

CHAPTER ONE

Pietro “Ollie” Olyokintov waited patiently for his hockey teammates to queue up and leave the ice. He shifted his weight from skate to skate, hoping to reduce the pain in his aching knees. There would be no locker room celebration that night. They’d lost. He’d lost. During the overtime period, Olyokintov had been checked into a sideboard, losing possession of the puck to a Wilkes Barre defenseman whose outlet pass eventually resulted in the game-winning goal against them.

As he stepped off of the ice and onto the rubber pathway that would lead him to the visitor’s locker room, he surrendered to his interior voice of Russian origin. Olyokintov had hoped that by immersing himself in the culture of North America, he would reflexively think in English. But there it was:

Okonchatel’no.

Finally.

As he exited the rink, Olyokintov did not raise his head. He knew that the portal for visiting players would be ringed with the new era of hockey fans, celebrating their victory with extended digits and gestures of oral sex.

Olyokintov’s left knee gave way without provocation as he walked down the corridor among his teammates. As he closed the twenty meters between himself and the locker room, he finessed his hockey stick to his left arm to use as a crutch with a nonchalance born of repetition, hoping that his coaches had not seen him buckle

Once safely in the locker room, Olyokintov slid between the torsos of his subdued teammates and faced his locker. He untied his breezers and allowed them to drop to his ankles. He retrieved a crucifix from the top shelf of his locker along with a photograph of his wife and son. Olyokintov kissed them both and stowed them in a side pocket of his duffel bag.

Olyokintov continued to follow his post-game rituals. After seating himself upon the bench before his locker, he gripped the shoulder blades of his sweat-drenched sweater and, in an uninterrupted motion, pulled it up over his head and launched it in the direction of a nearby laundry hamper.

His breezers followed a similar arc across the room.

Olyokintov paused before the next stage of his undress.

He would need to flex his knees to unlace and step out of his skates. If his coaches or teammates were to witness the level of pain he was about to endure, he was certain that they would never again allow him to skate for the Colonials of Springfield, Massachusetts.

As he tensed the muscles around his knees in anticipation of agony, defenseman Kostin Alendreykov moved beside him, screening Olyokintov’s face from the other athletes in the room.

Olyokintov recognized Kostin Alendreykov without having to raise his head. “Kostin. Bol’.”
The pain.

The words left Olyokintov as more sob than utterance.

Kostin Alendreykov bent low and shared a confidence with his Russian countryman.

“Ollie,” began Alendreykov, using his comrade’s familiar name.

“Eto ne tak ploko.”

Pietro “Ollie” Olyokintov and Kostin Alendreykov had come up together in the Russian Junior Hockey League (the MHL) playing for Omsk. Both seemed destined for success playing for a Russian team in the Kontinental Hockey League. But the Detroit Red Wings of the National Hockey League had other plans for them.

The Red Wings had demonstrated a draft strategy with international focus in the past, having drafted and signed Russian ice hockey players Sergie Fedorov and Vladimir Konstantinov. Remaining faithful to that successful formula, the Red Wings’ management selected Kostin Alendreykov in the fourth round of the 2015 NHL Entry Draft.

But when General Manager Alexander Venice attempted to negotiate the release of Alendreykov from his contract, the MHL ignored him. The spirit of detente that had motivated past Russian officials to release Fedorov and Konstantinov had dissolved with no incentives to take its place. Instead, the Russians now decried the NHL as poachers.

Undaunted, Venice enrolled a journalist to slip a message to Alendreykov affirming Detroit’s desire that he play for the Red Wings. Months passed without movement. Then, after a Russian youth all-stars exhibition match in Portland, Oregon, Venice escorted Alendreykov around his distracted MHL chaperons and onto the team’s private plane bound for Detroit, Michigan.

Ollie’s arrival into the NHL proved more circuitous. As a youth hockey player, Olyokintov committed to serving in the Russian army for twenty-five years. His defection to the United States would have triggered a conviction in the Russian legal system and consequences visited upon his wife and son. So, Red Wing management drafted him and embarked upon a backwater campaign to have Olyokintov medically discharged from the Russian army due to a series of concussions he had endured in youth hockey. Then, during a moment of turmoil in local Russian politics, Olyokintov followed prearranged instructions and boarded a plane bound for Budapest and eventually for Detroit.

Neither Olyokintov nor Alendreykov enjoyed success in the NHL. Olyokintov shied away from physical contact to preserve his health, eventually earning a reputation as a “soft” player. Alendreykov was so homesick for Russia that his loneliness found its way onto the ice.

Both athletes were released by the Red Wings and consigned to the Springfield Colonials of the American Hockey League on the same day.

Eto ne tak ploko.

