# The AUERBACH WILL

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Stephen Birmingham

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The BOOK of ESTHER

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PEOPLE used to say I was an absolute ringer for Gene Tierney," Joan is saying, standing in front of the long mirror of the entrance hall. "An absolute ringer." She fingers her throat. "Do you like this necklace, Mother? It's by Kenny Jay Lane. The stones aren't real, and neither is the gold, but I think it's an amusing fake."

"I'd be nervous about wearing real stones these days," Essie says. "Mrs. Perlman, downstairs, had a diamond and sapphire clip ripped off her jacket by a man on the street, right here on Park Avenue." Essie is thinking how well Joan has kept her figure, that extraordinary thinness. Most women, when they reach a certain age, tend to thicken around the middle like - well, like Essie Auerbach herself - but not Joan. Oh, of course Essie knows how Ioan does it. She never eats. Oh, sometimes an asparagus spear, a little bit of fish, a mouthful of spinach. But otherwise she just pushes the food about on her plate, pretending to eat. She lets her wineglass be filled, but just pretends to sip at it. She helps herself to the dessert, spoons the raspberry sauce over it, but doesn't touch it. Before dinner, she always asks for a bourbon oldfashioned, but just pretends to drink it. Essie Auerbach has long since given up trying to tell her daughter that she needs to eat to stav healthy. After all, Joan is never sick.

Seeing Joan, still a perfect size four, walking toward you on a crowded street, or across a softly lighted room, you might think for a moment that this was the body of a trim teenager, her glossy reddish-brown hair — thanks to the ministrations of her hair-

dresser —bouncing slightly. Only at close range would you discover that Joan is . . . well, that Joan is Joan. Has Joan had her face lifted? Essie would never dare to ask that question of her oldest daughter, but there was that long, unexplained trip to Argentina just before Joan married Richard, and when she came back everyone had remarked on how "rested" Joan looked. And Essie had noticed that the small mole on Joan's chin was gone. And so the answer to that question, Essie thinks, is probably.

Standing before the glass, Joan straightens the shoulder strap on her black lace dress and turns to her mother. "Before we go in, I want to ask you to do something for me, Mother. I want you to speak to Richard. He's got this idiotic idea of going to South Africa to research a book he wants to write on race relations, or some idiotic thing. I can't afford to let him go. I need him to edit the paper. I want you to tell him that this is not the time for him to go, that I need him here, that you personally oppose it."

"Richard's your husband, Joan."

"Ha! That's just the thing. He won't listen to me. Your word will have more weight."

"And aren't you also his - well, employer?"

"That's the rest of it. How can I threaten to fire my own husband? Think of the story the *Times* would make of that one. Besides, he has a contract. Richard's no slouch."

"Well, then that's easy. If he has a contract, he has to stay."

"Unfortunately, he doesn't. Stupidly, I agreed that he could have a six-month sabbatical every two years. He wants to exercise that option now. So please do as I ask, Mother. The paper's at a crucial point right now. He's damn good at his job, and it's crucial that I have him here."

Essie hesitates. "Joan, has that newspaper of yours ever made any money?"

Joan's dark eyes flash angrily, and Essie knows that it is not wise to trespass any further into this danger-ridden territory. Joan's temper is legendary. When, Essie thinks, did the flighty debutante turn into the strident female executive, when did thinness turn to brittleness? Stop the presses! she can hear Joan commanding. Start them again! — all in the exercising of Joan's managerial power.

Did Gene Tierney ever play Lady Macbeth? "Never mind," Essie says.

"Of course it's made money!" Joan says. "And right now it's at a *crucial* turning point, into the really big money. We have new advertisers all lined up. That's why it's so important."

Essie does not say that she has heard this sort of thing often before from Joan. New advertisers have always been "lined up." Essie envisions them in a long queue, single-file, portfolios in hand, bulging attaché cases, outside her daughter's walnut-paneled office door downtown. But the line does not move. It just stands there, blocked at the gates of power, foundering, uncertain — afraid, perhaps, to tap on the door of the thin, stylish woman who sits at her Chippendale desk inside, twirling a gold pencil. Whenever Essie has read of her daughter's enterprise it seems to have been in terms of the word "foundering": "The foundering New York *Express*, still fueled by the Auerbach millions, etc., etc."

"Don't forget you're a stockholder in the paper, too, Mother. Will you do as I ask?"

"I'll do my best," Essie says. They start together across the wide foyer and into the paneled library where Richard, looking fit in a hacking jacket, stands at the bar fixing drinks.

"Good evening, Richard," Essie says.

