the flow of materiel in the Syracuse plant, which increased efficiency and saved me thousands.”

“My, you have unheard of talents for a woman,” Mrs. Ingersoll said, with a tone that seemed subtly envious to Priscilla. She then turned to Joseph again. “I would have thought that your son would be the one to...”

“Take over the business? Yes, he could do it, and he would if I asked, he’s got the ability, but his heart would not be in it. He loves archeology—he’s getting his doctorate, you know. And he’s made some incredible discoveries excavating ancient cities in what used to be Mesopotamia. It’s very exciting work.”

“So, are all the girls interested in business as you are, Priscilla? What about you, Esther?” Mrs. Ingersoll asked. “Joseph tells me that you are engaged to a Holt—you girls can’t miss with all these old-money families.”

“Well, we are not actually engaged yet,” Esther said.

“And what are you waiting for? Hasn’t it been several years?” Mrs. Ingersoll asked.

“Well, first of all, he has not asked me, and I’m also continuing my education. I’ve gone back to college to get

my master's degree."

"Your master's degree! My, how accomplished your children are, Joseph."

"Yes, Esther is majoring in English. She'd like to be a writer, I think. She's written some advertising copy for me that is quite good," Joseph said.

"So, you are a businesswoman also?" Mrs. Ingersoll said, with a bit of irony in her voice.

"No, I just like to write. I'm not involved in the business," Esther said.

"Well, advertising is part of it—it's very important," Mr. Strickland added.

As he finished speaking, the cook and her assistant came in and began serving the main course. Then Mr. Standish entered and walked towards Mr. Strickland but said nothing for a moment. "What is it, Standish?" Mr. Strickland asked, a little irritated to be interrupted.

"A phone call for you, sir."

"You know I don't take them after six, and especially not during dinner."

"Yes, and I would not have interrupted you, but Mr. Calvin insisted. He says there has been a fire in Albany."

"A fire? Well, I must be excused then," he said, looking at Mrs. Ingersoll. "I'll take the call in my study, Standish."

After he left the room, Mrs. Ingersoll looked over at Esther, and Esther looked back, waiting for her to speak, but she hesitated, as if considering whether or not she should.

"Would you be open to advice from me?" she asked.

"Well, of course. What might it be?"

"You are still young, but not that young, and you have a man from a fine family who is interested. But all this education could put him off. That may be why he hasn't proposed yet. Most women don't go to college, and a man wants to feel that he is the one who is wise and worldly. You may lose your catch if you're not careful. There are many

young women who would like to snare a man like that.”

“Well, anytime my catch wants to swim away, or if he gets snared by a younger, uneducated woman, that’s fine with me. I’ll just wile away the hours as an old spinster with...” Esther stopped speaking for a moment as the family cat ran in and jumped on her lap, and purred, hoping for some food from the table. Esther gave her a tidbit as she continued, “...with my cats as companions.” One of the cooks ran in after the cat and took it off her lap, apologizing for letting the cat in.

Anna and Alice both started laughing, and Mrs. Ingersoll pursed her lips in displeasure. “I was only trying to help.”

“Yes, I understand, and I thank you for your concern,” Esther said, and then Mr. Strickland walked back into the dining room, and sat down.

“Was it serious?” Priscilla asked.

“No. There was a fire, but it was put out, and one machine is down because of it, but we have a spare. The line should be running again by tomorrow afternoon. Calvin knew we had the spare, but he wasn’t sure it was functional, and he wanted to check with me. It really could have waited until tomorrow, and I think the chief engineer could have told him, but he wasn’t there, and you know how nervous Mr. Calvin can get.”

“Yes, I do. When I visited that plant, he seemed to be scared to death of me. At first I thought he was hiding something because of the way he was acting,” Priscilla said.

“Yes, he’s always been that way, but he’s an excellent manager,” Mr. Strickland added.

“Oh, Joseph, I simply don’t know how you keep track of all these different factories, making these different products. However can you ever remember all the details?” Mrs. Ingersoll asked in a gushing tone.

“Well, Betty, it’s not so hard. Normally our managers don’t need me at all. This was an exception. But it’s eas-

ier with Priscilla helping. Now that she's graduated I have her full time."

"Yes, that's very nice," Mrs. Ingersoll said, but it was obvious to the girls that she was not pleased that her remark resulted in a compliment for Priscilla.

After they were finished eating, Joseph looked over at Priscilla. "We will be in the study in about five minutes. I don't need you very long, because I know all of you want to spend time with Alice."

The girls began to move towards the stairs, as Joseph and Betty walked towards the study. Betty took his arm, but after a few steps she stumbled, and Joseph reached out and took her other arm to keep her from falling. She grabbed his shoulder and her body moved against his as she caught her balance. The girls turned and watched as she slowly disengaged herself from Joseph. "Oh, that was close—thank you so much," she said, smiling at Joseph, but also hesitating as she held both of his arms for a moment. "You are so strong!" she added.

"Are you okay?" Joseph asked with a sincere tone.

"Oh, yes, I am now. Just a little embarrassed for being clumsy."

"Think nothing of it," he said, and the girls turned again to go upstairs. When they got to Esther's room, they burst out laughing.

"You are so strong!" Priscilla said, barely able to get the words out because of her laughter, but mimicking Mrs. Ingersoll's voice with uncanny accuracy.

"I guess she knows how to snare her man," Alice said.

"Doesn't Father see what she's doing?" Anna asked.

"He seems to be blind to it, somehow," Esther said in a quiet voice. "He's so perceptive with most things, but there is something about this woman."

"Yeah, there's something about her, and I don't think

he's too blind to see—she's beautiful," Priscilla said.

"So you think she really likes Father? I mean she must be twelve to fifteen years younger than him," Anna said.

"Well, Father looks good for his age, but the fact that he's fifteen hundred times richer than her might be part of the attraction," Priscilla added.

"What do you think, Alice? You're more objective than us."

"I think she's a snob who wants to marry the richest man she can find. But don't get me wrong, your father is quite attractive for his age, and he's a perfect gentleman—he makes a woman feel so at ease. I think many younger women would be attracted to him, and he doesn't need this society climber."

"You took the words out of my mouth. But can he see it?" Esther asked.

"I don't think he even realizes she's after him," Priscilla said. "Maybe I should mention it."

"I think that would be a big mistake," Esther said. "Let's see if it goes anywhere. She can only invite herself over so often to talk about charities."

"Well, you're probably right about not telling him, but I think this hussy will find a dozen ways to waylay Father if she puts her mind to it. I just hope he has enough discernment to see what she's really like," Priscilla said. Then, mimicking her again, she added, "Oh, Joseph, I simply don't know how you keep track of all the factories, you are so strong, handsome, clever, and by the way, I never noticed before—wonderfully rich! And now I'm so clumsy that I just happened to fall into your arms. Are you snared yet, you guppie!" The girls began laughing again, and then Priscilla composed herself and walked out of the room to join her father and Mrs. Ingersoll. When she got there, she was still amused and had to restrain herself from giggling.

