Part One

Manhattan, 1928–1930

One

IT WAS THE SEVENTEENTH DAY of the ninth month of the year 1930. It had not been a normal year for anyone. The party atmosphere of the 1920s and the explosion of ideas—in arts, literature, science, lifestyles, and politics—had abated with the stock market crash. Hopes were being dashed along with fortunes. Yet people still clung to dying dreams. Nobody wanted to wake up.

Sinclair Lewis, attacking the selfish complacency of middle-class America, had just won a Nobel Prize for literature. In Russia, ushering in a new somber mood under Stalin, Maksim Litvinov had recently been appointed Soviet foreign minister. In the wake of the Big Red Scare, the works of Leon Trotsky were being banned by the city fathers of Boston. The death had been announced of Arthur Balfour, British statesman and author of the Balfour Declaration (championing the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine). An elated Nazi Party had gained its first major victory in Germany. People were singing "I Got Rhythm," "Body and Soul," and "Something to Remember You By." They flocked to Broadway hits like *Strike Up the Band* and *Girl Crazy.* Reflecting a new isolationist mood, *All Quiet on the Western Front* won the Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year. Amy Johnson's dramatic solo flight from London to Australia signaled a last hurrah for the daredevils of the 1920s. And everyone from beggar to billionaire was laughing over the comic-strip antics of *Blondie.*

It had rained lightly earlier that day in the city of New York. A mild thunderstorm at dawn had cleansed the summer dust from the parched streets of Manhattan, so that now a mist was slowly rising from curbside and stoop. At the pier of the White Star Line, along Manhattan's West Side, the luxury liner *Majestic*—so much a symbol of the glitter and the pomp of the 1920s—stood bedecked in multicolored bunting, waiting patiently at her berth as eager passengers and well-wishers crowded aboard. Everybody was anxious for a good time. Perhaps there would not be many more, so any opportunity for a champagne farewell party was not to be missed.

On the main deck, in one of the ship's luxury suites, Helene Rabinoff—known to everyone as Bluet, for the cornflower blue of her eyes—knelt down to open her trunk. Outside, the unseasonably hot summer wind was drying up more than just dreams. Life was going to be far different for her from now on. Usually, the noise and the bustle of a departure would thrill her with the anticipation of yet another journey with her husband, Max, to her beloved France and the excitement of dashing from one European capital to another, ferreting out new talent for his productions.

Highly volatile, the famous American millionaire opera impresario Max Rabinoff had devoted all his energies and his life to such a quest. Bluet had been his diplomat, the only one with sufficient tact, social flair, and understanding to knit all the explosive elements together.

Today she was alone. Only a few weeks earlier she had divorced Max after sixteen years of marriage. She had persuaded him with some difficulty to give her one year's alimony in advance so she could make the trip abroad. That had come to $3,000, a sum far in excess of anything she had personally ever held in her possession before. Max always kept a tight rein on the family purse strings. Though he allowed his wife to shop with abandon, he never permitted her to have her own money. Cautiously, she checked once again to make sure it was still there—a bundle of travelers' checks carefully folded inside the black calf handbag that lay on the satin bedspread.

Glancing around at the gleaming wood of her first-class cabin, she smiled briefly as she remembered the unexpected gaiety and warmth of the farewell party her friends had just given her. They had been in high spirits. This was even true of Dr. David Dubrowsky, who ran the Russian Red Cross in New York and who was the only one who really knew where she was going. She had told the others she needed some months alone to travel and think things out. It troubled her to have to lie.

Then there were the flowers. She had received so many lavish bouquets, she had not realized until now how many of her friends genuinely wished her well, even though she and Max were no longer together. Tied with red, yellow, and pink taffeta ribbons, they sat on a tall dresser in elegant crystal vases with tiny white cardboard message cards tucked neatly into the blossoms. Full-bodied chrysanthemums, tall gladioli, delicate roses, Bluet loved them all. The scent reminded her of her childhood in the Auvergne in central France. In the springtime and throughout the long, hot, torpid summer, the hilltops and the meadows would be ablaze with the colorful brilliance of wildflowers.

Helene (Bluet) Rabinoff, c. 1911

She picked up a half-empty champagne glass from the collection that stood on the low coffee table. Even though her guests had all left, she could still sense the buzz of their voices.

One final toast—to Marc. To their future. Together.

