

Defenders: Russia – chapter 13

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

Seth realised that Nadiya was in danger when she didn't return during the Belgium-England game. His fears were confirmed when he was handed a folded note. He dreaded opening it, but knew he had to.

Тринадцать

To Mr Seth White of England

We have taken your girlfriend. We know you have the Romanov Egg. It is worth 20 million US dollars to us and we will do whatever it takes to get it. If you do not bring it to the Peter & Paul cathedral in St Petersburg during the Russia v Spain game on Sunday, your friend will be left where she is to die. Which is worth more to you? Your girlfriend? Or 20 million dollars?

Yours very sincerely – Marfa and Petrovna Svidrigailova

When she woke Nadiya's first sensation was coldness. She touched the floor and felt stone. Cold hard stone.

She opened her eyes to see darkness, apart from a thin line of light above her.

As she shifted to become more comfortable, Nadiya heard something rustle. She searched the area with her hand and found a plastic bag.

She examined the contents in the dark. Three warm plastic bottles. Three dry and crusty objects. The unusual smell of Russian rye bread.

Sunday morning. Seth sat in a café and looked across the Neva River at the Peter & Paul Cathedral. Since Nadiya had been taken, Seth had been home to retrieve the Fabergé egg.

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He had wondered if, with Alexei being weaker, he would be able to move from Russia to England. But he found he was able to by looking at any screen, where he would see a ghostly vision of Alexei and then be transported.

He had feared the two women in black would take the egg from him given any chance: but would they keep their promise to release Nadiya? Seth had hidden the Fabergé egg in a locker at the railway station in St Petersburg before coming across the city to the cathedral where he knew the Romanov's remains had been buried.

The egg was his bargaining power and was safer hidden out of the way.

This was it. Seth strode across the bridge from the Kronverkskiy Park to the island, leaving a tense café of people watching Spain beating Russia 1-0 as half time approached.

The city of St Petersburg was beautiful, but the streets were quiet. Seth knew most Russian families would be cheering their team on against Spain.

He made no attempt to hide in the shadows cast by the trees and buildings as he approached the Cathedral across a wide square. Nor did he try to conceal the package he was carrying under his arm, something that looked the same size as a Fabergé egg, something to confuse the two women in black.

The cathedral was spectacular, a tall honey-coloured stone tower with a sharp spire that resembled a needle, sharp and shining against the radiant blue summer sky.

Seth walked through the main cathedral door – paying his 20 roubles at a small booth – into what felt like a forest of white marble and gold. The inside of the cathedral appeared to radiate its own light. Seth would have taken the time to enjoy its beauty if he had not known that he was being followed.

But he was. And he did. He was glad of it.

Inside the cathedral, Seth took corners quickly, doubling back on himself to check if his tail was there. There they were. Two figures. The women in black. Not wearing white England tops now.

Time to outthink them. Beat them. Save Nadiya.

Seth did nothing to suggest he knew he was being followed, skirting round the tombs of the Romanovs, carved stone plinths on walls, large tombs like giant raised graves, flowers scattered on the top. There was a strange smell in the cathedral, like his mum's incense sticks in the bathroom.

Seth turned sharply and walked through the exit door. Out into the sun. Hiding round the corner of the church, peering back to see if the two women were coming.

One was. Heading straight towards him. But only one of them. Why? Where was the second woman in black? Seth heard a click behind him and turned. Now he knew why the first woman in black was alone. The second woman was right there, aiming a gun at Seth. Then a sudden and loud noise. Deafening.

Nadiya sat up and felt another layer of stone just above her head. She could hear no sound to help her identify her location. But she *could* smell something. A smoky flowery smell.

Nadiya identified it immediately. Incense.

Incense was used in the Russian Orthodox churches during services. She must be in the cathedral where the Romanovs were buried. She knew it. If only she had her phone with her she could just text Seth and tell him to come and get her.

But she did not have her phone. She had nothing. And what she had least of was hope. A loud noise interrupted her thoughts. The first sound to permeate the stone box she was entombed in. Then quiet again. And Nadiya felt very alone.

The loud noise Seth had heard was a tremendous cheer. It was followed by shouting, as doors opened and hundreds of people filled the streets, waving Russian flags.

He heard one woman crying out in English. 'We win! We win on penalties!'

Somehow Seth was swept among them and away from the women in black. Into the crowd, down an alleyway and safety. No longer petrified, crouching in an alleyway, Seth watched the two women in black argue, then appear to give up searching for him. And perhaps go home.

Now Seth could follow them. Now he could find out who they were and where they lived and where they had put Nadiya.

Seth followed, leaving the cathedral behind.

The two women walked quickly along the banks of the Neva until they reached an old wooden house. They seemed nervous every time they met another group of celebrating Russian fans; they were rushing, not noticing that now they were the ones who were being followed. By Seth.

It was large, with a wooden-plank façade and a red roof overhanging. The house was surrounded by trees. It looked to Seth as if it had not been decorated for 100 years.

Now Seth knew where they lived. He was sure that was where they would be keeping Nadiya. His plan was to wait until they left their house, hopefully tonight or tomorrow. Then he would go in.

As he waited in the dark – the rustling, snuffling, squeaking of creatures around him – Seth shook his head in disbelief. This crazy life he was living. So crazy he had not given a thought to *Colombia v England*.

If only he could find Nadiya tomorrow in this creepy house, then take her to the game in Moscow on Tuesday night, get back that feeling he had had when watching England before. But it would not work out quite like that for Seth. Let alone for Nadiya.

Nadiya could tell that night had fallen. The line of light above her had gone. She checked the contents of the plastic bag again.

Two bottles of water left. Two small loaves of bread. She wondered how long she could survive on that and yearned for the line of light.

Seth is convinced that Nadiya is being kept in the women in black's house. But is he right about where his friend is? And when will he look for her? After dark, when everyone is asleep or tomorrow when, he hopes, the pair will go out.

Chapter 14 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published before 7.30am on Tuesday 3 July.

Chapters will go back to being shorter than this one. Apologies for it being longer today.

Watch the video trailer for the first book in Tom's *Defenders* series here:

<https://youtu.be/yjqIIZNbeQ>.

World Cup word of the day

Radiant

