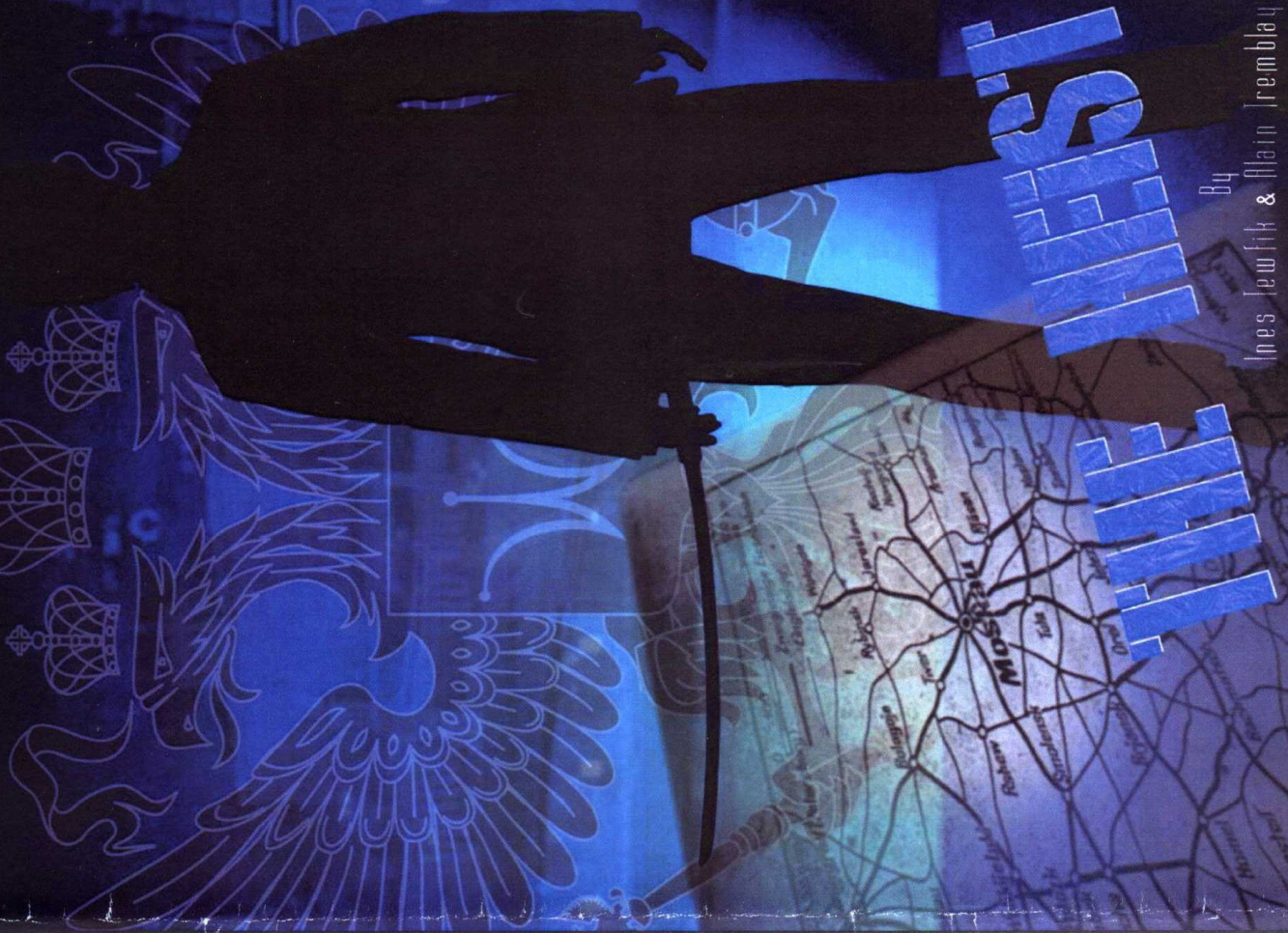


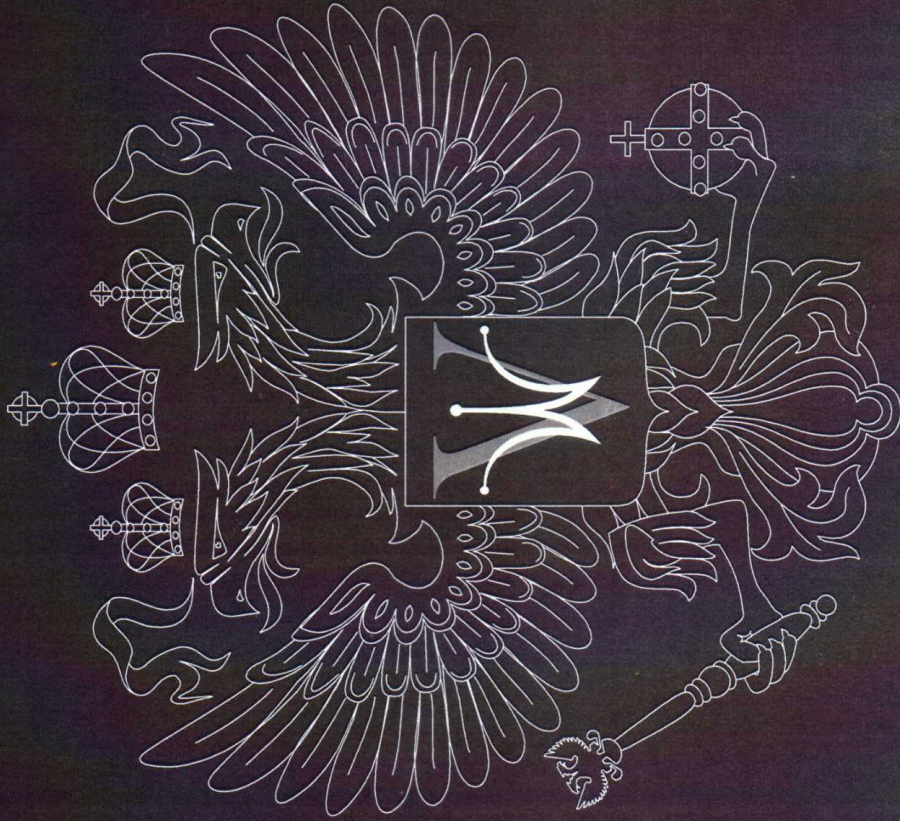
F a s h i o n R o y a l t y



THE BEST

By Ines Lewfik & Alain Tremblay

THE BEST



The Jason Wu Event V:

THE BEST

The Black Russian Affair

Chapter 1

Nobody knows how or when the Eye of Prussia came into the possession of Duchess Anastasia of Montenegro, widow of Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich of Russia. It was presumed that her late husband had acquired it during one of his many hunting trips in Asia and Africa, but Her Grace had always refused to say. It was only known that she wore the dazzling ruby publicly for the first time at her husband's funeral in 1897, surrounded by exquisite marquise diamonds and mounted on a beautifully-designed gold ring, causing a bit of a stir as it glimmered almost shockingly against her widow's weeds.

After that, she wore it daily and it was whispered that she never took it off, even to bathe or sleep. No one knew why she had named it the Eye of Prussia, but she did and that was that. The Duchess was known to be somewhat eccentric with a tendency towards mysticism, which combined with her considerable charm, not to mention her illustrious family and fabulous wealth, added to the mystique that surrounded her wherever she went. Thus, it was hardly out of character for her when, exactly one year to the day after the death of her husband, during a visit to the home of her dear friend Countess Mariane Perrin of Monaco, Her Grace presented the magnificent jewel to her hostess, saying only that as she had no children of her own, she wished to ensure that the Eye of Prussia would remain in worthy hands.

Her generosity was amply repaid many years later when the Duchess managed to escape the carnage that accompanied the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, in which almost all of her relatives were killed. After a long and

perilous journey by land and sea, she arrived at the home of her friends the Perrins, where she was warmly welcomed into their family and set up in a luxurious guesthouse on their vast estate where she lived out her remaining years in comfort. Indeed, the Duchess' new home became a vital cultural and social base for the community of White Russian émigrés in Monaco and nearby France. She also doted on the Perrin children and they adored her.

