

Defenders: Russia – chapter 15

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

Seth is being held at gunpoint in an attic after breaking into the women in black's house in St Petersburg. Nadiya is entombed in the St Peter & Paul Cathedral with no hope of escape. Alexei is fading fast, his spirit energy almost gone. And, thanks in part to Seth as you will soon see, England are through to the quarter finals of the World Cup. But beyond that, has Seth's quest to save his two friends failed?

Пятнадцать

Seth swallowed. Was this it? The end?

One of the two women in black was glaring down the barrel of the pistol she had trained on him. Angry now, Seth returned the woman's glare and raised his eyebrows, daring her to shoot.

'You have one last chance,' she said. 'Deliver the Fabergé Egg to the St Peter & Paul Cathedral by 10pm tonight. Or your girlfriend will die before midnight.'

Seth wanted to say: 'She's not my girlfriend.' But something stopped him.

Seth didn't want to anger them.

The other woman in black moved out of the doorway and allowed him to pass. Seth remembered that they would not kill him until they had the egg: they had too much to lose.

Seth walked down the dilapidated staircase and – before leaving the house – revisited the room where the bizarre World Cup wallchart had been. He plucked the needle out of the England flag and stuck it into the Colombia flag. The game wouldn't kick off for a few hours. Maybe, just maybe, he could influence the result. Then he smiled and did the same with the penultimate game, moving it from the Sweden flag to the Swiss flag.

Then Seth White, a slight smile on his face, was on his way: he had something to do and he couldn't mess it up this time.

Nadiya was sleeping. Without light or sound or anything else for her senses to feed on, she dozed for longer and longer, her breathing shallower and shallower.

Later that afternoon, Seth left St Petersburg station with the Fabergé egg in a small rucksack. He was astonished by the railway station; its grand entrance and cavernous interior, stonework painted gold, stained glass windows, all seemed more like another cathedral than a transport hub.

Once or twice, when Seth caught sight of a blurry face in a mirror or a reflective window in the station, he would stop and look, only to see the face fade quickly. He knew this was Alexei Romanov trying to communicate with him. But he also knew that the Russian prince was powerless to help him now.

Outside the station was a sea of yellow, blue and red. Huge numbers of women, men and children flooding towards Seth over the bridge from the island. Football fans returning from the Sweden v Switzerland knockout game.

Seth held his rucksack in front of him, anxious not to lose the Fabergé egg, his last chance of saving Nadiya's life.

There was chanting and laughing and, on the faces of those wearing blue and yellow, huge grins.

Now Seth knew that, if England beat Colombia tonight, they would be playing Sweden for a place in the semi-final of the World Cup.

Seth could barely take any of that in. His mind was sharp and focused on one end: to hand over the Fabergé egg to the women in black and save Nadiya, while at the same time condemning Alexei's spirit never to join that of his parents. Seth had no real choice – Nadiya had to come first. But he felt terrible about what he was doing.

Seth checked the time on the big screen in the fanzone in the large public square. It was 8.55pm. Time for kick off. When he heard the English national anthem he felt hairs go up on his arms. Not because of the football. But because he was doing what he was doing for his friend. If it inspired the players to hear their national anthem before they took part in a big game like this, then it could help him now.

Because Seth's game was a matter of life or death.

By the time Seth reached the St Peter & Paul Cathedral it was 1-1, the game in extra time. Passing a bar he glanced inside to see images of Colombian players surrounding the referee and pushing him.

Unbelievable, Seth thought to himself.

Then the screen changed. Now all Seth could see was Alexei Romanov's face. The Russian boy spoke weakly, but clearly enough for Seth to hear him.

'Save her,' the boy said. 'Not me.'

Then the screen was showing football again. Penalties. It was penalties. Seth felt a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. That penalty feeling. But enough of that. Seth had to forget the World Cup. For now. He walked across the square to the cathedral, the weather dry and hot, and he felt a bead of sweat trickle down his back like an insect.

Seth exhaled long and hard.

The time had come.

Hearing female voices, Nadiya stirred and lifted her head. Nothing. She opened her eyes and took a sip of water, finishing the bottle. Now she stared at the darkness above her. She had just drunk the last of her supplies.

Walking into the St Peter & Paul Cathedral, Seth shivered. The huge metal doors looked forbidding, but he was able to ease in through a small entrance.

Inside it was dark and quiet and cool. It felt to Seth like his senses had been muted.

As his eyes adjusted Seth saw them: two women in long black coats, or capes, standing at the far side of the Romanov tombs: a line of stone boxes on the floor, surrounded by an iron fence.

There were flowers strewn on the tombs. More than before. Seth knew why: in two weeks it would be the centenary of the Romanovs' executions.

Seth walked towards the women. He wasn't going to try anything. He knew the best way to save Nadiya was to give them what they wanted as soon as possible. He noticed that one of them had a walking stick and wondered if she had hurt her leg on her splintering staircase. But that was just a stupid half-thought and he dismissed it.

'Forgive me, Alexei,' he said under his breath as he listened to his own footsteps' echo, the only sound in the church.

Up close, Seth looked into the women's sullen faces and handed the Fabergé egg over. Now he saw their eyes light up as they caressed it, as if it were a long lost favourite pet animal.

'Our family has waited 100 years for this day,' one of the women whispered. 'It is our history.'

Seth demanded. 'Where is my friend?'

He watched as the two women smiled at each other, then he shivered again. But not from the cold.

Then – before he could react – the stick that one of the women was holding whistled through the air. He heard a crack echo back off the cathedral walls. And then he was down on the cold marble floor. Dazed. Trying to get up onto his hands and knees.

He'd been struck. Hard. And could only watch as the two women walked away.

'My friend?' he shouted after them.

'Will die,' one of the women finished his sentence.

Seth had been tricked. They had never intended to tell him where Nadiya was.

He tried to get up, but still couldn't make his legs and arms work. He felt weak, so weak.

Then two things happened. Together.

Colours and light flickered around Seth, reflecting off the walls. And his phone. A message alert coming in. Still concussed, Seth found it hard to make sense of it all. He wondered deep down if he was losing consciousness. Or worse.

He looked at his phone and read *England win on Penalties!*

And, as he did, he heard a noise, rattling or banging. He looked up to see the women in black at the door to the cathedral. They couldn't open it and now they were gazing at something beyond Seth.

And the look on their faces betrayed their utter terror.

Terror of something they had seen above the Romanov tombs.

England have won and are through to play Sweden in the World Cup quarter final. But it means next to nothing to Seth. It is what is happening in the cathedral that matters for the moment. The lights. The sounds. The look of terror on the women in black's faces. What now? For Seth? For Nadiya? For the women in black? For the Romanov spirits?

Chapter 16 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published before 7.30am on Thursday 5 July.

Chapter 17 of Friday 6 July will end with a vote.

Another note to teachers...

Thank you for the very kind enquiries about if *Defenders: Russia* will be published! Sadly it won't because it is not really good enough for that format and was never intended for publication because it is being written day by day, to be read aloud. So you may have noticed, I have broken a few grammatical rules and used different sentence formats to make it easier for all the teachers across the country to "perform" it. I also hope it helps to make the story more "real", confirming that it is really happening now and making it easier for you to quickly identify with the main child characters Seth and Nadiya.

To understand a bit more about how books like those in your school library were published, we've put together *Tom Palmer's Guide To How Books Are Made* (a 1 page worksheet with answers) downloadable from <http://tompalmer.co.uk/world-cup-2018-literacy-resources/>

Thanks to La Mare school in Guernsey for the spectacular idea about Seth moving the needles.

World Cup word of the day

trickle

