ABSENCE OF PAIN

A NOVEL BY

BARBARA VICTOR

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PROLOGUE

The year is 1982. Two months of fighting between Palestinians, Lebanese and Israelis in Lebanon has produced a level of suffering that is incomprehensible to me. I am sitting on the ground somewhere near Sabra Camp in Lebanon, examining a guarantee that came with Joe Valeri's battery-packed Walkman. The screaming of women and children is only interrupted by the moaning of the sick and the wounded or the steady hum of bulldozers removing the dead. One year in the Middle East as a correspondent for an American television network and I am still unable to understand the reasons for so brutal a war. Yet, I am here to give explanations for the human carnage, the rubble-strewn refugee camps—to cover the story of this chaos that was once a society, to show the drama of human beings who once carried on the mundane functions of everyday life. I stand before the camera each day, backdropped by wide-eyed Palestinian children rummaging through the debris for a possession from the pile of ruins that was once their homes.

Sweet, frightened Joe Valeri, the man who produces the audio portions of my stand-ups in these war torn areas of Lebanon, listens as my voice drones on reciting the various features his guarantee offers. He presses me to continue, to speak louder, for he needs the reassurance of my words to block out the sounds of pain, grief and hopelessness. As I begin to read about a guarantee for life, I glance up and notice that Joe Valeri's head is no longer on his shoulders. Lifetime guarantee—the words barely leave my lips when I realize that my sound man is dead. Bits of what were once his head and neck are now scattered all over the ground and on my white T-shirt. I can't even scream. I can't seem to register anything that might even remotely connect me to what just happened.

"Lifetime guarantee" I repeat to no one in particular over and over until someone finally picks me up—arms under my arms and around my chest. A blurry image of a uniform is lifting me off of Joe Valeri. Looking down at myself, I see that I am covered by Joe. The uniform takes shape—a familiar Israeli general is holding me tightly and stroking my head. Burying my face against his shoulder, I can think of nothing until suddenly the nightly newscast flashes before my eyes. I will go on the air, bloodstained and covered with Joe. "Look what you've done to my sound man—you the American people who demand grisly reports of the suffering only for the purpose of recording the visual—never for an instant do you really comprehend the reasons for so senseless a war." Joe Valeri's Walkman is guaranteed for life. Why? I wonder, did Joe have a will? "I, Joe Valeri, hereby bequeath my guarantee for life to my friend Maggie Sommers since my life ended rather abruptly one morning near Sabra Camp in Lebanon and the guarantee still has about forty years to go."

Several hours later, in the bar of the Commodore Hotel in Beirut, the usual group of journalists are gathered around a table drinking themselves into a stupor. The Israeli general has still not left my side—a man I have known casually since the war began. Avi Herzog's hand is resting lightly on my shoulder, and while I am only vaguely aware of his touch, I am acutely aware of a pain inside of me that I can't quite locate. There are suddenly remote voices around me, drawing me into the conversation. "Pretty awful about Valeri—wasn't it? Brains blown out. A random RPG caught Valeri's head and suddenly no more Joe Valeri," someone says, snapping his fingers. Avi squeezes my shoulder reassuringly.

Much later, alone, nibbling a fingernail and staring at the peeling ceiling that is illuminated by one low watt light bulb, I remember my only session with a psychiatrist. Thirty minutes of the fifty-minute hour passed with only the sound of my muffled sobs.

"What do you want out of life, Maggie?" he asked.

"I want to be happy," I answered simply.

He didn't hesitate for a moment. Leaning forward, he said, "I can't promise you happiness, but if you maintain your dignity, I can guarantee you an absence of pain."

CHAPTER ONE

It was a Sunday afternoon in June 1969, when seventeen white doves flew out of their gilded cages in the grand ballroom of the Pierre Hotel. My wedding to Eric Ornstein was not only an important social event but also a guarantee to Father that he would continue to receive his yearly retainer as counsel to the prestigious Wall Street brokerage firm of Ornstein and Ornstein. Flowers were everywhere the day I walked down the aisle on Father's arm. "Smile, Maggie," he muttered. "This cost twenty grand."

