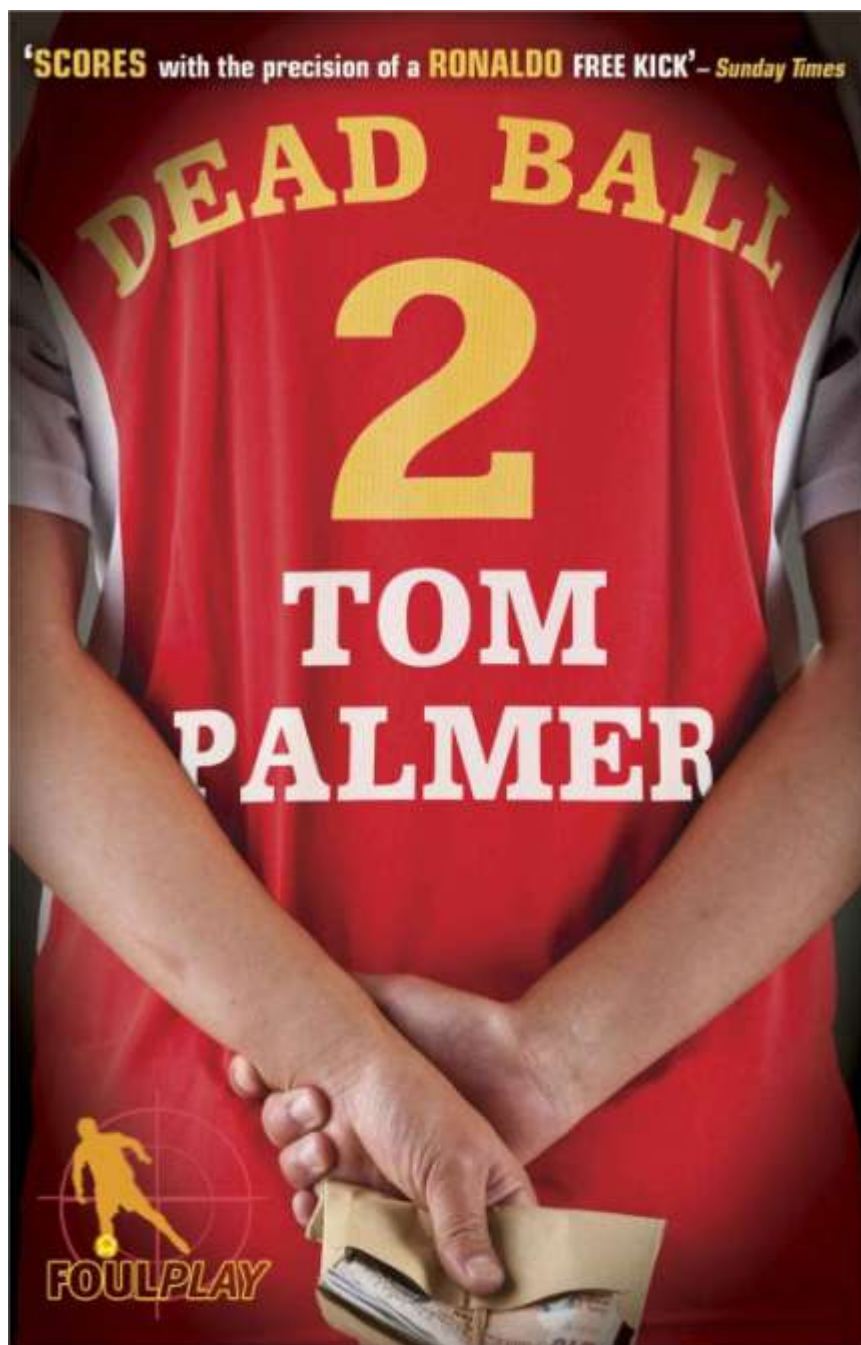


# TOM PALMER

## FOUL PLAY 2 : DEAD BALL



Follow Danny to Russia as he tackles another case in the thrilling follow-up to Foul Play

"scores with the precision of a Ronaldo free kick"

Sunday Times



## World Cup Qualifier

'Come on England!' Danny shouted at the television.

