

BLOOD COLD



A CHRIS BLACK ADVENTURE

JAMES
LINDHOLM

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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

For Zibbo.

Because it's in the suitcase.

**Previously, in *Into a Canyon Deep*,
Chris Black's first adventure. . .**

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 man 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 10-foot drop, 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 55-degree water, though cold, was not the most immediate problem. Though water wicked away body heat at more than

32 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 got 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.”

1

Bile, mixed with the remnants of some distant meal, erupted from Michael de Klerk's mouth as he was wrenched back into consciousness. His face slammed into the gritty, non-slip back deck of the small boat on to which he'd been dumped. The rhythmic hum of the twin diesel engines vibrated through the thin, vomit-covered deck plates, and de Klerk could feel the boat steaming quickly over the undulating swells. With every third or fourth swell, his body lifted off the deck and hovered briefly before the Earth's gravity drew him back into its massive embrace.

Relief that he was awake swept over him for about ten seconds, but that feeling was quickly replaced by pain, then fright, and then a mixture of the two. In addition to the scratches on de Klerk's face, pain emanated from the back of his head where someone had hit him. There was also the extreme discomfort of his bound limbs—his arms were tied behind his back and, judging from his inability to feel much of his left arm, he had apparently been lying on his left side for quite some time. His ankles were also bound, though this caused less outright agony.

He recalled leaving the office in downtown Cape Town in a hurry; there'd been something important going on, but he couldn't remember what that was. What had he been doing there? He crossed the street

to enter the parking structure. Okay. And then he approached his car. Someone must've hit him from behind.

The next thing he knew, he was on this boat. Where was his stuff? His computer?

De Klerk was lying such that his face was directed toward the stern of the boat with his head nestled under the lip of the rear gunwale. He couldn't see anything. As the boat launched off the next swell, de Klerk took advantage of his status to shift his body. When he landed, he was facing toward the cabin of the small boat. The door to the wheelhouse was closed, and he couldn't see over it, so there was no way for him to guess at the number of people inside.

The gradually increasing ambient light around the boat told him it was near dawn, though he couldn't be sure precisely which day was dawning. He could see things more clearly now. There were two five-gallon buckets sitting against the gunwale to his left, each had five or six very large hooks hanging around its perimeter. He thought he could smell an odor of fish coming from the buckets.

Though he was a genius with mapping software, de Klerk was not particularly good with introspection. If his mind was busy with a mapping problem, he was happy. But if he was left alone to his thoughts, well, that didn't usually go very well.

The fact that no one had taken even a moment to check on him heightened his belief that he was in big trouble. Valuable hostages would receive good care. People who were not valuable would not. He'd also watched enough American TV shows to know that if the kidnappers let you see their faces, you were "toast." He'd always liked that phrase.

This latter point taxed his young heart when the boat abruptly cut its engines and drifted quietly on the undulating swells. The door of the cabin opened and three large men emerged, none of whom was wearing any kind of mask to obscure his identity.

De Klerk knew he was toast.

The men wore knee-high rubber boots under Farmer John foul-weather pants. Each sported a sweater of some kind, and all donned knit hats. Only one of his captors looked at de Klerk before joining the other two at the boat's rail. There'd been no compassion in that glance. The other two were pointing at something away to the right and nodding their heads. No one said anything.

That is not to say that it was quiet. The aural void produced by cutting the boat's engines had been filled rapidly with what sounded like a loud cocktail party. De Klerk could hear hundreds or more voices arguing loudly. Overhead, dozens of common seagulls soared, and a penetrating stench was coming from a source de Klerk could not see. The pieces of this puzzle did not fit together well, and he did not understand what was happening.

The men conferred among themselves for a moment, and then two of them began working with the hooks. They each carefully strung three of the large hooks on a line. Next, they reached into the bucket and baited each of the hooks with a large fish head. With all six of the hooks baited, the men tied the lines off at either side of the stern and threw the heads into the water.

Perplexed by this activity, de Klerk's anxiety was temporarily abated as he tried to figure out what these men were doing.

The blue-eyed man came over to him. He squatted down, resting his large arms on his even larger thighs. When he exhaled, his breath smelled of bologna and old cheese.