Trite, she chided herself, but true. Marc Cheftel, the magnetic but enigmatic Russian physician for whom she had abandoned Max, would have composed a far more original and pithy toast, probably a quip about the pious wags who would be set astir by the thought of such a respectable pillar of society as herself stealing halfway across the globe on a lover's tryst. She adored the boyish delight he found in setting the cat among the pigeons and watching the pompous elite wriggle uncomfortably in any situation that mocked their stuffy self-righteousness. For despite his quiet mien, his urbane appearance, and his impeccable manners, he was the most irreverent anti-establishment figure she had ever met.

Marc Cheftel as a young man

Though the end of the 1920s was at hand, all sorts of people were still chasing madcap dreams. It was the thing to do. The swirling and dizzying magic of the decade had not totally dissipated. Marc had been caught up in this atmosphere as much as she had.

Putting down her glass, she left the cabin to wander onto the deck to watch the familiar chaos of a departure. Deckhands, loosening fat ropes from their moorings, worked feverishly as dockside crowds waved and gawked and shouted their farewells at departing friends and relatives. Then, with the grace of a seabird, the liner gently, almost silently, slipped into the open channel of the murky Hudson. Glancing up at the cloudy, windswept sky, she worried about the unsettled weather—all the ingredients for a storm. She shuddered. She hated stormy seas.

She looked around. The three-funnel, 56,000-ton *Majestic,* the flagship of the White Star Line, was one of the most luxurious passenger liners of the

day. Built in Germany in the early 1920s, it sported all the finery and the trappings of that era: superb restaurants overstocked with lavish and exotic foods, deck tennis, movies, plush nightclubs, cocktail bars decorated with outrageous motifs, expansive lounges with tall picture windows. There was just about everything for its passengers' pleasure, from caviar to calisthenics. The *New York World* assigned a reporter aboard each journey merely to report on the gossip. And just one year earlier, amid feverish publicity, a ship-to-shore telephone had been installed.

Yet this time she was somehow unimpressed with all the finery. There was no escaping the guilt she felt about leaving Anna, her sixteen-year-old daughter, even temporarily. She was equally uneasy about turning her back on her comfortable and familiar world of servants, opulence, and a glittering social life, to embark on a romantic adventure that hardly befitted an elegant matron of thirty-eight. She was, after all, no longer a starry-eyed youngster. With difficulty, she choked back a sudden and unexpected flood of tears.

She was sacrificing a way of life. Yet without Marc, it had lost its flavor. She had become so overwhelmed by a consuming passion for the man that there was no possibility of making any other decision. The thought of saying good-bye to Marc was impossible to face. Their affair had become too special. With time her enemy, she feared it might never be recaptured. So she opted for the path her emotions dictated. And in doing so, she was equally willing to blind herself to the stark realities of the life that she might have to face in Moscow.

BLUET RABINOFF was a petite French woman standing only five feet tall, with hair the color of ripened wheat, an hourglass figure, and such finely drawn features that her picture had appeared in *Beauty* magazine only a few years earlier. She was considered a vivacious coquette, exquisitely chic in clothes that were custom-made by her personal dressmaker in Paris. Even her shoes, an incredibly small size three, were hand-sewn for her in France. Since she traveled to Paris with Max at least once a year, she scorned American ready-to-wear as assembly line and commonplace.

Though she and Max had drifted apart in recent years, mainly due to his neglect, constant bullying, and the vulgar flaunting of one new sexual conquest after another (usually a singer he would seduce with the cliché of a promised role in an upcoming production), their lives radiated glamour and excitement.

Since Max not only possessed a fluent knowledge of Russian, but also claimed extensive familiarity with Russian business affairs, in addition to his cultural activities, he had been appointed an adviser on Russian matters to the U.S. government in 1917, immediately after the Bolshevik revolution. He attended the Versailles Peace Conference and the equally important Genoa Conference of 1922, serving as a liaison between the Russians and Americans. He acted as the official representative of the newly organized Estonian and Azerbaijan governments. Though not avidly political by nature, Max employed his diplomatic credentials more as an opportunity for a wily entrepreneur like himself to edge his way into the lucrative markets he was confident would blossom between the United States and Russia—a country recognized for its enormous untapped natural resources, as well as for one hundred million potential consumers. Max tended to gravitate toward those portions of the business and the diplomatic worlds that would provide him with the highest profits, the most grandiose headlines, and the jauntiest publicity.

Thus, to their wide circle of performers was added an increasing number of diplomats and politicians. Parties at their triplex apartment adjacent to Central Park at West Sixty-seventh Street, and occasionally at the permanent suite Max maintained at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, were the envy and the talk of both the concert and the diplomatic world—a heady brew of glamorous names and powerful statesmen. Even this was not all. Max had recently introduced a third element: the crowd from the Amtorg Trading Corporation, those secretive Bolshevik Russian traders who were slipping in and out of the country on a wide variety of missions.

