

EXCLUSIVE: Sneak Peek from Marc Cameron's BREAKNECK: An Arliss Cutter Mystery

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Leonard Jukes would be the last to die.

Shortly after coming to work aboard the fishing vessel *Esther Marie*, Alex made the mistake of telling his crewmates that his paternal grandfather had been killed and eaten by a Siberian tiger. None of the men believed him; Jukes, the boat's electrician and first mate, egged them on.

The bastard.

It made what he did next all the easier.

Alex was eleven when he'd first seen his father kill a man. He'd never personally taken anyone's life—but it turned out not to be nearly as difficult as it looked.

At nineteen, he was the youngest member of the crew by almost a decade. He had his father's pinched face, but was tall and blue-eyed like his American mother. Unfortunately, he'd also inherited Maureen Preston's pale complexion. Even after he spent weeks on deck in the sun and in the wind, his skin remained as white as a peeled potato.

At his father's insistence he'd practically begged Captain Hannigan to bypass Kodiak and go straight to Homer. The skipper, a stooped man with a white ponytail and an unlit briar pipe perpetually clenched between his teeth, actually offered to pay airfare from Kodiak to Anchorage. A quick check online showed what Alex already knew. Low clouds had canceled multiple flights—no seats available for well over a week. There may have been some charter flights, but they were expensive and the captain was not that sympathetic. Hannigan explained that he didn't intend to stay long in Kodiak, and, to be blunt, didn't quite believe the boy even had an emergency, "what with his tall tales about Siberian tigers."

None of the crew would have known he had any ties to Russia, had he not told them about his grandfather. But from that point on, everyone began calling Alex "comrade" and butchering what few Russian phrases they'd learned trying to hook up with Russian women online. Butch, the captain's son, had learned a garbled pronunciation of *boleye boyepripasy*—more ammunition—and, for whatever reason, blurted it out every time he got within earshot of Alex. Jukes growled like a tiger whenever they were on deck pulling crab pots.

They were dead men walking—and Alex was the only one on the boat that knew it. There was tremendous satisfaction in that.

He happened on just how to go about it while working in the wheelhouse with Jukes and the captain—and it was audacious as hell. Chiginigak Bay lay off the beam to the west. The captain planned to keep to the inside, sailing between the island and the mainland and then cutting east below Raspberry and Whale to reach the city of Kodiak. Boat traffic would increase exponentially, the closer they got to the island. If he was going to make his move, he needed to do it now.

The other three crewmen were on deck, tending crab pots and other gear during the run home from the Bering Sea. Jukes lay on his back, buried up to his waist under a bulkhead cabinet, chasing one of the many electronic glitches that plagued boats that spent their lives in freezing salt water.

Low man on the crew, Alex stood at the electrician's feet and handed him tools.

An eerie calm fell on the boy when he saw Hannigan's short shotgun under the counter, with a Tupperware container of shells. He passed Jukes a pair of wire strippers and casually asked the captain if he kept the shotgun loaded.

Hannigan nodded, concentrating on the quartering waves. The electrician thrust an oily fist out from beneath the cabinet, opening and closing bony fingers. "Small flathead!" he demanded. Then added, "An unloaded shotgun wouldn't do us a hell of a lot of good, comrade."

Alex considered driving the point of the screwdriver through the hand on behalf of all the sons and helpers who'd chased the moving hands of impatient fathers and bosses. Control of another man's destiny brought a powerful sense of euphoria. Alex held all the cards, so he decided to give Jukes one last chance for a quick and merciful death.

"My uncle says that when you catch your first glimpse of a tiger, it's already been watching you for an hour."

Jukes gave a condescending chuckle from beneath the counter.

Grinning, the captain muttered around his pipe, "I think I read that about tigers."

Alex pushed on, studying the men's reactions. "My uncle says it's better to get eaten by a tiger than a brown bear. He says tigers crush your neck and it's pretty much lights out. A bear, though." Alex shook his head for effect. "A bear might leave you alive while it chows down on your kidneys." The boy tossed a roll of electrician's tape into the air, caught it with one hand, then sighed. "Bears apparently love kidneys. My uncle says wolves are the worst, though. They drag you down and start eating from the ass end—"

Jukes's muffled voice came from inside the cabinet. "Your uncle knows a shitload about getting eaten by wild animals."

Alex dropped the tape into the bag, eyes on the shotgun. "Guess so. He's a hunter."

Jukes bumped his head on something, cursed, then finished off his oaths with a chuckle. "Didn't I hear you say your grandfather lived in Okhotsk?"

"Yeah . . ." Alex paused, wary. "He's really from a little place called Ayan, about two hundred fifty miles down the coast. I always say Okhotsk because even Russians don't know Ayan."

Jukes shimmied out from under the bulkhead and sat up, arms resting on his knees, grinning, pointing at Alex with the screwdriver. "That is where you get it wrong, kid. Assuming you can spout these little villages like there's no Internet to check. I found an article online about Russian cops chasing a tiger around Vladivostok. But Ayan's too far north for you to set your lie." He flipped the screwdriver in the air, caught it by the end, and then dropped it in the bag. "No tigers that far up."

The boy gazed out the window at the gathering waves. “Someone should tell that to the one that ate my grandfather . . .”

Captain Hannigan half turned from the wheel. “It’s still a good story, kid. And you tell it masterfully, I’ll give you that. You make a person pay attention.”

“Yeah, like watching a train plow into a school bus,” Jukes said— a breath before Alex shot him in the left hip.

Alex took down the captain like a tiger—quick, a single shotgun blast to the neck.

Meanwhile, Jukes collapsed, screaming, eyes flashing between angry to astonished. He teetered there for a long moment before a swell slammed him on his ass in a pool of blood.

“Be right back,” Alex said, and went to take care of the others.

The shotgun was fast and efficient, leaving no time for begging or the pithy sayings people made in the movies.

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Word Count: 1169