He was still so bitter. He never forgave me the bad grades, the stolen lipstick from the dime store, the pregnancy that forced me to San Juan—oversized sunglasses and khaki army jacket—protesting the war in Vietnam but also protesting what was happening to me. The women's clinic in the suburb of San Turce with the porcine doctor who charged one hundred dollars per week of unwanted fetus after a hurried examination, remained a vivid memory.

Father and I were halfway down the aisle when he suddenly whispered, "Do you really want to go through with this, Maggie?" There was a glimmer of hope that he would spin me around so we could walk back up the aisle together and pretend this had never happened. Instead, Father said that after a while, a short while, passion died, and it was better to be well provided for, given my tendency to get fat. The man who had given me life, apparently without benefit of passion, was delivering me under the *chuppah* to a man I believed would rob me of my soul.

I concentrated on the *chuppah* because I was confused—my Jewish father, Russian Orthodox mother, baptism in the Episcopal Church, and now this—the *chuppah.* Standing underneath the elaborate canopy that was part of the ritual in any Jewish wedding ceremony, I noticed that it was less a symbolic roof than one of the most ostentatious overhangs I ever saw. Rows of white garlands

were interwoven with tiny sprigs of baby's breath and delicate rosebuds, all intricately arranged on a seventeenth-century embroidered tapestry that depicted cherubic infants spraying water into the open mouths of voluptuous virgins. Not particularly representative of Mr. and Mrs. Eric Ornstein's junior four-room apartment with eat-in kitchen and eastern exposure near Gracie Mansion—my new home.

Eric took my arm and gave it a squeeze. This stranger standing next to me, the man whose name was already on my passport, had clammy hands. Looking up at him, I hoped that we would never have daughters, but if we did that they wouldn't have his nose. I wanted to scream that this was some kind of terrible mistake, but the rabbi was already speaking in Hebrew. Perhaps I could claim that I never understood what he said, and the contract therefore wasn't binding. "Had I known, Your Honor, had I understood that this was forever, I never would have stood there while the doves flapped around in their cages, their excrement dropping precariously near to Eric's mother. And something else, Your Honor: I'm an Episcopalian."

I think I might have lost consciousness, because suddenly it was over and the rabbi was saying something about man and wife. It dawned on me that only seconds before, I could have simply walked away, apologized to everyone and exercised other options, but now it was too late—I was Sadie Sadie Married Lady. I might not get fat but I would have to account for my every move to someone named Eric Ornstein. I was doomed to a life without passion.

One of Eric's hands held me firmly at the waist, while the other began to fumble with my tiara and veil. My sister Cara, Eric's accomplice, was grabbing at my lace train—trying to reach the white taffeta and get it out of the way so my husband could kiss me properly. My own sister, a traitor, married with one child and currently swollen with another. Misery loves company, I thought as I twisted away from her nimble fingers, her tight grip on my shoulder. "Maggie," she whispered, "everybody is waiting for you to kiss him, untangle yourself."

Eric's wet mouth was pressed against mine, which was clamped shut, not allowing his tongue between my lips.

Everybody was waiting. Suddenly I was an actress, and this was my Academy Award performance: My entire career hinged on this particular scene. Letting the tiara and veil fall to the floor, I

shook my head ever so slightly, causing my hair to tumble from its chignon and cascade down my back. Give the people what they want, I thought, as I kissed Eric, my husband of thirty-five seconds, passionately on the mouth. The crowd cheered. "More! We want more!" I imagined wriggling out of my Bendel wedding gown, strap by spaghetti strap, until I am completely naked except for a white garter belt, lacy white stockings, and high-heeled white shantung shoes. Lying down, I prop my legs up on the platform, knees apart, and watch as the doves fly excitedly around the grand ballroom. Copulating under the *chuppah.* The guests are in a frenzy, clapping to the rhythm of Eric's strokes into my body, as the ice sculpture drips symbolically over the chopped-liver mold.