"Well now, my little friend, you didn't honor our deal and now it doesn't look too good for you. Nope. Not too good at all." He shook his head in a world-weary way that almost made de Klerk believe that the man was on his side, that he didn't want to do whatever it was that he was going to do.

“Please. Please!” de Klerk exclaimed, now in a full-blown panic. “I don’t know who you are and I won’t say anything. I promise. Please just don’t hurt me.” He was crying now.

“Now, now. Don’t make this any harder than it has to be, my little friend. We are just being paid to do a job, right? We have families, too, right? Won’t do for us to come back without having done our jobs, right?”

“Just let me off somewhere and I’ll disappear. I’ll never tell anyone what happened,” de Klerk begged.

“Did you hear that, boys?” the man said, looking back over his shoulders. “He wants to be dropped off somewhere!”

Looking back at de Klerk, the man said, “We can do that, my little friend. We can do that.” His tone gave de Klerk no confidence.

One of the other men extracted a coil of line from a compartment in the starboard gunwale. At one end of the line there was a carabiner and a large Styrofoam float.

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 from de Klerk's perspective was the incredible speed with which they took place. If you sneezed, you missed it.

De Klerk knew from his job at the National Marine Research Institute (NAMARI) that the ecotourism industry that grew up around the breaching sharks followed a simple daily routine guaranteed to satisfy the curiosity of even the most jaded traveler. Arrive on site at Seal Island at sunrise to watch the natural acts of predation, sometimes

as many as five events in the first hour. Next, deploy the fur seal decoy on a line from the stern of the boat and motor slowly back and forth just offshore of the island. During the peak of the “shark season” the decoys might produce several instances of shark breaching immediately behind the boat where even the cheapest of cameras took compelling photos.

Finally, the cage would go in the water, along with large fish heads to attract the sharks right to the boat. Here the tourists, many of whom had never worn a face mask or breathed from a SCUBA regulator, not to mention enter the water with a large carnivore, would gleefully enter the cage for a chance to see the prehistoric behemoths swim past, sometimes mere inches away.

De Klerk recalled the talking head on TV say several times that the frequency and intensity of the attacks left one indelible impression on observers, either on-site or thousands of miles away in front of a TV screen—to enter the water at Seal Island outside of a cage meant certain death.

One of the fishermen tugged on a line drifting down current behind the boat. As the man pulled the line, the fish head anchored at its end rose to view, skipping along the surface. Several feet beyond, a large dorsal fin emerged, water streaming to either side as its forward momentum increased.

De Klerk inadvertently evacuated his bowels into his pants as the shark’s jaws closed around the fish head only inches below his dangling feet. Tearing the fish head from the hook, the shark violently beat its tailfin against the stern of the boat, drenching de Klerk, then disappearing into the depths. The magnitude of de Klerk’s predicament had triggered some kind of deeply rooted self-preservation mechanism. Nothing scared him more at that second than the prospect of being eaten alive by a wild animal. His mind rapidly traveled to another place, a place far away from the hideous reality of his current circumstances.

The small remaining portion of de Klerk's brain that had stayed behind to maintain basic functions listened to the surrounding sounds. "We will end this quickly my little friend if you tell us who else knows about our transaction," one of his captors said. "You were paid a large sum of money for those maps and told not to discuss it. But we know that in fact, you did discuss it. Tell us whom you told, and what you told them, and we will not put you in the water with the fishies. Tell us that, and this will all end. That's a pretty good deal, right?"

Unfortunately, de Klerk was able neither to process nor vocalize anything beyond the guttural moan that was triggered when the first dorsal fin had become visible near the boat. Now several sharks were investigating the fish heads trailing just off the stern.

"That's it? Okay, then," said the man with something like glee in his voice.

Michael de Klerk was tossed over the stern into the fifty-degree water, a line attached to the ropes binding his wrists. The shock of the chilly water was lost on his remnant brain as a few remaining synapses fired. His eyes processed the deep green water below, punctuated by beams of sunlight striking at sharp angles to the surface that would have been beautiful under other circumstances. They observed, too, a large grey shape swim past directly below him.

In a final twist of fate, Michael de Klerk made one last effort to preserve himself with a desperate lunge to the surface for air. That lunge drew the attention of one of Seal Island's larger denizens, a fourteen-foot-long female shark, and in a matter of seconds de Klerk's torso was permanently separated from its lower extremities, relieving the few remaining grey cells in his brain from any further obligations.