It was one of the most fascinating and cosmopolitan circles in the city of New York. Few could resist the excitement and the sophistication of an invitation to dine with the Rabinoffs. Max enticed everyone with his showman's charisma and the glamour that regularly surrounds a leading man of the theater.

Bluet attracted them with the quality of the evenings. For, undoubtedly, she was the one who reigned supreme over the glittering setting. Even Max recognized her as a jewel in this respect. She was charming and a scintillating conversationalist, and she possessed a delicate grace that enchanted everyone she met. It was she who set the tone of evenings that were inevitably full of fun, laughter, and refinement.

All of which was in total contrast to Bluet's own lowly beginnings among the hill folk of the Auvergne, a rustic region where the weathered timbers are

blacker, the grass grows taller, and the scent of pine and fruit-filled orchards leaves indelible impressions of nature at its most bounteous. Her early childhood had been spent in the care of a foster mother she called "maman," an illiterate peasant woman with enough maternal warmth for the needs of a dozen children. In the Augerolles, a group of medieval granite and cobblestone hamlets where they lived, everybody had been accepted for what they were, with never any pretense; for their weaknesses, as well as for their strengths; for their learning or even for their unschooled peasant wisdom. Poor or rich, it did not matter. There was enough kinship to go around.

But they were a passionate lot, those people of the mountains. Like the torrential rivers of the spring, the violence of the thunderstorms in summer, and the whistling winds of winter, their characters were in harmony with their surroundings: stronger impulses, stronger characters, stronger voices. They loved more deeply, cried more bitterly, and laughed more heartily than those from less dramatic settings. Indeed, had it not been so, she might have been better able to resist the current temptation.

It was at her Manhattan home, at one of those magnificent dinner parties, that she had first met Marc almost three years earlier. Max always made a point of welcoming newcomers from Moscow and introducing them into his circle of highly placed Americans in politics, banking, industry, and the arts. This would continue throughout the years between the Russian revolution of 1917 and the official American recognition of the not-so-new Soviet regime in 1933.

Marc had just arrived in the United States to head the Russian Red Cross mission in New York—an outpost seeking to raise funds and purchase modern medical supplies for a people recently ravaged by famine and civil war. The mission was spearheading a humanitarian effort on behalf of all Russian people. Max had a special admiration for such vital work, volunteering his services to gather a distinguished array of artists for benefit performances.

That particular night the Rabinoffs were giving a formal dinner party for fourteen guests at the long refectory table in the huge downstairs living room where they did all their entertaining. To step into that room, friends would tell Bluet, was like stepping across the Atlantic into Paris. She had decorated it with period pieces she had carefully selected in France and had shipped to New York. The floor was polished parquet and scattered with oriental rugs that were rolled aside for dancing after dinner. Paintings hung in ornate gold frames over crimson damask wallpaper—an eclectic mixture

of Serge Soudeikine's theatrical interpretations (this particular Russian émigré painted much of the scenery for Max's productions), pastoral French landscapes, nudes, portraits—anything and everything that came their way. But if there was an underlying theme to the art, it was one of strength and passion. "Nothing safe . . . nothing proper," as Bluet would express it.

Yet concerning the etiquette of her dinner parties, Bluet was very proper indeed. She was much taken with manners, courtesies, and grace, believing they reflected the care that one individual took toward the sensibilities of another.

On this occasion the table had been set with one of the hand-embroidered tablecloths that the commercial attachés at Amtorg had been trying to peddle in America for desperately needed dollars—cloths that had been painstakingly patterned by Russian peasant women into intricate designs of foliage and native birds, representing the natural beauty of each province. The blending of colors in those linen-and-lace tablecloths was a visual delight.

The china was blue and white from Bluet's own native Sèvres, and the tableware was pure British sterling. Even the crystal wine and champagne glasses were the finest the Bavarians, superior in glass blowing, were producing. As a finishing touch, tall twisted candles had been placed at each end of the table, name cards sat at each place setting, and a spray of fresh orchids served as the centerpiece. To ensure the smooth flow of the meal, a button bell was hidden under the rug at Bluet's regular spot at the end of the table, so that servants could be summoned at exactly the most propitious moment. But all this effort was not entirely her own idea.

As other first-time guests, including important bankers, had been invited on this occasion, Max had insisted upon everything being just so. Bluet therefore gave orders to the French couple who ran their household that there should be no skimping on the groceries, ordered by telephone as usual from Park & Tilford, the "corner grocery store" preferred by the city's elite. For the main course she had chosen rack of lamb with tiny new potatoes in butter and parsley sauce. Each guest would also be offered a side plate of fresh asparagus, as it was early in the spring and asparagus was in season.