My fantasy ended. Holding on to Eric's arm, I walked slowly up the aisle, my hair in disarray, my train held by Cara's tiny daughter and an unidentified child from the Ornstein side of the purple velvet rope. I heard a rip as one of the children stepped on the material, but it didn't matter. That dress would never be worn again.

Mother had accomplished her self-proclaimed mission in life. She successfully married off her daughters to two unsuspecting wealthy Jewish men. The Sommers family conveniently forgot about the baptism at St. Andrew's, neglected to mention that Mother's side of the family was guilty of stomping on the faces of the Ornstein clan in czarist Russia, and never did inquire if Maggie really wanted to marry this man.

Peter Duchin and his orchestra were playing "Fascination" when we finally stepped away from the receiving line. Holding me tight and breathing heavily in my ear as we danced our first dance together as man and wife, Eric whispered, "I'm going to fuck your brains out tonight."

Everyone watched approvingly as we pretended to dance. Mother with her diamonds, Father with his bad cigar, Eric's mother with her heartburn, his father with the lecherous leer, and all the friends, the pillars of the Jewish community, celebrating what to me was a bad dream. Even Father's tennis partner was there, the ambassador from Thailand, who had voted against Israel in the United Nations that year; inviting him had been a democratic gesture on the part of the Sommers family. The other democratic gesture was to seat Jonesie, our beloved black housekeeper, in the front of the banquet room. And there I was—Marguerite Sommers, twenty-one, college degree in English Literature, aspirations of

being a journalist—dancing with a man who not only wanted my body but was also intent upon eliminating my brain.

Two days later, Eric and I arrived in Munich, where our honeymoon was about to begin, a planned tour of the concentration camps throughout Europe. Sitting in the hotel room that first morning, I thought about the horrors he wanted me to witness and wondered why I had accepted his decision. Munching on cakes and sipping *Kaffee mit Schlag,* I contemplated the insensitivity of the man with whom I now shared a bathroom. I was ashamed that I hadn't protested that decision, disturbed that it had never even occurred to me to try.

Eric hadn't yet fucked my brains out, because I was still able to think more or less clearly. His penetration of my body had, however, left me feeling nothing more than several moments of discomfort—similar to Dr. Drysdale's pelvic examination two weeks earlier to fit me with a diaphragm. In response to my cries of pain, Drysdale used a virgin speculum—another sham, since my abortion was a matter of record in my file. Eric's response to my cries of pain was only more heavy breathing and a strange guttural noise that alerted me to the explosion he was about to have—the one that caused his unborn children to slam up against the rubber wall of Dr. Drysdale's diaphragm. "Was it good, sweetheart?" he asked on six different occasions—six being the number of times that Eric released his fluid inside of my body.

"What's good, Eric, and how would I know, when my only experience with sex was with Skip Hollingsworth at college?"

"What happened with Skip?"

"It was after an anti-Vietnam protest rally, and we were dancing to the Platters—"

"Why?" Eric interrupted.

"Because they were singing 'I Am the Great Pretender.' "

"No," he interrupted again. "Why the hell did you go to a protest rally?"

So the conversation ended there, and I never did finish telling him how outraged we were by the war, furious at school policy and drunk on cheap sangria from a cracked punch bowl that had rotten fruit floating on top. It was just so natural to follow Skip up three flights of stairs to his cramped room in one of the Harvard dormitories, where he placed me gently on his small, rumpled bed. It would be a lie to say that I had no idea what was about to happen, but it

would also be a lie to say that I understood that "putting it in a little" was far enough. Two months later I was in Puerto Rico and Skip was graduating from Harvard. I hardly recognized him a year after that, when he grabbed my arm at the notions counter in Bloomingdale's. I hardly remembered it was his baby I had murdered that rainy morning in Puerto Rico.