2

Extrême danger in nature often accompanies great beauty. Oleander, coral snakes, and even lionfish are enjoyable to behold right up until they poison, bite, or sting someone.

One has to be careful, Dr. Chris Black mused, as he sat along the seawall in the small coastal town of Muizenberg and stared out into the aquamarine surf breaking along the white sand beach. He'd only been in South Africa a week, surfing when he could in between recovering from jet lag and integrating himself into a new research project. He'd travelled many places around the world, but somehow the combination of flights and long layovers for his trip to Cape Town had taken him nearly thirty-six hours.

Since he'd arrived they'd already counted four white shark sightings right here at the main beach. In fact, within two hours after he left the surf the day before, an angler had caught a ten-foot white shark in three and a half feet of water.

That's basically on shore, for God's sake, Chris thought.

Coming from California, where white sharks were always around but attacks were fairly rare, Chris had appreciated from the moment that he stepped off the plane that he wasn't in Kansas anymore. As a scientist, Chris was not prone to anthropomorphisms or sensational

news coverage, but he had to admit that South African sharks didn't mess around. They didn't taste you or mistake you for some other more palatable food source. No, they came to dine, and if they got you, you were history. Toast.

Chris had toyed with the idea of a commercial shark dive near Seal Island the previous week but had been discouraged by his South African colleagues, who were not very pleased with the tour operators. He understood the underlying tension between scientists seeking to understand natural phenomena and the ecotourism operations that dramatized the same phenomena to make money. But Chris hoped to get a chance to try it at some point nonetheless. He thought it would be a pity to come all the way to South Africa and not spend some time in the water with white sharks.

To his left, Chris saw a large sign depicting the elaborate flag system that Cape Town had erected at many of the more active beaches to gauge the threat of a shark attack. Paid shark spotters were on a hill above the beach. These keen-eyed citizens maintained a near-continuous watch on the water. That was, Chris assumed, unless they were eating a sandwich or texting someone, in which case all bets were off. Anyway, they operated a straightforward system of color-coded communication to keep the populace informed about the odds of having their legs bitten off.

A green flag meant "all clear," go surfing in your meat suit with reckless abandon. A black flag meant "viewing conditions were poor," or, again, don't believe anything we say because we are eating our sandwiches. A red flag indicated a "high shark alert," which Chris assumed would be flown fairly frequently if for no other reason than to justify the employment of the shark spotters. And finally, there was the white flag. If you see a white flag, run like hell and don't stop until the parking lot because something big is coming after you.

Chris's enjoyment of his own witty insights was interrupted by the arrival of his mother, Dr. Margaret Black, and her "friend," Steven Larsen, who was also a doctor. They came bearing chocolate-filled croissants and freshly squeezed orange juice from a café across the street.

"Seen anything resembling a dorsal fin so far?" Steven asked, handing Chris a croissant.

"Nope, but that doesn't mean much," Chris replied, chomping the end of the croissant with predatory efficiency.

"A man in the bakery told us that white sharks are washing up on shore with their internal organs removed," Margaret said. "He says that Orcas are doing it. Have you ever heard of that before? I don't recall ever seeing anything like that back home."

"From what I've heard, the guy in the bakery may be right on," Chris said. "There've been several documented cases of precisely that. But not today. Nothing's happening other than this guy down here picking up kelp along the shoreline." He gestured to a black man who had spent the past forty-five minutes piling up the kelp along the shore in little piles, assumedly for removal.

"I read about this last night," Margaret said. "Since the end of Apartheid, there has been a major effort to employ as many black people as possible to help enable them in a way that wasn't possible previously." She sat down next to her son.

"When we went grocery shopping last night, there was a man responsible for putting barcode stickers on each of the apples we purchased. When we went out to our car, which had been parallel parked on the street, we paid a few rand to a man who was responsible for watching that portion of the street to prevent burglaries. And I believe that man over there is being paid to remove the unsightly kelp from the beach. It's actually quite extraordinary."

“I know what you mean,” agreed Chris. “I didn’t understand the stickers when I first went grocery shopping after I arrived. Showing up at the cash register with no stickers created quite a scene.”