Many decades later, Russia has drastically changed. From the ruins of the Soviet Union, a new class of ruthless, rapacious predators has emerged with an insatiable craving for wealth and power at any cost. Among them is an extraordinarily beautiful young woman who uses the name Tatyana Alexandrova and claims to be a direct descendant of the Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich and thus would be the rightful owner of the Eye of Prussia.

Little is known about Tatyana's background, other than that she is the fabulously rich heiress of one of Russia's so-called oligarchs, who managed to amass a huge fortune during the decade that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall before being killed in a car explosion one lovely spring morning. Tatyana was his only child and he doted upon her. Neither Tatyana nor her father ever spoke of her mother and thus nobody else did, at least in their intimidating presence.

Over the years, Tatyana became obsessed with acquiring the famous ruby, partly because she half-believed the superstition concerning the jewel's magical ability to protect and empower its owner and partly because she had almost managed to convince herself that she was indeed descended from aristocrats. In her mind, her claim as a Russian was far more legitimate than that of an American former jazz singer, even if she was the glamorous Countess Jerrica Perrin, who had received the jewel from her mother-in-law, the previous Countess.

After being repeatedly frustrated in her attempts to convince the Countess to sell her the Eye of Prussia at any cost, Tatyana finally lost patience and decided to steal it. As she had many times in the past, she turned to the talented and unscrupulous Takeo Mizutani.

Takeo shared Tatyana's craving for money, his only discernible weakness. Otherwise, he was almost godlike in his accomplishments and abilities. Breathhtakingly handsome, brilliant, cultured and charming, he was also a ruthless and highly-skilled criminal. He and Tatyana made a formidable team that had never failed to achieve any of their objectives so far. In this case, induced by Tatyana's promise of an enormous financial reward, her objective became Takeo's objective: to steal the Eye of Prussia.

Chapter 2

There would be no better time than the annual Perrin Charity Ball, one of the rare occasions when the famous jewel was taken out of the Countess' secret hiding place and worn in public. The Countess spared no effort to make this event as glamorous and exciting as possible for the illustrious guests, who in turn, would be expected to donate generously to help a number of desperately struggling orphanages in Eastern Europe.

With the Ball less than six weeks away, Takeo began to formulate a detailed plan for infiltrating the Perrin estate in Monaco and escaping with the famous and well-guarded ruby. As part of the plan, he carefully cultivated the lovely Kyori Sato, whom he knew was on the guest list for the Ball. Kyori was no ingénue, but even she was no match for the devastating charm and good looks of Takeo. It was almost too easy: entranced by Takeo, Kyori wasted no time in abandoning her longstanding boyfriend Darius in favor of her exciting new relationship.

Meanwhile, when he was not working his spell on Kyori, Takeo located and studied every article and photo ever printed about the Eye of Prussia and every documentary or film in which it had appeared. Using one of his old and trusted contacts in the Yakuza, he secretly ordered an exact replica of the ring, using glass and crystal instead of the gems in the original.

On the day of the Ball, he was ready. Takeo's every move was meticulously choreographed in advance: he managed to position himself and Kyori in the middle of a long line of guests forming to greet the Countess, who was graciously welcoming them to the Ball. Soon, the moment had come and Takeo was elegantly bowing before the Countess. As she held out her hand,

the practiced thief smoothly slipped the ring off her finger and simultaneously dropped the fake ring on the carpet at her feet. He was already several feet away when he heard the gasps and agitated murmurs, followed by sighs of relief, which indicated the success of his maneuver.

After that, he relaxed and enjoyed the rest of the Ball. He knew there was no chance that the fake would fool the Countess for long, but he was counting on the evening's distractions to prevent her from discovering it until after the guests had left. Knowing that he would soon be discarding the delightful but no longer useful Kyori, he generously devoted the remainder of the evening to ensuring that she had a memorable, enchanted time.