Eric walked out of the bathroom where he had just taken a shower, a towel wrapped around his waist, and sat down. His chest and shoulders were covered with curly black hair, his olive skin still glistened from the steaming water and his face a mass of red blotches all over it. Looking at my husband, I could objectively admit that if he had a chin and if his nose were shorter, he wouldn't be that bad. It was just all that hair. He rubbed his hands together vigorously and proceeded to devour his breakfast. I was wrapped in a pink silk dressing gown, my left breast slightly exposed each time I reached for something on the tray, and my legs tucked up underneath me.

"Go easy on the cakes, or you'll get fat," he cautioned, and then added, "Can you be ready soon? I want to catch Dachau while the sun is right."

I looked at him in disbelief and tried again to understand why Dachau meant more to me—a technically non-Jewish fraud—than it did to my observant Jewish husband. But if Eric understood how inappropriate it was to view Dachau as anything other than a historical shame, he would have surely been my husband for life.

"I'm going to take a bath," I said, stretching.

Eric was studying me in that particular way he had that meant at any moment I would be facing the ceiling—a fish out of water, a caught flounder. Hunching over, I tried to invert my chest so my breasts, Eric's admitted weakness, were not standing straight out. But he wasn't fooled. He caught me by the wrist, pulled me over to the bed, and pushed me down. Murmuring several sentences I didn't quite catch, he proceeded to stroke my breasts and pop one nipple in his mouth while instructing me to hold his erect appendage in my hand. I didn't protest, because protestation took more energy than participation in Eric's assault on my body. I felt his thing, as he taught me to call it, pulsating within my grasp.

"Let go," he ordered, "or I'll come too quickly."

But I kept touching him, having caught on that coming meant going. Then, just as he was entering my body, I realized that I hadn't put in my diaphragm.

"Stop!" I cried. "Wait, I'll get pregnant."

"Never mind," he said between gasps. "So we'll have a baby. I can afford it." And then he listed in the space of time it took him to have his orgasm, exactly how much a baby would cost—including a maternity wardrobe for me, hospital, insurance, a nurse for the first six weeks, and tuition at a decent prep school and college.

How did this happen? I was trying to escape him by affecting my hunched-over pose when he somehow managed to impregnate me in the Three Ostriches Hotel in Munich, Germany. Stumbling into the bathroom, I could feel his warm liquid dripping down my thighs and knew that whatever hope I'd had to escape this life with him had just been dashed. I felt pregnant. There was no doubt in my mind, as I stepped into the bathwater, that I was two beings. There was no possibility that I had avoided those thousands of sperm that were, even as I scrubbed, swimming frantically upstream to trap my ovum. The desperation I felt at that moment was even more acute than my despair while listening to the words of the rabbi at the Pierre Hotel, only several days earlier.

Eric was whistling tunelessly as I walked back into the room, stark naked—brave because it was too late. He stepped behind me, his reflection visible in the mirror, and smiled. "Hurry, Maggie. I have a car waiting to take us to Dachau."

It was the first but not the last time I resisted him.

"I'm not going."

"What do you mean, you're not going? It's all arranged."

"It's just too awful to turn something like that into a celebration—our honeymoon. I can't."

"You'll do what I do," he answered. "We're one."

He was wrong. He was one. I was still zero.

"Maggie," he whined, "I wanted pictures of you there to remember." And who would get custody of those pictures, I wondered, during our divorce settlement?

"It was my camera," Eric would argue.

"Yes, but it was my smile frozen on my face in front of that memorial." We would battle it out right down to the last orange juice glass in the kitchen cabinet. It occurred to me that even though I was sure I was pregnant, there would never be a custody battle over the child. Somehow I knew there would never be a child.

He went alone to Dachau that day while I stayed in the room, trying to piece together a clue—anything that could explain how this had happened to me. I remembered the large house on Long

Island where I spent my summers as a child—it seemed so easy then. Mother printed those adorable invitations—"Summers at the Sommers'"—for all her extravagant garden parties. It was several hours before one of those events that they had one of their famous arguments. Maybe it wasn't so easy after all.

