

JAMES LINDHOLM

**DEAD MEN'S
SILENCE**

A CHRIS BLACK ADVENTURE

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The Chris Black Adventure Series

By James Lindholm



1: Into a Canyon Deep

2: Blood Cold

3: Dead Men's Silence

To the Plan A Team—

Kameron, Megan, Paulina, and Tommy
(with some help from Matt
and plenty of moral support from Marisa).

Just in case you guys have any doubts about how much
I've enjoyed working with you.

**Previously, in *Blood Cold*,
Chris Black's second adventure. . .**

De Klerk was not a good swimmer. If they were going to put him in the water with his hands tied, he might drown.

“Please. Please don’t put me in the water. I can’t swim! I’ll give all the money back! I will do anything. Please.” He paused. “At least cut my legs free. Please!”

The blue-eyed man grabbed de Klerk by his two wrists and hefted him up on to the stern gunwale. Momentarily disoriented by the move, it took de Klerk several seconds to get his bearings.

He was seated on the stern with his legs dangling over the back of the gunwale. In front of him, perhaps seventy-five feet away, was a very small island. More like a large rock pile than a proper island. It was covered with what looked like some kind of seals. There were literally thousands of them. The din of sound that earlier had reminded him of a party was their near-continuous vocalizations, kind of a barking yelp. The stench, even at this distance, was overwhelming.

Seals were coming and going from the island; leaping off the rocks into the water and jumping about in small groups. A small huddle of penguins watched from the water’s edge.

A new panic erupted in de Klerk, a panic like nothing he’d ever experienced before. He shook violently and tried to rock his way back

into the boat. Large hands clasped down on both his shoulders and prevented him from moving.

He knew he was staring out at Seal Island, a small rocky outcrop located a few kilometers offshore in False Bay. It was known to Cape Town residents, as well as much of the TV-watching world, as the home of South Africa's famous "flying" great white sharks.

De Klerk's mind involuntarily reviewed the last nature special he had seen on TV. This was the spot where one-ton sharks literally leapt from the water at 25 mph in pursuit of their Cape fur seal prey, a behavior rarely seen elsewhere in the world. Erupting from the water, the sharks would split the small fur seals in half. They would then thrash about at the surface in a frothy red mix of seal blood and seawater as they finished off the meal. Sea birds would swarm on the kill spot, grabbing loose seal innards and fighting over them in the air above as the shark thrashed about below. Occasionally, an unlucky seabird would stray too close to the gaping maw of the white shark and become dessert to an already satisfying meal.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of these predatory attacks was the incredible speed with which they took place. If you sneezed, you missed it.

1

Damien Wood died first. In the dwindling twilight of a Colombian sunset, a pirate cut his throat from ear to ear as he sat at the helm of his father's sixty-foot cabin cruiser *Innovator*. The entire incident took less than twenty seconds. One instant he was leisurely staring out the cruiser's front windshield, smiling as he thought about the last *Game of Thrones* episode he'd watched, the next he was dying. Damien's last conscious act was to look down at the blood pouring over his tanned-but-skinny torso and wonder, "What the hell?"

The *Innovator* had left Newport Beach two months prior and slowly worked its way down the length of Baja California and along the Mexican mainland in four weeks' time. Investment banker Jared Wood had been initially hesitant to loan out the *Innovator* to his son Damian and his friends. He'd only owned the boat for a year and had hardly spent any time on it himself.

Wood had ordered the crew, via satellite phone, to steer clear of Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua for fear that they might run afoul of "bad people." But it was at the last stop the *Innovator* made in Colombia that the boat had caught the attention of four men lurking in a small converted fishing boat at the partying crowd's perimeter. The crew of the *Langosta Espinosa* were nondescript enough to move freely

among the boats moored around the island without attracting attention. The boat itself was unremarkable, and the five Hispanic men that operated it could have fit in anywhere along the Central American coast.

If anyone had looked closely, they would have seen that the wooden-hulled boat had not been lobster fishing for some time; with traps irreparably broken and fouled on the back in a way no active fisherman would ever allow. But in a crowd more concerned with merriment than potential dangers, no one gave the boat or the crew a second look. And the lagging Colombian economy had left the already under-funded coast guard with very few assets to patrol the extensive coastline.