"Hi, Nana. Merry Christmas." He steps toward her, takes both her hands in his, and gives her a peck on the cheek.

Richard McAllister is the fourth of Joan's husbands, and perhaps the nicest. At least Essie thinks so. Of the others — well, the less said of them the better, since they are all gone now. Gone, each with a certain share of Joan's money, of course. Richard has always seemed, to Essie at least, to be less interested in the money, more interested in turning Joan's newspaper into something profitable and worthwhile and not, as it had once seemed to Essie, just another expensive hobby of Joan's. Richard, at least, had been listed ("journalist, author") in Who's Who in America when Joan married him, whereas the others . . . but forget about them. When Joan had told Essie that she was marrying a goy, that she was fed up with Jewish husbands, Essie was more than a little apprehensive. "Oil and water don't mix," as Essie's own mother used to

say. Mama had been full of little homilies like that ("Too many cooks spoil the stew," "The early bird catches the worm"), picked up, Essie supposed, as Mama had learned her new language. But as far as Richard was concerned, Essie kept her own counsel, as she usually did when it came to the things Joan wanted. And the marriage seems to have worked out well, better than the others, God knows. Joan and Richard have been married now - how long? — eight years, at least, longer than the others. And as far as Essie knows Richard has never physically abused her daughter, which was more than could be said for - but enough of that, which was ancient history. And he seems to get along well with Joan's daughter, Karen. Seeing him tonight, Essie thinks he looks very fine, distinguished even, with his full head of sandy hair, blue eves and that good, straight nose. Essie has always been certain that Richard is several years younger than Joan, but she has never brought up that matter, either.

"I'll have my usual, darling," Joan says, sinking into one of the deep leather chairs, all in one motion, with her thin ankles crossed. "Bourbon old-fashioned, no cherry."

"How about you, Nana? A martini tonight, or some champagne?"

"I think my martini tonight, thank you, Richard."

Joan sits forward, looking expectant, as though about to speak, but at that moment Mary Farrell appears at the library door, a folder of papers in her hand. Mary has been Essie's secretary for the last eighteen years. "Excuse me, Mrs. A," Mary says, "but I thought you might like to check the seating."

"Oh, yes, I'd better," Essie says. She follows Mary out of the room, adding, "But I really don't know why, Mary. You always do it perfectly."

The dining room is at the other end of the apartment, nearly a full city block away. The apartment is large — too large, Essie often thinks, for one old woman — but one grows accustomed to things, to certain familiar spaces, and one doesn't want to make a change. She needs so much space, she has always reminded herself, because of the art collection. At this point in Essie's life, her paintings have become her oldest and dearest friends, and she thinks

that she could not bear to part with one of them. As she and Mary pass through the long central gallery where the heart of the collection hangs, she greets them anew as they glow out from the dark walls under their museum lights — the seven Cézannes, the five Van Goghs, including her precious "L'Arlésienne," the Manets, the Monets, the Degas, the Renoirs, the Rousseau, and the magnificent Goya which the Prado has wanted to buy for years. Along the walls, too, in lighted glass cases, are the Shakespeare first folios and the collection of illuminated Bibles, and at each corner of the room the guardian sculptures — two by Rodin, two by Bourdelle. How did we have the wisdom, Essie asks herself, to find these beautiful things so long ago? The two women pass the curving staircase that leads to the upper floor, and enter the dining room where more old friends smile down from the walls.

"Oh, everything looks very pretty, Mary," Essie says. "Perfect, as usual."

"I chose anthuriums and ferns for the centerpieces," Mary says, "because I thought they looked — well, Christmassy. And I had them put in the two pink-and-green Ming bowls."

"Anthuriums. Very nice. They're an economy flower, too, you know. They last for weeks and weeks. Be sure to send them over to Mount Sinai in the morning."

"Of course. Now here's what I've done with the seating, Mrs. A." Mary takes out her seating chart, and moves along the table checking her diagram against the hand-lettered placecards in their silver stands. "On your right, I've placed the new man, Mr. Carter. First name, Daryl."

"Carter. Daryl Carter. Remind me, Mary. Who is he?"

"He's the gentleman Mrs. Schofield is bringing. She telephoned to ask if she might."

"Oh, dear."

"Should I have told her it was inconvenient?"

"Oh, no. No, it's all right. But you know what I mean."

Mary smiles discreetly. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"Another one. What will she come up with this time?"

Mrs. Schofield is Karen Schofield, Joan's daughter Karen, Essie's granddaughter Karen. "Poor Karen," Essie says.

"Well, I put him on your right so you could find out all about him first hand."

"Good girl."

"All I know about him is that he's with the Parks Department."