○

Cara and I were eating sandwiches under a large striped umbrella—on the patio behind the kitchen, while Father and Mother were inside, fighting. The sandwiches were piled neatly on a platter and placed in the center of the redwood table. The crusts were removed, and peanut butter and jelly, yellow American cheese, and tuna fish peeked out from underneath the usual Pepperidge Farm bread. Cara seemed oblivious to everything except licking the rim of jelly from around the sandwich she was holding. Straining to hear their angry words, I managed to catch the gist of what it was all about—a secretary who worked for Father in his law office. Mother was upset, threatening that if he continued whatever he was doing, she would leave. Not a word, I noticed, about us. Fins I wanted to yell. Who gets us? I was terrified by this mysterious intruder, who seemed to be suddenly very important in my life. Glancing at Cara, I noticed that she was still busy nibbling the sandwich from the outside in so that there was only a small circle left, which had barely any peanut butter or jelly on it.

"Cara," I whispered, "did you hear that?"

"Yes. So what?" she said, popping the circle of bread into her mouth and following it with one index finger, which would liberate the peanut butter that was sticking to her gleaming braces. I didn't realize then that Cara was in as much pain as I—that she was as frightened but had other ways of coping with that fear. Neither of us knew how to give the other comfort or strength, because there was no one capable of teaching us.

Mother stumbled through the kitchen door just as I was about to reach for a tuna fish sandwich. Father followed.

"Dumb shiksa," he screamed.

"I love you, Mother," I said, without even thinking.

She was blinded by her own tears as she ran toward the tennis court—never once looking back. Father sat down, and I marveled at Cara's ability to engage him in conversation about plans for the second half of the summer.

But individual survival was an integral part of living at the Sommerses'—every child for herself.

"Could I take tennis lessons at the club?"

"Yes," Father answered distractedly.

I interrupted then, because at nine years old I was not terribly well versed on the subtleties of male-female relationships.

"Why are you and Mother fighting?"

"We're not fighting," he snapped. "Grownups sometimes have disagreements—it's not fighting."

"But," I persisted, "what's a shiksa?"

"A shiksa," he said, without the slightest hesitation, "is someone who is stupid."

Even at nine, I did not accept either explanation. Years later, however, I learned that I had been mistaken—grownups *frequently* have disagreements; and to men like Father, shiksa *does* mean stupid.

○

When Eric failed to return to the hotel for dinner that night, I had that same gripping fear in the pit of my stomach that I remembered from my childhood—every time that Father turned his key in the front door to reenter my life at the end of a day. I never knew what would happen and when the fighting would start. I thought about what I endured at his hands—my father, who was Jewish when it suited him and non-Jewish when he mingled in Mother's world of displaced but titled Russian aristocracy. Jewish when he proudly pledged money at charity benefits in New York, where his valued colleagues reserved seats for him at their ten-thousand-dollar tables. Non-Jewish when he visited his oil-rich clients in Texas, who slapped him on the back at the end of an anti-Semitic joke.

There was some kind of connection between all of that and what happened to me as a child in that insulated apartment house on Fifth Avenue. I grew up surrounded by doormen and elevator men whose faces I learned not to recognize on the street when they were out of context and dressed in civilian clothes. I saw them as only servants of the rich—of my family and others like us and I was ashamed when they greeted me on Madison Avenue. Yet, I spent many more hours in their company than most tenants on those numerous occasions when Father refused to allow me into our

apartment if I returned home past the designated curfew. I shared my shame and disgrace of having to sit on that tattered leather sofa in the lobby with the late night doorman. The disgrace of dozing as the sun came up over those impenetrable buildings facing Central Park. Should I have tried to explain to Otis, the doorman, that it was perfectly natural for a young woman of my class to sit in the lobby all night? Should I have tried to explain that it was actually being done for his benefit—a sociological study in how the rich treat their offspring? Otis watched me sitting huddled in a corner of that tattered couch and looked pained. He would shake his head as he peeled an orange that he produced from a brown paper bag that Mrs. Otis packed for him. Otis would sometimes share his orange or even his Twinkie with me—chatting pleasantly until Father rang downstairs and instructed him to send me up. Upstairs before the neighbors who walked their dogs in the morning saw me. Upstairs before the mailman who carried the large leather pouch noticed me wilting in the lobby. Inside the apartment before the morning shift doorman came on duty and gossiped to the others in the building. I sometimes contemplated the actual extent of Father's cruelty—whether his opinion of the night doorman as the lowest form of life was worse than the fact he closed his youngest daughter out of his home because she returned ten minutes late from a school dance.