On the screen England's star striker, Sam Roberts, picked the ball up in the centre circle. He played it wide to the national team's short, but speedy winger. The winger moved slowly at first, then accelerated past two Russian defenders and played an early ball into the box. Roberts was already bearing down on the penalty area, having run half the length of the pitch in seconds.

He leapt for the ball.

'Go on!' Danny was on the edge of his seat now. Literally.

Ready to leap in the air if Roberts scored.

Roberts met the ball with his head. Full on.

But Danny's sister, Emily, was on her feet now.

'Ha ha,' she shouted. 'What a donkey.'

Roberts' header had gone wide. Well wide.

Emily turned to face the rest of the room: her brother, his friend Paul, her mum and dad.

'Come on *Russia!*' she shouted.

'He missed,' Danny said, turning to his dad. Danny did this automatically if they were at the football - or just watching it on TV. His dad was blind. And Danny was his commentator.

'I gathered,' Dad said. Then in a very different voice 'Sit down, Emily.'

Dad knew that Emily was really getting to Danny now. Throughout the game she'd been trying to wind her brother up, saying she wanted Russia to win, not England. Cheering when Russia did well: mocking Danny when England messed up.

'Yes, Emily,' Mum said. 'Either sit down or go and do something else. You hate football. You're only doing this to annoy your brother.'

Danny said nothing. He couldn't even look at his sister. He was absolutely furious. It was worse than sitting with a *real* fan of another team. At least then you knew they felt as much about their team as you did about yours.

'Why should I?' Emily said. 'I support Russia.'

Danny knew it was best to leave his sister to it. If he reacted angrily to her she'd have won. And today she was being particularly unpleasant. Having been dumped by her boyfriend. Two hours ago. By text.

Danny smiled.

But not for long.

Because *Russia* were attacking now. Their keeper had flung the ball half the length of the pitch and suddenly their giant blonde forward was bearing down on goal. The England defenders couldn't get near him. The forward went past a first and a second, then played a one-two with his striking partner. And *bang*: a shot on goal from fifteen yards. Only Alex Finn, the England keeper, to beat. The ball flew straight and hard. Impossible to reach.

Emily was on her feet now. 'YeaaaaAAAHHH.'

Danny looked away from her in disgust. Towards the screen, to see Alex Finn dive low, stretching his arm out as far as he could. And - impossibly - tipping the ball round the post.

'What a save!' Danny said, standing up now. 'What a fantastic save. You should have seen it Dad. He should never have got to it.'

Then he stared at his sister, who'd sat down scowling.

The commentator agreed with Danny: 'The City and England keeper is playing as if his life depended on it!'

Moments later the ref's whistle blew. Half time. England 0 Russia 0.

But a draw wasn't good enough: England needed to *win* this game. It was a World Cup qualifier. Everybody agreed that you had to win your home games to have a chance of qualifying for the finals.

'We're still going to win,' Emily said. 'Then your precious England - and your even more precious Sam Roberts - won't go to the World Cup.'

'We?' Mum said to Emily. 'Since when were *you* Russian?'

Paul, who had said nothing up to this point, looked at Danny's sister and said 'Vlady vorksvet?'

Danny's sister stared at him. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It's Russian,' Paul said.

Danny grinned at his friend. 'Don't you understand? Being a Russia fan?' he said.

Emily narrowed her eyes and stared at her brother. But she had nothing more to say.

The second half of the match was more open. End to end stuff. England and Russia equally matched.

There were two key points in the half that decided the result.

The first was a Russian attack, catching England on the break. Four attackers against two defenders.

The Russians moved so quickly there was nothing the defenders could do. Suddenly it was two strikers against Alex Finn. Again. The first striker lobbed Finn, but somehow Finn leapt and tipped the ball onto the bar. But instead of going out for a corner, the ball bounced back into play, to the other Russian striker. The second striker took his time. He controlled the ball, then side footed it past Finn.

'GooooaaaAAALLL,' shouted Emily, on her feet again.

Except the ball *hadn't* gone past Finn. And it *wasn't* a goal. As he was recovering from the lob, the England keeper managed to stick his foot out and deflect the ball wide for a corner.

A miraculous save. Danny turned to smile at Emily.

**A footballer attacked.**

**A criminal on the loose.**

**Can Danny Harte keep his eye on the ball?**

**Read on ...**

**Foul Play 2 :Dead Ball by Tom Palmer available now at bookshops and libraries.**

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