Several hours later, exhausted but happy, Jerrica Perrin finally reached her suite of rooms, heading straight to her enormous bathroom entirely covered in rare blue marble and appointed with solid gold fixtures. Carefully locking the door behind her, she went to the wall behind the bathtub and gently pressed an ornamental gold "P" that was embedded in the marble, which opened to reveal a keypad. She keyed in a six-digit code and gazed at the ring she was wearing, while a cunningly hidden safe silently emerged from its hiding place behind one of the large marble wall tiles.

In dawning horror, Jerrica realized that the gem on her hand lacked the depth and fire of the Eye of Prussia. She told herself that she needed more light, but her trembling hands and the sick feeling in her stomach belied her denial of the truth. Barely managing to walk on legs that were suddenly too weak to support her weight, she stumbled to her bedroom and dialed the number of her daughter Veronique's room.

Chapter 3

Soon Veronique, her younger sister Vanessa and their cousin Eugenia, who was spending the night at the Perrin mansion, were gathered in Jerrica's bedroom, trying to comfort the inconsolable Jerrica while trying to suppress their own shock and grief.

She dialed the police, who arrived within minutes in the form of two detectives, one an older man with rough features and sad eyes, the other a much younger man whose bravado poorly masked the obvious fact that he was intimidated and awed by the Perrin women, no less than by the grand Perrin family home.

The two detectives asked a few questions and took notes. They requested and were given the guest list, as well as the names of the caterers and household and security staff. Then they stood up to leave. Veronique stood up with them to escort them outside. After she shook their hands and as the younger policeman went down the mansion's front stairs to the car, the older one turned to Veronique and said in a low voice, "Madame, I'm sorry to say this, but based on what you've told us, there's almost no chance that the police will be able to catch this thief and return your property."

Veronique looked at him silently, waiting for him to continue. The events of the evening had left her feeling numb and exhausted, but she instinctively trusted him. After quickly checking to see whether the younger policeman was within hearing distance, the man went on. "With this kind of situation, the guests are among the main suspects," he said. "The police are unfortunately subject to all kinds of influences, particularly the political kind. From what I've seen of your guest list, chances are that a lot of weight is going to be

thrown around, messing up any possibility of a proper investigation." His sad eyes bored into hers. "If you want to solve this crime," he said carefully, "you will have to try...alternative channels." He held out his hand. In a louder voice, he said, "We'll let you know if we need any more information or if anything turns up." Veronique took his hand. "Thank you, detective," she said gravely.

Veronique waited until the police car was gone, then turned and walked slowly back inside the mansion. She found the other women sitting grimly silent in the parlor, her mother's chest heaving with her struggle to breathe.

"I need to make a phone call," she said into the tense silence.

"Agnes, we need your help," she said tersely into the phone, ignoring the startled looks of her sister and cousin. Her mother merely stared at her. "I know, I'm sorry it's late, but this is an emergency." Veronique continued. She quickly explained the situation to her friend, the Baroness Agnes Von Weiss, then answered a few questions before thanking her and hanging up.

Vanessa, looking exasperated, burst out, "What on earth can Agnes do?"

"More than anybody else I can think of," answered Veronique mysteriously.

"She asked me to give her a few days and she should have a good idea who took the Eye of Prussia by then." Veronique noted the way her mother winced painfully at the mention of the missing heirloom and went to her, bending down and enfolding her mother in a warm embrace. "Don't worry, please Maman, I promise we will get it back," she whispered, desperately praying that she spoke the truth.

Three agonizing days passed, during which none of the Perrin family were able to sleep or eat, wracked with worry about the Eye of Prussia but even more frightened by the rapid deterioration of Jerrica's health. The family doctor was called and he prescribed sedatives to calm her nerves, expressing serious concern about her blood pressure.

Then, on the evening of the third day after the fateful Ball, Agnes finally called back with some possible answers. "Veronique" she said in a brisk, no-nonsense voice that would have amazed many who thought they knew the seemingly scatter-brained Baroness, "I checked out the auction houses that contacted your mother about selling the Eye of Prussia and though it wasn't easy, I found out that the same person was behind every one of those requests to sell: Tatyana Alexandrova."

