

Defenders: Russia – chapter 12

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

Seth has agreed to take Alexei’s Fabergé egg to St Petersburg next week, so that he can place it in the Romanov crypt and Alexei can rejoin his mum and dad. As a thank you, Alexei promised to send Seth and Nadiya to the England v Belgium match last night, where the two children were planning to have a fantastic evening at the World Cup. But plans don’t always play out the way you intended...

Двенадцать

‘Aren’t you disappointed it’s the second team playing?’ Nadiya asked Seth. ‘No Kane. No Trippier. No Lingard.’

They were sitting pitchside in the Kaliningrad Stadium. The national anthems had just finished. Southgate and Martinez standing just in front of them.

‘A bit,’ Seth said. ‘Are you?’

Nadiya shook her head. ‘No. I think the players who haven’t had a game yet need game time. And....’ she paused, ‘...if the first team don’t play tonight then Southgate can prepare them to train for either Japan or Colombia tomorrow.’

‘True,’ Seth agreed.

The first half was calm, apart from Belgium nearly forcing the ball over the line, after Pickford had it kicked out of his hands. Seth was loving the sound of the England band and England fans singing. Loving the flags and banner. Loving the floodlights’ glare as the sky turned from blue to black.

When the half-time whistle blew, Seth turned to Nadiya again.

This is amazing,’ he said. ‘Did you ever imagine we’d do something like this?’

‘Watch England in the World Cup finals?’ Nadiya asked. ‘Er... no.’

Seth grinned. He felt great.

‘But we need to talk about the crypt,’ Nadiya counselled.

Seth shuddered involuntarily. The crypt. That word. It sounded dangerous.

'We do,' he admitted.

'So, I've done some research on it.' Nadiya told him.

'Go on.'

'It's in a beautiful church in St Petersburg,' Nadiya explained. 'There's a chapel attached to it. That's where Alexei's parents' remains are. People still go there and put flowers on the tombstone. All of Alexei's family are there – apart from him.'

'So, it's like a normal church?' Seth said, feeling the sympathy for Alexei that had made him decide to help the Russian boy. 'Maybe it'll be easy to get into. Do what I need to do.'

Seth saw that Nadiya was shaking her head.

'What?' he asked.

'The remains of most of the Tsars of Russia are in there, Seth. It'll be guarded like the crown jewels are in England, but times 100. We'll have to come up with an amazing plan, like something out of a James Bond movie.'

'But one that no-one would expect children to do,' Seth nodded, standing up. 'Once this match is over we'll give it everything we've got. But, before that, we need snacks.'

Nadiya stood too. 'I'll go. I need to go to find the ladies.'

'Okay,' Seth said, sitting down again.

Seth gazed around the Kaliningrad Stadium and took in the colour and light and sound of 10,000 conversations discussing whether either manager would bring on a substitute for the second half.

Then, just for a second, he thought he recognised a face in the crowd.

A woman.

Maybe it was just someone he'd seen earlier in the crowd. It was hard to be sure, because the woman turned and walked away with another person, both of them wearing white England vests.

Then a sudden noise. So loud it shocked Seth. Cheering.

The players were coming back on to the pitch. Seth watched the England team to check there had been no substitutions. He saw a 6 on the back of an England shirt.

'Maguire,' he said to himself. 'For Stones.'

England had made one change at half time.

‘Come on Nadiya,’ Seth said, checking his watch. ‘Where are you?’

He scanned the crowd and the entrance she had disappeared down when he’d seen her go.

Then a sudden chill came over him, like someone had poured icy water down his back. Where was Nadiya? Surely something was wrong? She wouldn’t have been gone all this time.

He stood up.

He looked around the stand.

When he had finished, he saw one of the World Cup stewards was right in front of him, holding a piece of folded paper.

Seth took it.

‘What’s this?’ he asked.

‘From woman. Two woman,’ the steward told him in faltering English.

‘Thank you,’ Seth said, as he began to unfold the note.

What was this?

It was to do with Nadiya.

He knew it would be bad.

If he had put his friend in danger, he would never forgive himself.

Nadiya has been gone too long and Seth instinctively knows that she is in danger. The note he has just been handed must be related to Nadiya’s disappearance. But what does the note say? Is this going to affect Alexei and his plans for next week? And – most important of all – where is Nadiya?

Chapter 13 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published before 7.30 am on Monday 2 July.

Thank you to the schools in New Zealand and Australia for following the story. We know you break up today. Your pupils are welcome to follow the story from home, by registering. Also, don’t forget a full printed version – with some dyslexia-friendly features – and certificates will be available later in July.

World Cup word of the day

Involuntarily