Briefly that morning she had taken a few minutes to see her thirteen-year-old daughter, Anna, off to the Lincoln School, considered one of the more progressive private schools in Manhattan and one heavily patronized by the avant-garde. Anna was a conscientious student with a natural inclination toward the theater, a field she had already shown a desire to enter. Bluet was tremendously attached to her daughter. One of her obsessions, friends would

say, was being a doting and devoted mother. There is no doubt that Bluet lavished so much affection and time on her only child because her own mother had abandoned her as a baby to the care of a foster parent, being too wrapped up in her life in Paris to be bothered with the care of an infant.

After seeing Anna off, Bluet took a leisurely bath and dressed. She pored over the morning mail and attended to housekeeping matters—including the evening's schedule—with the servants. At that time she employed a household of five: a French couple, an austere but devoted governess from Paris they called Mademoiselle, a maid, and a chauffeur.

That evening Bluet chose to wear a black chiffon sleeveless dress that clung close to the body. It was cut provocatively low in a steep V at the front and had a layered, pleated skirt starting at the hip, with a hemline finishing a shade below the knee. The opera crowd was known for its formality of dress, and Bluet preferred to keep it that way.

Max also took infinite pains dressing for these occasions. His reputation for flamboyant attire had led a reporter to mockingly describe him as "Tamerlane or Genghis Khan without the turban." Gold rings adorned his fingers. He favored raspberry-colored shirts with a matching cravat, a diamond stick pin, and studded cuff links. Around his neck he regularly wore a twisted rope of gold. A fob watch dangled from a breast pocket on a gold chain. When outdoors, his fedora, worn at a rakish angle, was not only his personal trademark, it was part of the legend of Max Rabinoff, dandy-about-town—"the impresario who looked like an impresario." It would trigger imitations of a Max-like character that would embellish the theater and entertainment world for decades to come. Here was the original, the man who initiated the legend—a caricaturist's dream.

Max's obsession was his bushy mustache. He regularly had it curled and set with hot wax by one of his young office girls. Since his office was in his house, it was a convenient arrangement. Max was the sort who could never keep his hands to himself, and he inevitably managed to run them all over the young assistant. It was an exercise that obviously gave Max pleasure, but it sorely irritated his wife, since he did not even have the good taste to refrain when she happened to pass by. It did not matter if the assistant was a niece or a cousin, as was often the case, provided she was female and attractive.

Although Max lavished jewelry worth at least $30,000—a small fortune in 1928—upon Bluet over the years, she felt uncomfortable decked out in too many jewels. She considered it inelegant and ostentatious. That night she

Max Rabinoff

chose a pair of plain gold circle earrings, a small round brooch of twisted gold, and a gold bangle bracelet.

Had it been one of the theater parties that she and Max often gave, she would have added her favorite white silk shawl with the long tassels and a silver filigree evening purse. These were the other kind of parties the Rabinoffs had become popular for giving, the kind where invitations would be sent out to guests in advance, with tickets clipped to a card on the inside of the envelope. Everyone would be requested to gather in a reserved section of the theater, usually upstairs, and enjoy an opera or a ballet performance by one of the newest companies that Max had imported from Europe or Russia. Later they would return to the house for a buffet supper, dancing, and much animated conversation.

But on this particular night the guests had been invited by telephone and would be arriving at eight. As they filtered in, they gathered for cocktails around a magnificent grand piano that took up an entire section of the Rabinoffs' large living room. They were a talented group, and it was not uncommon for someone to extemporaneously start up a tune, most often something by Irving Berlin or George and Ira Gershwin—also friends of Max.

Since they were a crowd that loved to keep up with the latest books, not to say the latest fads, Bluet knew her guests also secretly hoped to rub shoulders with John Galsworthy or Sinclair Lewis, two Nobel Prize–winning novelists equally well-known to Max. They gossiped excitedly about the latest daredevil flights across the North Pole and high-profile rescues from mountaintops and underground caves. They were especially taken by the fact that religion was losing its grip and churchgoing was being tolerated only so long as the preacher finished in time for a Sunday drive in the newest and most popular acquisition of all: an automobile. They were equally full of chatter about the most recent innovations in radio, something still experimental called television, and the latest electric gadgetry for the home. Talk was fast-moving, exhilarating, and chock full of new ideas.

Such was the scene when Marc entered Bluet's home for the very first time.