

Seth and Nadiya emerge from the St Peter & Paul cathedral in St Petersburg, having helped reunite Alexei Romanov's spirit with his family. The threat from the women in black is gone. But who is inside the sleek silver limo that is approaching them? And what does it mean for Seth and Nadiya in the last week of the World Cup finals?

Восемнадцать

Nadiya and Seth walked out of the Cathedral into the beautiful Russian night. Stars glittering in the black chasm of sky above them. Soft piano music coming from an open window. And the Neva river running silent and strong below the bridge the pair were crossing.

As they walked Nadiya pointed out a small pack of dogs.

'Strays,' she said.

Seth stopped and watched them. One of the dogs, with a black and white face and pricked-up bent-over ears was looking directly at him. Seth squinted to look more closely. The dog had something about it. An aura? A presence? It was hard to explain, except that it was a little like one of the echoes from the past Seth would sometimes see. But different.

Seth normally saw ghosts of Vikings and Romans and Iron Age people; not spectres of *animals*.

Suddenly a slick silver car drew up to drive slowly alongside them, obscuring Seth's view of the dogs.

Seth and Nadiya began to walk faster. An instinctive reaction.

To danger.

What now? Hadn't there been enough?

Then the window rolled down and a familiar face peered out at them.

Seth glanced out of the corner of his eye. He could not believe who it was.

'Mum?'

Mum explained everything in the car. She had been approached by the British embassy in Moscow. They said a mystery benefactor had offered to pay for her to fly in a private jet to Russia, then put her and the two children up in a spectacular apartment in central Moscow. For a whole week. As well as that they would have all the food they needed, a swanky limo to take them where they wanted to go, a helicopter for longer journeys and tickets to all England's remaining games.

Seth and Nadiya were so astonished by the idea of seeing England's last matches, that neither of them saw the black and white-faced dog chasing after their car as it sped out of St Petersburg.

The flat was posh. Seriously posh. The taps in the three bathrooms were made of gold. The wallpaper was crushed velvet, which looked luxurious in the light of every room's chandelier. There were four staff to welcome them. One on the door, one in the kitchen and two serving and cleaning. Every curtain, TV screen and other device was voice-operated.

The apartment had a bird's eye view of Red Square and over some high walls into the heart of Russian power.

The Kremlin.

Seth and Nadiya had no idea that, in three nights' time, they would be breaking into the building on their most dangerous ghostbusting mission of the World Cup.

Game day. Saturday. Samara, Russia.

When Dele Alli headed in the second goal, Seth and Nadiya leapt out of their front row seat.

2-0.

England were going to the World Cup semi-finals. It was really happening.

After the crescendo of noise from the England fans, Nadiya turned to Seth.

'We're actually here!' She exclaimed.

'Are you sure?' Seth asked.

Now Nadiya was laughing. 'No.'

Seth's mum chose that moment to take a photograph of the pair.

'Just so you believe it when we get home,' she said.

Events after the game were amazing. The England players came running over to the fans and right up to Seth and Nadiya. Harry Kane was first, throwing his captain's armband into the fans. Nadiya caught it, but saw a small girl beside her looking crestfallen that *she* hadn't caught it, so Nadiya handed it to her.

Later, Mum took photos of Nadiya and Seth singing the national anthem with thousands of others, Gareth Southgate photo-bombing in the background conducting the singing.

'Have we really got tickets for the semi?' Seth asked his mum.

'Back in our apartment safe in Moscow,' she said. 'I'll show you after the chopper ride home.'

'This is about as fab as it gets,' Seth turned to Nadiya. 'I mean, after all that crazy stuff the last few weeks, we're living the dream. Match tickets. Limos. Helicopters.'

Nadiya laughed. 'Don't say that. You never know what's round the next corner.'

Nadiya's words would prove to be prophetic.

Just hours later after they had travelled back to Moscow, landing on the helicopter pad just next to St Basil's Cathedral, Nadiya, Seth and his mum walked across Red Square towards their apartment, seeing Gary Lineker and Alan Shearer come the other way.

But Seth had no time for Lineker and Shearer: he'd seen the St Petersburg dog again. Hundreds of miles away in Moscow.

It was sitting by the eternal flame, a monument that burns forever on the edge of Red Square to remember all the Russian soldiers who have died in battle.

'What's up?' Nadiya asked, noticing his hesitation.

'That dog,' Seth pointed. 'Can you see it?'

Nadiya shook her head. 'Just leave it, Seth,' she said. 'Come on. Please.'

'Give me a minute,' Seth replied, leaving his mum and Nadiya as he walked towards the dog. 'It's a dog. I miss Rosa. And, if you can't see it...'

Seth walked slowly and smiled at the dog, sitting calmly watching him approach.

'Hey boy,' Seth said gently.

The dog stood up, stretched and eyed him. And then it spoke. 'I'm not called Boy. I'm called Laika.'

Who is Laika? What does she want from Seth and Nadiya that she would follow them across a continent? Is she alive – or a ghost? And... did she just speak? Find out more in Chapter 19.

Chapter 19 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published before 7.30am. on Tuesday 10 July. There will be 22 or 23 episodes in total with the last one being on Friday 13 July or Monday 16 July.

The final result on Friday night was more than 99% in favour of option II, carrying on with *Defenders: Russia*. Thanks to all the children for voting to keep the story going. And to teachers, librarians and parents for helping make that happen.

Several schools have been asking about whether there are any other books featuring Nadiya and Seth. There are three. More information about them here:

<http://tompalmer.co.uk/defenders/>

