

A vertical underwater scene featuring a diver on the right side, illuminated by a bright light source. The diver is positioned against a dark, textured rock wall. The water is dark blue with visible bubbles and particles. The title text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# INTO A CANYON DEEP

**A CHRIS BLACK ADVENTURE**

**JAMES  
LINDHOLM**

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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## **The Chris Black Adventure Series**

**By James Lindholm**

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*1: Into a Canyon Deep*

*2: Blood Cold*

*3: Dead Men's Silence*

**For Gran**

**Your encouragement (and early reading suggestions)  
launched me on a lifetime of adventure.**

## Author's Note

Though Dr. Chris Black and his CMEx team do not exist outside of the printed page, the process they follow to conduct scientific research in the deep subtidal is very much based in reality, including the use of remotely operated vehicles (ROVs) for working deep below the effective depth of SCUBA divers. Faculty, staff, and students working at institutions around the world regularly confront challenges of sampling in a marine environment that frequently doesn't cooperate. I hope that *Into a Canyon Deep* will give you some insight into the endeavor of marine exploration. It is also interesting to note that fact often mirrors fiction. While the main plotline for Chris Black's first adventure is entirely fictional, not long after I completed the story it was reported in the local news that a similar discovery was made on land. You can look it up once you've finished the story.

Life-threatening violence aside, the southern Monterey Bay area that is depicted in these pages is definitely worth a visit when you have the opportunity. In my role as a practicing research scientist I regularly refer to the Bay as the greatest 'living laboratory' in the world for the study of temperate ecosystems. We have tide pools, kelp forests, deep canyons, all accessible from shore, along with the invertebrates, fishes and marine mammals that live in those environments. It is, in a very real sense, the "Blue Serengeti," a term that my colleague Dr. Barbara Block first coined.

# 1

Spinning into the wake of the receding fishing vessel *Lizzie J*, Joe Rothberg's many wounds bled steadily. A blue, bioluminescent aura enveloped him as the movement of his sinking body agitated thousands of small planktonic organisms.

Only minutes before he'd watched the sleeves of his favorite sweatshirt slowly wick saltwater up his partially submerged arms as he'd dangled from a half-inch nylon line on the boat's bow. Hanging by his broken right leg, Joe's head was only inches from the cool ocean's surface.

He knew it was supposed to be pretty deep out there above the Carmel Canyon. The captain had said more than two *thousand* feet—two thousand feet. He saw and smelled the beach close by, even in the pitch black of the moonless spring night.

Maybe if I yell, he hoped, someone will help. Maybe someone will call the police or the Coast Guard.

Joe had tried to focus beyond the steady drum of the pulse beating in his ears, tried to remember the tricks his counselor had taught him when he was a kid, tricks to control the jumble of random ideas bouncing around in his head. "Identify what I'm feeling, identify what I'm feeling, identify what I'm—fuck! What am I doing out here?" The dark waters didn't respond.



He kept coming back to the fact that he'd been helping dump toxic waste into the ocean. Sarah is going to kill me if she finds out, he thought. *Not cool.*

Joe had felt the disappointment of Sarah, his parents, even his old counselor, Margaret Black, more intensely than the growing strain on his broken leg. His high school glory days were long gone. At least that was what he had realized when two weeks earlier he'd come home to find Kevin O'Grady, wearing camouflage pants, an expensive suede jacket, and what looked like military boots, sitting in the living room talking with Sarah. The baby was resting in the bouncy seat beside the couch.

They'd been sitting on the *same* couch, not across from each other as Joe would've if he'd been visiting someone else's wife. He knew that Sarah and Kevin had dated back in high school. In fact, there'd been rumors that Kevin was the father of Sarah's first baby, the one she aborted.

What hurt Joe most was what he'd seen in the first seconds after he came in the front door. Sarah had been smiling. There was a light in her eyes that he hadn't noticed in years. What he wouldn't give to see that light again and to be the reason for it. Instead, he saw the light go out when he entered.

O'Grady's size—the living room appeared to shrink in size with him in it—and the fact that he was seriously mean, kept Joe's pain and irritation at bay. Even if Joe had wanted to make some kind of point that day, to assert his husbandly authority, to try to earn back some respect from his wife, he knew it wouldn't have mattered. O'Grady could beat the shit out of him, no problem.

The next surprise came when O'Grady had turned to Joe that day and offered *him* a job. Sure, most of the spiel had been total crap offered up for Sarah's benefit. O'Grady had made up some story

about a business partner needing help at night in a new warehouse in neighboring Seaside.