"Well. What kind of a job is that? He plants trees?"

Mary smiled her little smile, her secretarial smile. Mary Farrell's life is a mystery to Essie, despite all their years together. She comes and goes by subway, to and from her house in Kew Gardens where, as Essie gathers, she lives alone, arriving promptly at nine in the morning and leaving at five except, on nights like this one, when there is a party, when she stays a little later. There is much more that Mary does besides order the flowers and diagram the dinner table. She manages all the household accounts, pays the bills, pays the servants, remonstrates occasionally with Cookie as Essie has always called her cook — for a tendency toward extravagance, particularly for ordering chocolate truffles from Maison Glass, which Cookie does simply because she knows Essie likes them. Mary is a list-maker, and in her files are lists of everything Essie owns, each filed in its separate category — the silver, the china, the jewels, the furs, the dresses, the shoes, the hats, even the gloves, the books, the stocks and bonds, and of course the paintings. Mary answers all of Essie's mail — the endless entreaties from charities, worthy and unworthy — meticulously typing the business letters at her little desk, writing the personal ones in a stylish longhand on heavy linen notepaper. Mary balances Essie's checkbook, and does all her business at the bank. She handles the telephone on Essie's private line. The only thing that Mary refuses to do is walk the poodles, Mimi and Charlemagne. That, she says, is Yoki's, the butler's, job, and probably she is right. This morning, Mary has been busy addressing — in longhand, of course — the last of some seven hundred Christmas cards, adding personal notes where appropriate, and writing out checks to each of the building's thirty-seven employees - most of whom Essie has never seen — each in its proper amount, for their Christmas tips. In their years together, Essie thinks, Mary Farrell must have learned every secret there is to know about Essie and her family, and yet of Mary's private life — she must have been a nice-looking woman once; was there ever a lover? ever a husband? — Essie knows almost nothing at all.

Mary moves along the table with her list. "I didn't put Mrs. Schofield next to Mr. Carter," she explains. "I gave him Mrs. Martin Auerbach on his right." Mrs. Martin Auerbach is Christina, married to Essie's oldest son, Martin, who has always been called Mogie, ever since Harvard days when he was called "The Mogul."

"And next to her I've put Mr. Klein . . ." Mr. Klein is Joe, married to Babette, the younger of Essie's two daughters. "Then Mrs. McAllister . . . then young Mr. Josh . . ." Young Mr. Josh is Joshua Auerbach, Jr., Essie's grandson, her youngest son's boy, just out of Princeton. He has joined the family business and is doing very well, and Essie is very proud of him. "Then Mrs. Schofield . . ."

"Good. As far away from her tree-planter as possible."

"And at the opposite head of the table, Mr. Wilmont . . ."
Jake's place, Essie thinks. But Jake has been dead for fifteen years.

"Now, on *your* left I've put Mr. Josh, Senior, then Miss Linda . . ." Linda Schofield is Karen's daughter, home on winter break from Bennington, and the only Auerbach great-grandchild at the party. "Then Mr. McAllister, then Mrs. Klein, then Mr. Mogie, and then Mrs. Josh, Senior, who'll be on Mr. Wilmont's right."

"Good. She'll be on the right of the Chairman of the Board and won't feel slighted. You know how Katie gets."

The secretarial smile again. "Yes. Well, that's it, Mrs. A. One reason I thought it would be all right for Mrs. Schofield to bring Mr. Carter was that otherwise it would have been thirteen."

"I'm not superstitious."

"And it does even out the sexes."

The occasion is Essie Auerbach's annual Christmas tree-trimming party. It is not, of course, the grand affair that it once was, years ago when Jake Auerbach was alive, when extra caterers' tables and gilt chairs were set up in the long gallery, and when as

many as a hundred people sat down for dinner. In those days, with Iake's great influence, the Auerbachs' Christmas dinners had amounted to something like command performances for all the elite of New York's German Jewry — old Mrs. Lehman in her diamonds, and her nephew, the Governor, and old Mr. Lewisohn, who always wanted to sing the Lieder, and little Mrs. Loeb, so scatterbrained, who inevitably managed to get lost in the apartment trying to find the ladies' room and wound up in the butler's pantry dodging waiters with trays of food. And old Mrs. Warburg, who was hard of hearing, who shouted to compensate, and whom no one really liked, but who had to be invited because the Warburgs were — well, the closest thing to Jewish royalty New York City had ever seen, or so they seemed to think. Farther down the social scale came the Strauses, who owned stores but had "married up" into Guggenheims, and the Altmans and the Seligmans, nearly all of whom were in one way or another peculiar, but who were married to everybody who was supposed to matter. Through marriage, nearly everybody was related to everybody else — a number of them to Jake Auerbach himself - and there were double and triple cousins. Essie wishes she could say that she misses those kinds of entertainments, or any of those people — the women who wore long gowns and pearls for picnic lunches in the Adirondacks — but the fact is that she misses none of them at all. In fact, she can remember times when she actually despised — but no, it is Christmas, and she will try not to have uncharitable thoughts. But still, but still -

"I have them," she says.

