

Defenders: Russia – chapter 14

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

Seth is hiding outside the house of the women in black, hoping that, when they next leave the property, he will be able to break in and rescue his friend. What Seth *doesn't* know is that Nadiya is not even in the house; she is back at the St Peter & Paul Cathedral, trapped in a stone tomb with no chance of rescue unless Seth hands the Fabergé egg over to the women in black.

Четырнадцать

It was mid-morning before the front door to the house of the women in black opened. Seth had been watching it since waking at dawn: waiting for this moment. He leaned forward to peer through the trees and bushes that obscured the building, his whole body aching from lack of sleep.

With the door open, Seth saw inside. There were no lights on in the house, even though all the curtains were drawn and only one window, above the porch, was open.

It was the strangest looking house Seth had ever seen. Pieces of the wooden cladding on the outside were hanging loose: it appeared as if vines or branches were growing inside the brickwork.

Once they had passed his hiding place, Seth followed the women in black for a mile along the banks of the Neva River. Then he quickly turned back.

This was it: he was going in.

Nadiya woke to find herself still in darkness. She took a sip of water. It tasted as stale as the air in the tomb. She closed her eyes and concentrated on trying not to panic.

Back at their house, the women in black long gone, Seth jogged into the garden, concealed by overgrown bushes. He climbed up the tree nearest the house, then lifted himself onto the top of the porch and through the open window.

Seth found himself in a darkened corridor, the smell of dust so overpowering that he sneezed, then listened out in case other people were in the house.

Nothing. No one. He was convinced he was alone.

Seth didn't waste time, taking his search from creepy room to creepy room. How long did he have before someone returned? All the furniture was ancient. Wooden mostly. Some was so old it had collapsed and yet it still lay there, as if nobody had been in the house for a century. A dressing table without a leg, the contents spilled out over the floor. A wooden chest, its front collapsed inwards. Both covered in a thick layer of dust.

Huge cobwebs hanging down, catching Seth's hands, hair; sometimes his mouth. He felt sick, like the cobwebs were like fingers trying to cling to him. And the smell. Musty. Like the air had died decades ago.

In the fourth room he entered, Seth found a set of six framed photographs on the wall, each taken in different times in the garden of the house he was in. He recognised their different eras from the vehicles on the road behind them – from horse-drawn carriages to glossy modern black limousines.

Each image showed a pair of women staring at the camera. Their faces looked similar. And Seth understood. The women: they were all related. The two women from today were granddaughters, maybe even great-granddaughters of the pair he had seen at the Romanov execution.

Then Seth looked at the last frame on the wall. It was a photograph. Of him.

Nadiya closed her eyes again. She was waiting until she heard someone before crying out. There was no point in wasting energy. She would conserve it. She knew that, as long as she was trapped down here, she had only a finite amount of energy. And time.

Seth searched the whole house. Every room, every cupboard, every corner.

No Nadiya.

As he moved around he noticed strange shapes in mirrors or glass-fronted cabinets. He knew he was seeing someone dead. The blurry shape looked like a face. Seth had no desire to know who it was. He could not be distracted.

In the last room Seth discovered the strangest thing of all. A World Cup wallchart. A large one – in Russian. A mirror at the centre. In front of the mirror and wallchart were candles. A burner with incense too. Dried leaves. A dead mouse, stretched out next to the wings of a small bird. A saucer of red liquid scabbing over.

Seth felt something catch in the back of his throat. An acidic sting, but he forced himself to study the wallchart. Each of the round of 16 games had something stuck into the flag of one of the teams. Seth took a closer look to see needles with feathers that had been dipped in something red.

‘Blood,’ Seth said involuntarily.

He checked the pierced teams. Argentina. Portugal. Spain. Denmark. Mexico. Japan. Sweden. England. What was this? Some sort of curse? And why those teams?

Seth hesitated, remembering that he would normally have been excited about England’s game against Colombia, making it to the last 16 of the World Cup. It would have consumed his every waking minute.

But that was before all this.

His mind went back to the wallchart? What did it mean?

The needles? The feathers? The blood?

Then it came to him.

The first four teams with a needle in them had all lost. It was Monday today. Did that mean Mexico and Japan would lose tonight? And what about tomorrow? Did it really mean England would lose to Colombia?

As Seth stared at the shrine – or whatever it was – he looked again at the mirror there and could, at last, make out the blurry face he had been seeing.

It was Alexei. And he was shouting, gesticulating. Seth read his lips.

‘You’re too late. They’re here!’

Seth turned, looked behind him as the door to the room opened and froze as he saw the two women in black, one lifting a pistol to direct it at him.

Seth bolted. Hard up the stairs, legs exploding with pain as he took three steps at a time, gasping in air to fuel his lungs, along the corridor with the crumpled furniture, table legs scattering across the wooden floorboards, past the photos of the women, and of him, onto the next staircase, the first step collapsing, his leg snared, pulling it free, running on to the top of the house, the attic, scrambling round invading branches and splintered roof beams as footsteps hammered hard behind him.

Seth heard a gun shot. The window next to him exploded. They were shooting at him. He was at the top of the house now. A skylight. Nadiya was not in this house. He had wasted a whole day and night looking for her here.

Seth lunged towards the skylight, his only way out now, to find his exit was blocked.

The women in black were already there.

How had they done that? He felt his leg muscles crumple, his lungs gasping for air, his heart hammering a hundred hits a minute.

They had him.

It was over.

Can Nadiya find a way to escape before she runs out of stale bread and warm water? Will Seth get out of the crazy house alive? Will he work out that Nadiya is being held captive in a tomb in the St Peter & Paul Cathedral? And what was that shrine about with the needle going through the England flag? Are England going out of the World Cup tonight? Find out in tomorrow's episode.

Chapter 15 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published before 7.30am on Wednesday 4 July.

Please note there will not be a vote tomorrow. The next and final vote will take place on Friday 6 July. Many thanks.

World Cup word of the day

obscured