Alendreykov paused after delivering his words of encouragement into the ear of his countryman. Then, in a display of faux horseplay and true friendship, Alendreykov removed both of Olyokintov’s skates and socks, and deposited them onto Ollie’s duffel bag. His mission completed, Alendreykov secured the buttons of the towel around his waist and padded his way to the shower room.

Olyokintov, playing his role, feigned annoyance at Kostin’s goofy behavior. But silently, Ollie invoked a prayer of thanks for his comrade’s generosity.

Olyokintov delayed his departure to the showers and allowed his teammates to file past him, dismissing an occasional inquiry about his knees or accepting a conciliatory pat upon his broad shoulders for his contribution to their loss.

When he finally raised his head, Olyokintov had expected to see an emptied locker room, his teammates having repaired to the showers. Instead, he found himself sharing the room with four grim-faced, suited men posted in the four corners of the room. "Is everything okay?" he asked in English, aware of his Russian inflection.

Each man looked at the other as if seeking permission to respond.

"All fine for now," responded the most senior of the sentries. "We're just here to facilitate a trade." Olyokintov felt his heart jump.

"Is it me? Am I to be traded?" asked Olyokintov, unable to stop himself.

"It's not you," the man responded. "But you'll want to board the team bus quickly tonight. The team will be leaving ahead of schedule."

"Thank you," responded Olyokintov.

Olyokintov briefly considered extending the conversation but decided against it, wishing not to provoke any *nevezeniye* or bad luck.

He rose, turned, and limped into the shower room, massaging his sore shoulder as he walked.

Ollie scanned the room until he identified the familiar frame of Alendreykov. He made his way unhurriedly toward his countryman and waited for the shower next to him to clear. He turned on the taps for hot and cold water, attempting to maximize the noise level around them. Then he leaned into the ear of his comrade.

"Kostin. I think one of us is about to be traded," Ollie confided, modulating his voice so as to be heard only by Alendreykov.

"Pochemu?" responded Alendreykov, leaning into his teammate but avoiding eye contact.

"Because there are four suits in the locker room waiting to deliver the bad news," responded Olyokintov.

"FOUR suits?" repeated Alendreykov, swiveling his head to fix the eyes of his friend.

Surprised by Alendreykov's physical response, Olyokintov took a step back. Then he grinned and put his hand on Alendreykov's shoulder.

"Relax. It's probably not you. You're playing like shit. Who would want to trade for you?"

But Alendreykov did not smile at the good-natured jibe. He appeared momentarily distracted, then snapped back to the conversation.

"Vam nuzhno vybrat'sya otsyuda. Bystryy. Popast' na avtobus."

Now, it was Ollie who reacted with concern. His friend's advice to make haste and board the team's bus suggested a level of trouble far beyond the consequence of a trade notice.

"Don't ask, Ollie. Please get dressed and go. Get them all to go," urged Alendreykov, referring to their teammates.

Olyokintov paused as he absorbed Alendreykov's concern.

"But the boy? What is to happen with the boy?" Olyokintov persisted.

"Acch, the boy," repeated Alendreykov. "I'd forgotten in the moment..."

“Don’t worry, comrade. I will teach the boy in your absence,” Olyokintov offered.

Alendreykov nodded, seeming to accept Ollie’s solution.

“You know what?” Alendreykov added ruefully. “If you coach the boy, then your fate could end up being the same as mine in a matter of weeks.”

Olyokintov smiled.

“What is it that is said in that American gangster movie?

‘This is the life we have chosen?’” asked Olyokintov.

“*This is the life we have chosen,*” agreed Alendreykov, nodding his head.

“Now. Go.”

Olyokintov ducked under the shower just long enough to appear conspicuously wet, then exited the shower room leaving Alendreykov behind. In contrast, Alendreykov slowed his routine to a crawl, loitering until he was the last player to shower.

Eventually, he too shut off his shower. He secured his towel around his waist and walked into the evacuated locker room.

“Are you Kostin Alendreykov?”

Four suited men stood in each corner of the room, square-shoulder to Alendreykov’s position. They were armed but held their handguns to the ceiling, watching Alendreykov for sudden movements.

Alendreykov was naked except for the towel wrapped around his waist. His instinct was to smile at the irony of his situation and the number of off-color jokes about concealed weapons that it raised, but he resisted his impulse. They might yet shoot him. He raised his hands above his head in acquiescence.

“Answer me! Are you Kostin Alendreykov?” yelled the senior-most man once again.

“Yes, yes, I am Kostin Alendreykov,” he responded.

“My name is Agent Boyer. FBI.”

The agent held up his opened wallet to display a badge and an identification card.

“You’ll dress and come with us.” “Why?” asked Alendreykov.

“You are being detained on suspicion of espionage.” Alendreykov nodded his head, understanding.

He turned his torso ever so slightly and reached back into his locker for his dress shirt.

As he drew it to his chest, he heard the tires of his team’s bus compress the gravel of the parking lot surface as it departed from the arena.