The job had brought Joe offshore for the eighth time in the past two weeks. He'd been supervising the disposal of toxic waste. Not so much supervising as standing around, actually. Joe's primary responsibility had been to match each barrel with a list O'Grady had given him and to make sure that each one made it over the side before the boat headed back in. O'Grady's boss apparently wanted a white man overseeing the dumping operations, even if that white man had far less experience with this type of work everyone else on board. Though O'Grady's business partner, if that's what he was, hired dozens of Mexican, Asian, and African American workers, down deep, Joe had figured, he was still just a racist dick.

Joe's regrets about working for a guy like that, and dumping waste into the ocean to boot, had grown with each trip down from Monterey. Two nights ago, on his seventh trip, he realized that he had to do something. He couldn't quit, he needed the money too badly. And he didn't want to call the cops, since he didn't want to get arrested. And anyway, he'd overheard O'Grady talking about the fact that his boss owned the cops. So that was a dead end. But he could try to alert someone to what was going on out there.

After some contemplation, a solution had come to him. Earlier in the evening he had stopped at the FedEx store in Monterey before coming down to the dock. He felt much better about everything after that stop. He would take his money from tonight and be done with it. He would never have to think about Kevin O'Grady again.

Tonight was perfectly calm, which Joe knew was unusual for this time of year as strong northwesterly winds tended to blow hard day and night. So instead of supervising, he'd spent much of the time leaning on the rail, enjoying the lights shimmering on the glassy ocean's surface

as cars went speeding down California Highway 1. Below him little bursts of blue light formed and then exploded just under the surface like fireworks. Bio-lumi-something or other, he was told.

An accidental cough from one of the Vietnamese crewmen as they approached him, coming at him from the stern alerted him. Joe noted that all the evening's barrels had been dumped. And then he realized that the five crewmen were carrying clubs. Oh shit! Had they figured out that he had betrayed them?

Not waiting for an answer, Joe moved as fast as his fat ass allowed him, climbing out onto the narrow rail that surrounded the boat and shimmying along the outside of the wheelhouse as he moved toward the bow. His chubby, sweaty fingers moved quickly along the wooden trim while his old Converse high tops kept pace below them. The lifeboat mounted on the bow might be his chance to escape.

The relief Joe experienced upon reaching the bow ahead of his pursuers was short-lived. O'Grady, whom Joe hadn't realized was on board tonight, came forward from the other side of the wheelhouse carrying his aluminum baseball bat.

"End of the line, Joey boy," O'Grady said. "No loose ends."

At that point Joe, still panting from his exertion, had given in to the inevitable. There was no way he was going to get out of this. No way. His shoulders slumped and he made no effort to dodge either the incoming bat or the kick that followed.

O'Grady had obviously not waited to hear the splash, nor had he looked over the side. Had he done so, he'd have seen Joe's body snagged on a line that was running from the bow of the fishing boat to the stern.

Joe felt the boat's powerful engines come to life through the barnacle-encrusted hull before he heard them. Could he make it all the way back to port in this position, he wondered? Maybe he could sneak away once the boat was tied up back at the fish pier.

As the boat began the return trip to Monterey, the bow lifted and then dipped into the oncoming swells. The first swell to brush the hull grabbed Joe from the line and swept him aft toward the stern of the boat.

The chill of the fifty-five-degree water barely registered as Joe was briefly free of the boat. The surge of adrenaline accompanying his release had armored him against the pain of being dragged along the weathered hull. Joe had had just enough time to consider his situation before he'd been drawn under the boat as he approached the stern.

Within seconds he was sucked into the portside propeller, which had been moving at full throttle. The propeller had ripped open Joe's left thigh, nearly severed his right arm, and sliced deeply into his scalp.

Adrift and sinking fast, the last synapse of Joe's dying brain fired in an expression of hope that Chris Black, someone he'd not spoken to in over twenty years, would know what to do with the package Joe had sent him.

# 2

Chris Black was not thinking about packages. Not thinking about work. Not thinking about much at all, other than his dad. For each of the past five years, Chris had come to this rocky promontory at the northwestern edge of Point Lobos State Nature Reserve to privately acknowledge the anniversary of his father's death.

Point Lobos, named by Spanish explorers after the abundant California sea lions, or "wolves of the sea," found there, served as the southern boundary of Carmel Bay. Looking to the west across the windblown swells of the Pacific from his perch on the rocks, the sheer vastness of the Earth's largest ocean quieted Chris's overworked brain. He knew that the only thing between him and the Chinese mainland was twelve-thousand-odd miles of deep blue sea; more than half of the circumference of the globe. But looking at it on a map didn't do that distance justice; one had to see it firsthand.