Waiting for Eric to return that night in Munich, I decided that Father's treatment of me had something to do with his own torment—that much I knew when I finally grew up and became Mrs. Eric Ornstein. But, how could I ever explain it to Eric—the man who bought the sham and facade of my rich and socially acceptable family—of the conflict and pain of this gilt-edged girl he had married? It was then that I had a vision that would haunt me for the duration of my marriage. I saw my tombstone clearly before my eyes—"Here Lies Marguerite Sommers, Beloved Wife of Eric Ornstein." Later, I learned to think of it as the final credit roll, then it was simply The End. Yet, I knew even then that I wanted more than Beloved Wife.

It began to make sense. I had always functioned as the abused child who defends her parents and denies that they were the ones who had inflicted the bruises on the frail and defenseless body. The ongoing battles with Father that I waged while protecting his motives, rewriting history because there was no other alternative. And Mother with her cold analysis of what life had dealt her, never hid her indifference and disapproval of me. Poor Eric Ornstein. And

that was exactly what I said to him when he finally returned that night. But he never understood.

"Poor Eric."

He looked bewildered, his hand still on the doorknob.

"It's not fair, is it?" I said softly.

"Many things aren't fair, Maggie," he finally answered. "But choosing not to be with me on our honeymoon comes under the heading of unacceptable behavior."

Although Eric finally stopped viewing the remnants of a gruesome period of history, I continued to ponder the memories of a gruesome childhood. We finally ended up at the Connaught Hotel in London, where my first impression of that city was the one that would remain with me always. I felt as an intruder in an exclusive men's club, crashing the gate into a world where thick cigar smoke, brandy snifters, and financial sections of newspapers excluded me from the mainstream of what was Eric's life. He had come to London to see people in the investment business and had made it very clear that I was to occupy myself during the daytime hours. And it was during one of my diversions that I wandered into the Scotch House looking for a kilt and met Quincy Reynolds.

She was everything I wasn't, the complete physical opposite, beginning with her petite frame, red hair, freckles, sparkling green eyes, and tiny voice. And she was deceptively tough, living proof that people could survive anything. Quincy had buried a child who began dying of a degenerative disease from the moment he exited her body. It was Quincy who finally made the decision to cut off the life-support system when her son lay in an irreversible coma—brain dead—for twelve weeks. And if that wasn't enough to endure in one lifetime, Quincy also survived a husband who informed her, after she had miscarried a replacement baby, that he was leaving her for someone he had met on an airplane.

Quincy viewed life as an obstacle course and managed—managed to be one of the most successful television agents in the business. She worked with her second husband, Dan Perry, a well-known tax accountant, who was also smart enough to realize that grief does strange things to people. He understood her need to succeed, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else. "Reynolds and Perry" was painted on the door of their office, and someone once wrote "Forever" in lipstick underneath. Neither Quincy nor Dan ever washed it off.

Quincy maintained that people could survive anything as long

as they had a sense of humor. That was what brought us together that day among the piles of Shetland sweaters and cashmere cardigans. As I rummaged through the merchandise spread out on one of the sale tables, I thought about my marriage. Eric had already grown weary of my lack of enthusiasm for anything he offered me as a reward for being his wife. Tears ran down my face as I realized that my marriage had already failed. He had even ceased asking me if the lovemaking was good, having understood that I endured his ardor rather than craved it. Quincy noticed me immediately. Ignoring my tear-streaked face, she said, "They ball up."

Glancing first at her face and then at the left ring finger of her hand, I saw with relief that she was wearing a gleaming gold wedding band. She had a husband—proof to me that she hadn't failed as a woman.

When I didn't answer her, she added, "Nobody is worth crying over."