Late in the morning, the *Innovator* had crossed into Colombian waters and sought refuge in the first cove the captain could find. The last week of partying had taken its toll on all passengers aboard, and the group required rest. As life-long, unrepentant nerds, Damien and his friend Stephen Long had survived this far with minimal experience in alcohol-fueled merriment. Damien's other friend, Mike Hanson, had done his share of partying during his football days, but these days had been over for years. Though all three guys had warmed quickly to the opportunities for celebration among their international boating community, they'd not had much endurance.

Cracks had begun to form in the façade holding the three young men together. As roommates during freshman and sophomore year at the University of Southern California, Damien and Mike quickly worked out the challenges of living in close quarters together, Stephen had no such training. He'd lived at home in his parent's basement for what little of college he'd attended before departing USC for the glory of the movie business. His career as third assistant to the director had lasted merely six months. The film for which he'd quit school was canceled mid-production due to financial issues. By the time the *Innovator* had reached Colombia, Stephen was complaining more frequently

about Mike's nightly snoring. Mike, in turn, noted that Stephen rarely cleaned up after himself, leaving "his shit all over the place" while he played games on his smartphone. Damien had simply been frustrated by how stupid he thought these complaints were as he tried to keep the peace.

As the *Innovator's* first day in Colombian waters came to a close, the three friends were as far apart as the boat allowed, each lost in his own thoughts. That made them easy targets.

After Damien, Stephen Long died next; and just as quickly. He was stretched out on the *Innovator's* bow playing a driving game called *Asphalt 8* on his smartphone. Stephen was so immersed in the game that he didn't sense the pirate's presence until his attention was redirected to the handle of the eight-inch ka-bar knife sticking out of his chest.

For every pound that Damien had been missing from his torso, Stephen had made up for on his own. He looked down at his chubbiness for the last time and wondered where his mom and dad were. *Asphalt 8* continued on its own for another two minutes until the phone's battery went as dead as Stephen.

Mike Hanson put up a fight. He was down in the galley, making his second sandwich for the evening when the third pirate came through the main hatch to get to him. At six-foot-four and two-hundred-and-fifty pounds, Mike looked at the smaller man wielding a knife and smiled.

Mike decided to resolve the situation quickly in his favor. Growing up in South Central Los Angeles as the only child of a single, African-American mother, Mike had learned early to solve problems before they came back to 'bite him in the ass.' He grabbed the wooden cutting board on which his second sandwich rested and smacked the pirate, crushing the man's nose with one strike. Mike then retracted the board and quickly struck again at the pirate's wind-pipe, forcing a guttural cough from the man as he collapsed.

Satisfied that he'd ended the incident, Mike paused to listen for other trouble. Hearing no immediate threats, he leaned over to pick up the pirate's knife, thinking he'd better check on his two less physically capable friends right away. The pirate could have already attacked one of them before coming down to the galley, he thought.

Rising back to nearly his full height, slumping slightly, so his head didn't hit the galley ceiling, Mike heard a metallic click that he didn't recognize. Before he had a moment to consider it further, a gunshot from the fourth pirate hit him in his left shoulder. The impact of the bullet spun Mike around, so he was now facing the pirate who'd just shot him. Neither of them moved as the gun's loud report still wrung in their ears.

Mike glanced down at the wound on his shoulder and then peered through narrowed eyes at the pirate. As the man raised his weapon again, Mike used the cutting board, which was still in this right hand, to swipe upward, across his body. The force of the blow dislodged the gun from the pirate's hand and broke the cutting board in half.

Not waiting to give the pirate another chance, Mike hurled his large body up the steps toward the back deck. "Damien! Watch out—" His warning caught in his throat as he found Damien's body slumped in the chair at the helm, a gaping hole where his neck used to be, and his chest covered in blood.

Grabbing his bleeding shoulder, Mike stepped around the edge of the wheelhouse and moved as quickly as the narrow walkway would allow toward the bow. The shock of seeing his friend dead was briefly tempered by the adrenaline surging through his body. Perhaps if he could get to Stephen in time, they could escape together.