With a research cruise starting in two days, there were plenty of things that Chris, the chief scientist for the cruise, knew he should be thinking about. But tradition dictated that he be at this place on this day regardless of what was else was happening in life. Wearing jeans, a fleece-lined jacket, and a university baseball hat, neither the strong northwest wind nor the periodically cascading foam from the crashing surf below bothered him much.

In his late thirties, Chris had the physique of athlete, toned by action rather than gym workouts. Though at six foot two Chris wasn't huge, a certain energy was emanating from him that made him seem bigger than he actually was. The lines on his face and the grey streaks in his otherwise dark hair only added to his overall character, or so he'd been told on a couple of occasions. He'd also been told that he looked like Agent Mulder on *The X-Files*, but the only agent from that TV show he cared about was Scully.

Chris was a native of nearby Carmel-by-the-Sea. His family had been stable and, though not particularly wealthy for the area, they didn't want for much. His father, first a military fighter pilot, then a commercial airline pilot, and ultimately an executive for United Airlines, had been a largely stern but fair influence on Chris's life.

Dad. Normally memories of his father were conflicted, a complicated mosaic of memories both bad and good. Andrew Black had instilled in Chris, at an early age, a strong notion of right and wrong that clearly derived from a world view shaped by war. That instillation had come at a cost, however, with countless holidays marred by barking orders instead of kind words, homework sessions more appropriate for boot camp than third grade, and generally unpredictable grumpiness that always kept the family on edge.

On the other hand, by teaching Chris to swim and, later, to SCUBA dive even before formal certification agencies were doing so, Andrew had inadvertently solidified Chris's career trajectory before Chris was ten years old. In later years, when reporters or interested students pressed for an explanation as to why Chris spent so much time in the water, or why his interest in marine biology endured over the years, his memory returned like a reflex to his earliest childhood.

He remembered many early June days like this one, when no one in their right mind would enter the cold water of southern Monterey

Bay without a wetsuit, except Chris and his dad. They'd spent hours over the years frolicking in the surf in their bathing suits, clinging to an inflatable raft while pretending to be castaways from a pirate ship. Chris could remember being so cold that his fingers had stopped working and he couldn't feel his feet, but at the same time he hadn't wanted to be anywhere else in the world.

Movement down to his left alerted him to a man and a young boy climbing along the rocks close to the water. Probably tourists, Chris figured. The red-faced man carried a gut that was seriously taxing a bright red Carmel T-shirt that no self-respecting local would be caught dead wearing. His jeans weren't faring much better. And he was wearing flip flops. It was no small hike to make it all the way out to the point with a child that was probably only five or six years old. The poor guy's discomfort from the exertion was palpable even at a distance, and wearing flip flops would not have helped anything. Chris was surprised the flip flops had made it as far as they had.

The blonde child, wearing a blue T-shirt emblazoned with a *Superman* logo and red shorts, leapt from rock to rock with more facility than the man. Not every step was surefooted, and there were quite a few loud warnings from the man, who was likely the kid's father, but the indomitable spirit of childhood won out. Chris smiled at the thought that the kid was probably very good at video games and other digital challenges but was nevertheless fearless out in the world of real physical dangers.

Chris returned his gaze to the open ocean and wanted to re-focus his mind on his own dad. But the father-son dynamic playing out in the present won out over re-hashing those of the past.

He looked back down to see the boy was now several feet ahead of the man frenetically moving over the rocks just above the high tide line without watching the water. If he wasn't careful, one of the coming swells was going to take him out.

Come on kid, Chris urged silently as he felt his own muscles tense, turn around. *Never* turn your back on the ocean.

“Hey, kid!” Chris yelled as he stood up, hoping at least to get the father’s attention. “Watch out for that swell!”

Too late. The next swell rolled in, an amorphous blue-green predator stalking its prey. It reached the boy and effortlessly lifted him off the rocks, drawing him back into the water. He quickly disappeared below the surface.

The father screamed, but Chris couldn’t hear what he said.

Chris removed his smartphone and wallet, placing them safely in a crack in the rock behind him. The kid was going to be history if someone didn’t get to him very soon. He turned to and prepared to make the ten-foot drop to the water, waiting for the next surge of water and trying to keep his eyes on the boy, who was back at the surface for the moment and struggling.

The next swell came, and Chris leapt, feet first and shoes on. There were too many dangers beneath the surface to enter head first, and though shoes would make swimming more difficult, against the rocks they would be invaluable.