"How do you know it's a nobody and not a something?"

"Because only a nobody can make a woman cry like that when all the cashmeres are on sale for half price." She smiled.

"What balls up?"

She looked puzzled for a moment. "The cashmeres. It's better to get wool blends."

We both laughed as we wandered through the wool blends, past the acrylic sweater vests, and finally outside to get something to drink. We found a small café, where we sat down and began to talk.

"What are you doing in London?" she asked.

"I'm on my honeymoon. We've just come from—" And I stopped, because how could I tell her what Eric chose for us to do as a celebration of our marriage?

"Were you crying over him or just because it's all so new to you?"

"I suppose I was crying because I just wasn't prepared for this. And now I don't think I'll ever be anything else but this: I can see the writing on the tombstone."

"You mean the wall."

"No, I mean the tombstone."

Quincy must have understood, because she didn't bother correcting me again or even asking what I meant.

"I'm in London," she offered, stirring her drink with a straw, "with a client. I'm a television agent and my client is doing a docu-

mentary on Windsor Castle. Everybody said it was impossible, since everybody's been trying to get permission for years."

I was fascinated. I had never met a woman who not only wore a wedding band but who also had a job.

"It turned out to be one of the most unpleasant experiences I ever had," she continued. "I managed to get permission from the Royals, marched my client into the American Broadcast Network studios here in London, and some bastard executive vice-president ranted and raved for an hour."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Simple. He was jealous, enraged that I got permission, when he'd been trying for two years."

"Why?"

"Because," she said impatiently, "that's what women endure in this world of male supremacy, and television is about the worst. What do you do?"

"I'm married."

"We know that." She grinned. "Remember I was the one who found you crying over the cashmeres. But what do you do for work?"

"Nothing."

"Well, that's ridiculous. Marriage isn't enough, especially when you're not happy. It's only two weeks, and already you're wondering what it's all about."

"And if I knew what it was all about, would that make it better?"

"Probably not. You should really think about doing something else. Are you interested in anything?"

I started explaining, slowly at first, because I was so unsure, but then the words began to tumble out. "I think I want to be a journalist—but world events. I think I want to be based overseas, where I could report on international politics or even cover wars."

She listened very carefully, taking in everything I said. "Do you want to write or do television?"

How did I know? It was the first time I'd even really talked about it, or made it enough of a reality to actually put all of those dreams into sentences.

"Television," I blurted out. The irony was that it was absolutely true—that was exactly what I wanted to do.

"How do you know you could do that? It's not easy."

"I don't know," I answered defensively—for I was already

fighting for a career that two minutes ago I didn't even know was possible. "But I'm sure if someone gave me a chance I could learn."

Quincy smiled again. "It's a tough business—probably the toughest to break into. I know because that's what I do, and I'm only in on the other end of it."

So there we were, having a conversation that began innocuously enough but was suddenly touching on something as monumental as what I had secretly been dreaming of doing with my life.

"I have to go now. I promised Eric I'd meet him at five, and it's already five." I didn't add that Eric Ornstein didn't like to wait for anything. And I also didn't add that I was clever enough to know that because I gave him little of what he demanded from me as a wife, the least I could do was not inconvenience his vertical existence with me.

"Let him wait," Quincy said. "He'll wait for five minutes, even fifteen, I promise."

Shaking my head, I stood up and tucked her card safely away in my wallet. "I'll call you when I get back to New York," I said.

I felt light-headed walking back to the Connaught, almost as if I had just committed an act of adultery. But what I had done was worse, because it was something that could alter my fate. And unlike adultery, it might not have that inevitable ending.

Eric was waiting for me in the lobby, sitting at a table and drinking tea. It was obvious that he was anxious, for he kept craning his neck in the direction of the entrance—waiting for me to appear, expecting me to be contrite when I finally did appear, almost fifteen minutes late.

"Marguerite," he said sternly, "never keep me waiting. I pay the bills in this family."

Two weeks and four concentration camps later and my husband already knew the rules of the game. I was only vaguely aware of being on the losing side.