She continued, ignoring Veronique's soft exclamation of surprise. "Well, it makes sense, doesn't it? The Eye of Prussia is not exactly a typical piece of jewelry that can be fenced just anywhere. For the moment, I'm ignoring the possibility that the thief went to the trouble of stealing it only to have it repossessed, again for now, that the thief coveted the stone's beauty and mystique for him or herself and that indicates a very wealthy thief, possibly with serious emotional issues.

"Tatyana!" Veronique exclaimed in a daze, for the first time feeling a surge of hope. Since Veronique had recently heard of the Russian "socialite's" shady reputation from one her contacts, this at least would give her a place to start. "But she couldn't have stolen it by herself; she must have had an accomplice."

"Yes, well..." said Agnes, "your guest list turned up several interesting names, but one in particular struck me as especially intriguing."

"Who?" asked Veronique.

"Does the name Takeo Mizutani ring a bell?" asked the Baroness, "He was the escort of Kyori Sato at the Ball."

"That's right. I was surprised that she'd been invited, but I checked with Maman's secretary and found out that she had somehow been put on the list. I did notice that Kyori was with a very attractive man that night, but he wasn't familiar to me."

"Would it surprise you to know that Kyori's date who, according to my very reliable sources, is a shady character with an extensive background in international crime, happens to be very cozy with Tatyana and indeed is suspected of having carried out various jobs for her before?" asked the Baroness.

"Wait a minute. First, tell me: are you saying that Kyori was somehow involved in this?" asked Veronique.

"I'm not sure, but I suspect that Kyori was used by Takeo to get him inside your home. Apparently, he broke up with her almost immediately after the Ball and she's taking it very hard." The Baroness paused. "In fact, I was thinking that you might want to pay her a little visit."

"We're not exactly friends Agnes, as you well know," said Veronique dryly.

"Haven't you ever heard the expression 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend'?" responded Agnes.

Veronique sighed. "I'll give it a try. Is that all for now?" she asked.

"For now," answered Agnes.

"Agnes, I have to be getting back to my office tomorrow afternoon at the latest. I've been gone far too long already and the phone calls from some of the staff are getting frantic. But I'll stop off to meet you in Berlin tomorrow

morning on my way to Paris, alright? Say, ten o'clock. I'll ask Adele to join us if she can. Could you ask Giselle to come too?"

"Consider it done darling," promised the Baroness. Véronique thoughtfully hung up and then dialed again. The voice that answered was sultry and breathy. "Luchia, it's Véronique."

"Oh, it's you, cara" said Luchia, in her normal voice reserved for women, and even then, only those she knew well. "I was so sorry to hear about what happened at the Ball."

"How did you hear about that? We've done everything possible to keep the news from getting out," said Véronique in a tone sharper than she had intended.

"This is Luchia, cara mia, from whom there are no secrets. Believe me, it's not common knowledge. Now, how's your mama holding up?"

"Oh Luchia, she's not well at all. She's tortured with guilt over what happened and it's affecting her health," Véronique explained. "That's why it's so important that as few people as possible know about what happened; I don't know how much more stress she can take."

"Ah, that's terrible!" exclaimed Luchia "Is there anything, anything at all I can do?"

"Well, actually, there is something," answered Véronique. "Could you get me the private phone number of Kyori Sato?"

"What? That creep?" exclaimed Luchia. "Why?"

"Don't ask why, Luchia, just get it for me as quickly as possible, ok? Add it to the long list of favors I owe you."

"Eh, what list?" Luchia said dismissively. "Besides, for your mama, I'd do anything. We artistes need to stick together, no?"

Véronique smiled. Luchia was a burlesque 'artista' and her mother had been a famous jazz singer in America before she married the Count Perrin of Monaco. "Ciao, Luchia, I'll be waiting for your call."