He hit the water and immediately opened his arms into a “T” position to halt his momentum and to keep himself at the surface. The frigid water instantly closed around his chest, drawing away his breath.

Chris knew that the fifty-five-degree water was not the most immediate problem. Though water wicked away body heat at more than thirty-two times faster than air, he planned to be out of the water well before hypothermia had a chance to set in. The real threat came from being right in the impact zone as the swells from the north Pacific came crashing in against the barnacle-encrusted rocks.

Two quick overhand strokes carried Chris over to the boy. The boy’s eyes were wide with panic and his lips were already turning blue. Chris



grabbed him with his left arm while trying to get purchase on the rocks with his right.

“It’s okay, big guy. I’ve got you. Let’s get you out of here.”

The boy was surprisingly light. Chris realized that he might be able to swing him up to the father if the ocean cooperated. No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than the swell receded. Chris held on briefly but realizing that the water level was dropping too fast and too low, he released his grip and let the current take them with it.

The boy screamed, probably thinking that they were going to be sucked out to sea.

“It’s alright,” Chris said, “We’ll be out of here... NO!” Chris was preparing to ride the next swell up high enough to pass the kid back to his father, when he realized that he was jumping off the rocks, apparently to try and save them.

The father hit the water awkwardly, arms flailing, just as the next swell came in, and he dropped like a rock. Chris held fast to the boy and squared his feet against the rocks. As the wave swept in, Chris used his leg strength to keep them off the rocks while leaning back to create less resistance against the oncoming water, pulling the boy briefly underwater. He could feel the boy struggling but held firm.

Popping his head back above the surface, Chris scanned the area for the father. The man was floating at the surface a few feet away. He wasn’t moving and he was bleeding from a gash across the forehead.

Chris realized that his range of good options was rapidly shrinking. The rock wall was steep and high as far as he could see in either direction, offering no obvious point to climb out of the water.

He decided to get the boy out before returning for the father. If he tried to rescue them both simultaneously, all three of them would surely die.

Side-stroking toward the lowest point on the cliff a few feet away, keeping the boy’s head above water, Chris spotted two men climbing

down toward the water's edge. The two men formed a human chain, placing the lower of the two just within reach of Chris.

Chris once again timed his approach with the swell and rode the surging water up the face of the cliff. Using his feet to climb as high as possible, he grabbed the boy with both hands and thrust him upward to the waiting arms of the passerby.

Seeing the man grab the boy, Chris launched himself off the rock with his feet and began to search for the father. Fewer than ten minutes had passed, but he could feel the cold water zapping him of energy. He had to find the father fast before they were both crushed against the rocks.

Chris shivered uncontrollably as he backtracked to where he had seen the father last. He was starting to feel pain from cuts on his arms that he must've sustained earlier without realizing it. He leaned back and tread water for a minute to collect himself for one final push. He judged the probability of success to be very low, and he was beginning to wonder if he'd get out himself.

And then something bumped him from behind. Chris spun around to find the father floating behind him, face down and not breathing.

Chris flipped him over and supported his head out of the water. He gave two short rescue breaths but struggled to keep the man's face above the surface while doing so. He needed floatation.

His cold-addled mind drifting, Chris looked around him to see what, if any, options he had remaining. The swells kept coming in, but he and the father were now far enough away from the rocks that being crushed was not an immediate concern. He twice looked past a large yellow jacket floating next to him. The third time he looked at it he also heard the men yelling down to him from the rocks above.

They were yelling something like, "Grab the jacket!" which Chris found interesting since there was a jacket right next to him.

He looked at it more closely. It looked like someone had tied off the sleeves, neck and waist to make a rudimentary floatation device. Brilliant.

A large swell pushed Chris and the man toward the rocks. When Chris's left shoulder slammed into the barnacle encrusted rock wall the pain electrified him long enough to break his stupor.

He turned the man to the right, grabbing the yellow jacket and placing it underneath the man's torso. Chris then began to kick as fast as he could. With shoes on, he found the flutter kick normally used by breast "strokes" to be the most efficient means of propulsion. He swam in thirty-second increments, stopping only to give the man two rescue breaths before proceeding onward.

Later, in the relative comfort of the nearby Ranger station, the two men who'd been on the cliff above described to Chris how amazed they were that he managed the ten-minute swim around the corner and into the only protected inlet within hundreds of yards. Chris listened as he warmed up with a detached interest, for he remembered none of it.

To hear the two men tell it, Chris had rescued the father and his son from certain death. Both were on their way to the hospital, cold and bruised, but alive. Chris could only smile and wonder if his own father had been watching from somewhere out there.



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