He could hear someone coming behind him, but before he could turn around, Mike had arrived at the portion of the walkway that opened onto the *Innovator's* bow, revealing Stephen's lifeless body lying against a hatch. "Oh, my god."

DEAD MEN'S SILENCE

Briefly stymied by the realization that his friends were no longer with him, Mike hesitated. At that moment, a pirate appeared around the edge of the wheelhouse. The man expertly tossed a large knife in the air, caught it by the blade, and then threw it directly at Mike's chest.

Mike frantically deflected the knife with his right forearm, the blade slicing deeply into his muscle before dropping to the deck and sliding over the side.

Now nursing two wounds, Mike determined that in the increasing darkness, his best course of action was to flee. He grabbed the rail with his bloodied right hand and launched himself over the side.

Plunging deep into the warm Pacific water, Mike surfaced away from the *Innovator* and began stroking toward the shore, leaving blood in his wake. He could see lights shimmering at multiple spots along the edge of the large cove from what he hoped were houses or hotels. Someone there would be able to help him.

It was a long swim for Mike, at least the length of a football field. He was not a natural swimmer, and with both arms impeded by injuries, his progress was slow. Approximately halfway to shore, he heard what he thought was the sound of a small outboard motor. He paused to listen over his labored breathing; it sounded as though the small boat was headed away from him. Maybe his plan was going to work.

Struggling with declining mobility in his limbs and significant blood loss, Mike continued to make progress toward land. He could see the silhouetted shapes of people walking along the shore, but he was too tired to produce a coherent cry for help. Pausing again to catch his breath, new hope swelled in Mike as his feet drifted down to touch the sandy bottom below. He'd made it!

His feet on solid underwater ground, he could now use both his legs and arms to make progress toward shore. Exhausted from the effort and delirious from the blood loss, Mike failed to process the tugging he

sensed down by his right leg. When it persisted, he started to wonder if he'd become tangled in something.

Reaching down to remove whatever was holding him back, Mike was briefly shocked back into lucidity when he realized that his right leg was gone below his mid-thigh. His hand brushed against the end of what must have been his femur, surrounded by strands of tissue dangling in the water.

“What the f—?” exclaimed Mike, just before he was pulled underwater. He could feel the rough skin of the shark's nose on the underside of his right arm as it clenched its jaws around his torso.

Seconds after the attack began, it was over.

Twelve minutes later, the *Innovator* was once again underway, this time alongside the *Langosta Espinosa*. Neither the simultaneous departure of the two vessels nor Mike's struggle for survival registered among the partying crowd in nearby boats or along the shore. As the boats disappeared over the horizon, the bodies of Damien and Stephen joined Mike one last time as the pirates tossed them over the side, wrapped in an old fishnet and anchored down by the dive weights that Jared Wood would never have the chance to use.

2

Chris Black stood tall on the back deck of the fishing vessel *Elizabeth Margot*. He saw the small drone flying overhead before he heard it; the noonday sun reflecting off the drone's camera lens, giving away its position. Shielding his eyes with his hand, still gloved in neoprene from the SCUBA dive he'd just completed, Chris tracked the craft's approach against a backdrop of the mountainous region of Big Sur, along California's central coast.

"What's up?" asked Paulina, Chris's dive buddy, as she removed her tank and placed it on the deck.

"Drone," replied Chris, his eyes tracking it as it came directly toward the boat.

"Shouldn't be any drone activity out here."

Flights of unmanned aerial vehicles were closely regulated along California's coastline, particularly in sensitive areas like the kelp forest in which they were working. He could see the Point Sur Lighthouse high on a rocky outcrop just north of their position.

Just as the whirl of the drone's propellers became apparent, Chris heard a small outboard engine cut out as three masked attackers climbed over the gunwale onto the fishing vessel's back deck. Though panic never crossed his mind, Chris would later admit that the sight of the

attackers in the midst of a research cruise was so bizarre as to give him pause. But that pause lasted only seconds.

The three invaders split up immediately. One ran toward the stern, and though the figure was wearing a full ski mask, Chris was fairly certain she was female. One ran toward the bow, or at least that's what Chris assumed to be the guy's plan. The third attacker, the largest of the three, extracted a club from a sheath on his calf and started running toward Chris and Paulina.