"Ciao, bambina!" answered Luchia gaily. "You won't have to wait long." And she didn't. A few minutes later, she was dialing Kyori's number and praying that Agnes was right. She was. Kyori was still fuming and badly hurt by Takeo's rejection and only too eager to help in any way that would make him suffer, even if that meant joining forces with her foes, the Perrins. Kyori's ability to speak Japanese and her contacts in the Asian underworld would eventually prove useful in bringing down Takeo Mizutani. But that was not Véronique's priority right now. First, the Eye of Prussia needed to return to its rightful owner. They agreed to meet in Agnes' office at ten o'clock the following day.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of activity for Véronique, as she called in favors from friends and acquaintances around the world, while somehow managing to answer questions and give instructions by phone and fax to her staff at the W Cosmetics headquarters in Paris. It was nearly midnight as she fell into her bed, instantly drifting into a dreamless sleep.

By six o'clock the next morning, she was already showered and dressed, drinking her third espresso while putting the finishing touches on her plan. Satisfied that she had done all she could, she climbed into the limousine that would take her to the airport, where her private jet waited to fly her to Berlin.

composers played by a talented chamber orchestra, to a magnificent buffet featuring classical Russian dishes interspersed with mountains of red and black Russian caviar, to the décor of the restaurant, which for the occasion resembled the interior of the imperial palace in St. Petersburg, was carefully designed to evoke the opulence of the Russian Empire.

None but the hostess suspected that this lavish celebration had a guest of honor which glittered against the pale skin of her delicate hand as she regally welcomed her guests. The mysterious red fire that burned deep within the Eye of Prussia seemed to heat Tatyana's blood, giving her a feverish glow that made her famous beauty even more entrancing. Her euphoria translated to her guests and even the most jaded and cynical among them were infected with an almost child-like excitement, as they took in the magical ambience with heightened senses that owed much to the expensive champagne that flowed continuously into their glasses.

Even Chief Inspector Boris Ivanovich of the Moscow Police Department did not appear immune to the excitement that surrounded him. On his usually stern face was a small smile that on him seemed positively giddy. He was accompanied by a stunning girl whom he introduced as Nancy, his American niece, on a visit to Russia in search of her family's roots. Tatyana was flattered and even more surprised that the Chief Inspector had accepted her invitation. Smugly, she marveled at how few people, even incorruptible police officials, seemed irresistibly attracted to money and power – even when these belonged to suspected criminals.

Nancy seemed very young, barely out of her teens, but moved with the assurance and grace of a professional model. She looked like one too, with her flawless complexion, almost too-slim body and exceptional height. As she entered the reception, she gave a dazzling smile to one of Tatyana's security guards stationed at each entrance and was pleased to find that he dazedly smiled back, his granite-like features softening. After mingling with the other guests for several minutes, she made her way back to him murmuring "hello" as she wafted past him, lighting a cigarette on her way outside. "You shouldn't smoke," he said to her in his heavily-accented English, obviously trying to make conversation. "Don't you know it's bad for your health?" He smiled, so she wouldn't think he was being judgmental. "I only smoke outdoors," she answered, smiling back. They chatted about the differences between America and Russia as she finished her cigarette and she went back inside. Nearly every half-hour she made her way outside. Sometimes the body-guard was too busy to talk to her, but he always nodded and smiled when he saw her.

Meanwhile, the party was beginning to wind down inside. The sinfully rich dessert buffet was but a pleasant memory and coffee and tea were

Chapter 4

When she arrived at the lush offices of Von Weiss International at ten o'clock, she was immediately escorted to its main conference room, where she found the others already seated and waiting for her. She went to Agnes first and embraced her, whispering "Thank you," and then she did the same with her dearest friend Adele Makeda, then Agnes' younger sister Giselle, then her own cousin Eugenia and her own sister Vanessa before turning to Kyori and hugging her as well. After a slight hesitation, Kyori warmly returned the embrace.

Looking pale but determined, Véronique then stood at the place reserved for her at the head of the conference table and prepared to outline her plan for recovering the Eye of Prussia. As she was about to speak, the door opened to admit two giggling young women, one of whom cheerfully apologized for being late. Véronique caught herself staring, even though she knew them well – she never could seem to get used to their dazzling beauty, nor their incredible resemblance to each other. She recovered quickly, however, and smiling indulgently said, "Thank you Lillith and Eden for coming. Please have a seat." And then she told them about her idea.