"Beg pardon, Mrs. A?"

"Just thinking aloud, Mary. I mean I think I have them all memorized. Where they'll sit. Why don't you wind up, dear. You've had a long day."

"Well, then I think I'll say goodnight, Mrs. A."

"Goodnight, Mary."

Yes, Essie's Christmas parties are much smaller now, just the members of her immediate family. And Charles Wilmont, of course, who is almost like family — her children call him Uncle Charles — her husband's right-hand man at Eaton & Cromwell for all those

years. Yes, Charles is just like family and, in some ways, more like family than some of the rest of them.

On her way back to the library, Essie pauses in the large sitting room where the big Norwegian spruce has been set up on its stand, and where Yoki has placed a stepladder and laid out all the boxes of ornaments from all the other Christmases. Somehow, though Essie's parties have gotten smaller, there seem to be more boxes of ornaments, and strands of lights, and tinsel, each year. There are at least thirty cartons full of ornaments and, when these are all hung, those boxes will be replaced with the gift boxes, now stacked in crowded closets. Essie sees that Yoki has laid fires in both fireplaces, at either end of the room, which will be lighted while they are having dinner. Meanwhile, to give the room a welcoming aroma, the tall scented tapers have been lighted in all the heavy silver sconces and candelabra, and the heavy récamier silk window hangings have been drawn shut. This is the largest, and most formal, room in Essie's apartment, but it is perhaps her least favorite. The other rooms are smaller, cozier, more inviting. Once upon a time this room was called the ballroom, and Essie does not need to be told that ballrooms are seldom found anymore in New York apartments. The Aubusson rug, woven for the room, can still be rolled back for dancing and, in the old days, two concert grand pianos nested back to back for music. Now there is only one piano, and the rest of the room is filled with French sofas, chairs, and tête-à-têtes originally bought for the Chicago house. Still, the room seems cavernous. But what can be done with a room two full stories high, with paneling of carved gilt boiserie, in which are set painted views of Florence, with trompe l'oeil frescoes painted on the ceiling to represent medieval tapestries, and suspended, from huge carved plaster rosettes, with a pair of Baccarat crystal chandeliers? The room, with its massive scale, has always had a way of miniaturizing, and trivializing, everything — and everyone entering it. Essie rings for Yoki. "Let's put a small grouping of chairs around the tree," she says. "Otherwise, everybody will be all spread out."

"Yes, Madam."

From the library, now, Essie hears voices — more people have

arrived. She hears Mogie's voice, and the shrill giggle of Christina, Mogie's very new, very young wife who, Joan said (could it be true?), had until meeting Mogie been a Rockette at Radio City Music Hall. Then, from the elevator entrance, there are more voices — the others seem all to have come together. The two maids are collecting coats, Yoki, changed from his white coat into gray, is passing drinks. The party has begun.

The young man on her right, Mr. Daryl Carter, Karen's new friend, seems pleasant enough, and is even good-looking in a pale, thin, rather washed-out way. Karen, who is in her forties, seems to be picking them younger and younger, Essie thinks. This man appears to be in his mid-twenties, and seems quite awestruck. He has been fingering the silk lace tablecloth, lifting the heavy silver three-pronged forks and pistol-handled knives, doing everything but pick up the series of service plates to examine the markings on their undersides. Essie has tried to put him at ease. But he has been so full of questions that Essie has been unable to find out much about him.

"So you're Karen's *grand* mother. Gee. Your granddaughter tells me you once had dinner at the White House," he is saying.

"Well, yes, when my late husband was alive."

"Which President was it?"

"Well, in fact, we had dinner at the White House a number of times. The first President was Mr. Wilson, who was rather stiff, and then came Mr. Harding, and then there was Mr. Coolidge, and then Mr. Hoover."

"You mean all of them?"

"They used to consult my husband on economic matters. Of all of them, I liked Mr. Harding the best. They said he was a crook, but I found him very down-to-earth."

"Golly!"

"When Mr. Roosevelt came along, my husband fell out of favor."

"But still - knowing all those Presidents!"

"I actually used to dread them, those White House dinners. All the formality, all the protocol—"