At thirty-nine years old and six-foot-two inches tall, Chris was still fit and not at all afraid to fight if he had to. The lines on his face and the grey streaks in his otherwise dark hair suggested a lifetime spent in the outdoors; a lifetime that to-date had put him in contact with more than his fair share of society's criminal element. He watched the larger attacker come across the deck and processed what was going on. The man's black ski mask obscured his face, but his large, tattooed forearms were visible, and he was wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with the words 'Deep Sea Corals Forever!'

"Eco-terrorists?" Chris asked aloud; he was that bewildered. He'd heard of such raids on boats around the world, but he'd never experienced one directly. He was now beginning to understand why the drone was there. These guys were trying to make some kind of point and were recording the entire event to showcase later to their membership.

Paulina, standing between Chris and the attacker yelled, "Hey!" A push from the large attacker lifted the five-foot-six Paulina off her feet, sending her flying into a pile of nylon line and inflatable floats.

With the move against Paulina, the entire event took on a new flavor for Chris. Chris and Mac, his friend and colleague, had argued about many things over the years as they'd encountered thugs and scum in many forms at various locales. But one of the things they agreed on was that you don't hurt members of their team.

Armed with nothing but his wits and dressed from head to toe in neoprene, Chris assessed his options. He did not know precisely how this was going to be resolved, but he was certain of one thing: this guy was going down.

Behind Chris stood a large shipping container that had been placed on the fishing vessel's back deck to serve as a mobile dive locker during SCUBA operations. As the assistant director of the Center for Marine Exploration (CMEx) in Central California, Chris spent a great deal of time in and on the water. With the university's primary research vessel, *MacGreggor*, headed south to Ecuador for a research cruise in the Galapagos Islands, Chris and his team had chartered a converted fishing vessel to serve as a platform for a research diving trip down the coast.

The family that owned and operated the *Elizabeth Margot* had fished off Monterey for generations. When increasingly stringent state and federal regulations had made commercial fishing less profitable, the family had converted the boat to support scientific operations. This was the third time Chris had chartered the vessel. He had come to like working with the family very much.

The attacker turned toward Chris, pulling a club from behind his back. Chris lunged forward, keeping his eyes on the club. When the inevitable swing came, clearly broadcast by the attacker, Chris was able to dodge it and grab the guy's sweatshirt with both hands. He then intentionally fell backward, pulling along the much larger man with all his strength.

The combined forces of gravity, the attacker's momentum, and Chris's strong pull resulted in exactly what Chris had hoped for—the attacker's face-first collision with the side of the shipping container. The forceful thud of the crash dented the side of the container and knocked the attacker unconscious. Chris sought, and to his relief, found a pulse on the man's carotid artery.

Seeing that Paulina was conscious, he asked as he pulled off his wetsuit gloves, “Are you okay?”

She nodded her head and grunted, “Go!”

Chris scanned the water to the left of the vessel, looking for bubbles at the surface. His four-member undergraduate dive team was still underwater and would be for several more minutes if the dive went according to plan. They were down in a kelp forest using a large virtual reality camera system to collect imagery on fish behavior. He wanted to resolve this situation before they returned to the boat. While he was completely comfortable, given their experience, with the team diving on their own as they were now, Chris didn’t want them injured by some ill-conceived attack at the surface.

Chris picked up the attacker’s club and spied around the right corner of the shipping container. Seeing no one, he moved quickly along the full length of the container. Peering slowly around the back corner, Chris could see the woman doing something to the A-frame crane mounted on the stern to deploy oceanographic instrumentation and small inflatable boats. He could hear the drone’s propellers whirring overhead.

“Hey!” shouted Chris. “Whatever you’re planning here is basically over. Your friend back there assaulted one of our staff, so you’re all in big trouble. Just show me your hands.”

The woman remained with her back to Chris and said nothing. He was briefly concerned that she might have some kind of explosive device. He hoped that the attackers weren’t that extreme.

Chris approached the woman and nudged her shoulder with the end of the club.

“I repeat, turn around and show me your hands.”

“Hey, asshole, I can’t,” replied the woman, and Chris could hear jingling metal. Glancing around the woman’s side, he realized that she’d handcuffed herself to the crane.