Three weeks later in the heart of Moscow, a dazzling array of Europe's glitterati gathered at the exclusive Russian Tea Room for what promised to be the most exciting event of the season. Outshining them all was their hostess, the stunning Tatyana Alexandrova, who had spared no expense to make this evening unforgettable. The theme was "Russia's Glory" and everything from the delightful music of Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov and other Russian

being served. Suddenly, the chamber orchestra stopped playing. Into the silence burst the thunderous steps of a troop of Russian dancers dressed as Cossacks, accompanied by dizzying music. As the guests enthusiastically applauded, the dancers whirled and stomped and leaped in time to the music, punctuated by shouts of joy. They were magnificent.

When one of the dancers held his hand out to Tatyana, bowing deeply on one knee, she did not hesitate. Laughing happily, she took his hand and began whirling in time to the music, surrounded by the shouting dancers. Soon, the other guests had joined the dancers with their arms around each others' shoulders, cheerfully imitating their steps.

It was only after several minutes that Tatyana sensed that something was very wrong. She glanced at her hand and felt her stomach drop as she realized that the Eye of Prussia had disappeared. Her anguished scream of rage cut through the room like thunder, paralyzing guests and staff alike and causing a shocked silence to echo through the restaurant.

The burly bodyguard at the door had been gazing appreciatively at Nancy's figure as she smoked pensively a few yards away when he heard Tatyana's scream and he instinctively rushed inside. "Nobody move!" yelled Tatyana, out of her mind with fury. "Security, lock all the doors and make sure nobody leaves this place! Now!" Suddenly all business, the bodyguard assured himself that Nancy was back in the restaurant, looking confused as she stood next to her uncle and that nobody was outside before he locked the door.

The next few hours were a nightmare, as Tatyana and her bodyguards frisked and searched each guest and meticulously combed through the entire building, refusing to let anybody leave before they had found the ring. Even Chief Inspector Ivanovich and his niece were thoroughly searched, with his permission. The ring was truly gone, seemingly swallowed up into thin air.

A new day was dawning by the time the bedraggled and humiliated guests were finally allowed to leave, hoping only to put the nightmare of this ordeal behind them, cursing the day they'd ever accepted an invitation by Tatyana Alexandrova and swearing never to make the same mistake again.

Several hours later at the Perrin mansion in Monaco, the telephone was ringing. "It's for you, My Lady" said the butler to Countess Jerrica Perrin, who was drinking her morning espresso on her upstairs terrace, "Lady Véronique."

"Darling, how are you?" she said, smiling gently into the telephone.

"I am very, very well, maman!" Véronique's voice was triumphant. "We did it! I'm calling from Paris but I'm coming straight home. I should be there by this afternoon and I'll tell you everything then." She continued, unable to help herself, "It's over, it's over maman, everything is back the way it should be! I can't talk any more now, but I'll tell you everything when I see you."

Countess Jerrica felt a surge of happiness greater than she'd ever thought possible. It banished the terrible guilt and feelings of failure that had been slowly killing her and filled her with life again. She smiled and for a moment, she was once again the radiant beauty who had captured the heart of a dashing count.

Turning as she hung up the phone, Véronique held out her arms and enveloped Lillith and Eden in a big embrace. "Thank you, thank you so much, Lillith and Eden," she murmured against their shoulders. Then she looked up mischievously, glancing from one to the other. "Or should I just call you both 'Nancy' for short?" Happy laughter burst out of Agnes, Giselle, Adele, Vanessa, Eugenia and Luchia, who had all gathered in Véronique's office to receive the joyful news.

"Luchia" said Véronique, "please give my warmest regards to Chief Inspector Ivanovich and to his talented dancing police officer. I owe him so much and I fully intend to thank him in person as soon as possible."

"Take your time, cara," laughed Luchia with a wink. "I'm looking forward to thanking him and thanking him and thanking him, in my own way of course, until you do."

The End.