“Okay, well, at least you aren’t going anywhere,” Chris said. Looking up at the drone, he added, “And I guess maybe you should have put your message on the *back* of your sweatshirt. As it is, you’re just getting footage of some idiot in a dark sweatshirt handcuffed to an A-frame crane.”

“Fuck you! We’re going to stop you from destroying the seafloor no matter what the cost.”

“Listen, lady, I’ve spent much of the past fifteen years sitting in ugly hotel ballrooms at too many management council meetings trying to provide scientific data on the impact, or lack thereof, of bottom trawling on deepwater corals and other habitats. And I can’t think of a single meeting, not a single one, in which anyone from your organization was present to try and help move management forward.”

“Yeah, you’re part of the problem!”

Chris shook his head as if trying to ward off the insanity. “You idiots are handcuffing yourselves to research vessels and clubbing scientists, and I’m part of the problem?”

“Corals are dying, man! They can live for over a thousand years. But along comes a trawl, and they’re knocked down forever. They die. The fishes that use them for habitat die. *Everything* dies.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “This is not a trawler; this is a research vessel.” Chris had serious doubts that any of the years of research he’d conducted precisely on the issues the woman was talking about would help the conversation. Coming back around the container, he found Paulina still lying tangled in lines and floats, but apparently uninjured.

“Don’t look at me!” she demanded, in what had become her signature line in the past few weeks since she had fallen while exiting the surf after a SCUBA dive. “I’m a disaster over here.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Chris as he delicately untangled the lines.

“Yes. But what just happened? Where did those people come from?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they were tracking this boat.”

“Can you see any divers at the surface?” Paulina asked. When not conducting science, she served as the university’s assistant Diving Safety Officer.

The burly boat captain came out of the galley dragging the third attacker by one arm. “This one didn’t have anything to say. He screamed something incoherent and raced onto the bridge. I just punched him, and he went down pretty hard.”

Chris smiled inwardly at the shock the attacker must have felt upon encountering the captain in the wheelhouse. Maybe the guy had conjured images of an old salt smoking a gnarled pipe as he slumped over the wheel. But what he’d found was a former amateur wrestler who’d become a fisherman like the rest of his family, only after it was clear that professional wrestling was neither professional nor wrestling.

Chris pointed to the attacker lying next to the shipping container. “Same thing with this guy.” Then he motioned with his thumb toward the stern. “The woman back there says she’s here to stop our trawling efforts.”

“Our trawling efforts?” exclaimed the captain, two veins prominently bulging on his deeply tanned forehead. “Jesus, we just can’t win. We’re out here trying to support scientific research. There’s no trawl gear onboard the boat. We’ve clearly got a dive flag flying overhead and divers in the water.”

“I know,” said Chris. “I don’t think these activists recognize that level of nuance.” Looking up into the sky, he added, “Where’s the drone anyway?”

“Gone,” noted the captain.

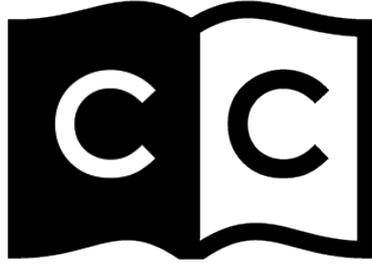
The vessel’s first mate, a gangly, balding man whom Chris liked immensely, disappeared for a minute behind the container before

returning with a smile. “If they were trying to disrupt our efforts, they didn’t plan it very well. I can cut those cuffs off easily, but we can also use the crane with her cuffed to it. That should make for some great video if the drone comes back.”

Looking at his watch, Chris explained to the captain, “We’ve got divers in the water for another twenty minutes. We’ll need a couple of hours at the surface to download imagery from the VR camera and replace batteries for the next dive, if there is a next dive. What are we going to do with this trio?”

“Oh, we’re not disrupting research for these clowns,” replied the captain. “I put a call in to the Coast Guard. We’ll just stow them down in the fish hold until the Coasties arrive.”

“Perfect. The smell alone should teach them the error of their ways.”



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Dr. James Lindholm's firsthand experience with the extreme survival conditions of underwater research missions informs all his stories. Look in the back of this book for a book club discussion guide.



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