“It is hard to believe,” Steven said, sweeping his hands to the left and the right, “that a country with this exceptional natural beauty was governed by such a backward regime for such a long time.”

Chris sat back and enjoyed his breakfast as he took in his surroundings and listened to his mother and Steven discuss the finer points of modern governance. He weighed bringing up the current occupant of the White House, and the utter havoc the guy had wrought on the country in general, and on science in particular. The beauty and potential of a country did not always go hand in hand with smart or even merely competent governance. But he decided to save that endless conversation for another less relaxing moment.

Chris was the assistant director of the university’s Center for Marine Exploration (CME_x) in Central California. He was a marine ecologist with a long track record of conducting successful field research at locations around the world. In his fifteen-year career he’d done all the things that research scientists were supposed to do: raise grant money, support students, publish scientific papers, and give public presentations. Success in that regard had resulted in the highly sought after professorial tenure at the university two years before and some local notoriety.

But at the same time Chris was much more than just an academic force. He was also a fairly imposing physical presence. At thirty-nine years old he was still in great physical shape. The lines on his face and the grey streaks in his otherwise dark hair only added to his overall charisma, or so he had been told on a couple of occasions. People had also told him that he looked like Agent Mulder from the *X-Files*, but Chris wasn’t convinced on that score. However, he was always impressed when anyone mentioned one of his favorite TV shows.

Chris had come to South Africa for a multitude of reasons, only one of which was to participate in a new research project taking place a few miles to the south of where he currently sat, down the west coast of False Bay. Six months ago, back home in California, Chris and his colleagues had inadvertently stumbled upon an illegal dumping operation while in the middle of a research project deep in the submarine canyon just offshore in Carmel Bay. The incredible rampage and bloodshed that erupted following that discovery had been extremely hard on Chris and his research team.

Months passed and Chris had fully recovered from his physical wounds, but the deeper wounds had yet to heal. The events had not been Chris's first interaction with violent criminals. Indeed, he and his colleagues had somehow found themselves facing danger on numerous occasions at locales around the world. But this most recent episode had fatigued Chris spiritually in a way that he'd never experienced before.

Though the person responsible for the carnage had been brought to ultimate justice and Chris had been instrumental in the man's death, closure had eluded Chris thus far. When he woke up one morning several months ago after another nearly sleepless night and realized the extent to which his enthusiasm for his day-to-day responsibilities at the CMEx had waned, he began to look for something different.

To his great relief, that something different came in the form of an offer from a South African colleague to come down to dive in one of the country's oldest marine protected areas. A six-month research project on a separate continent, about as far away from Carmel as you could go and still be on the planet Earth, was just what the doctor ordered. It was different enough to provide a welcome relief, but it was still consistent with his expertise and training. Though he was prepared to wait tables again if he'd had to, this was preferable by far.

Chris had applied for, and received, a six-month sabbatical from the university to come down here to Cape Town. He knew that the unprecedented speed with which his application had been processed and accepted was largely attributable to the support of Peter Lloyd, his friend and the director of the CMEx. Peter leaned on a few key administrators the way only Peter could lean. Then he'd sent Chris on his way knowing that his best chance to guarantee Chris's continued involvement with the CMEx hinged on giving him a chance to recover his enthusiasm for the job.

The violence of last summer had also touched his mother, Margaret. She was a child psychologist with a successful practice in Carmel. The death of one of her former patients had set events in motion. Margaret had also come very close to being kidnapped at gunpoint by one of the thugs involved in the incident, but Chris had intervened to save her.

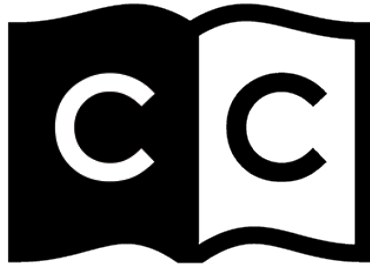
Margaret had been watching Chris closely following those events, and he knew she was still worried about him. Though he was sure he'd be fine eventually, Chris was touched by Margaret's desire to travel down to South Africa for the first two weeks of his stay. Steven, Margaret's new friend, had come along as well. And much to his surprise, Chris was actually enjoying his presence.

"Chris. Chris, are you listening?" Margaret asked.

"Er, um, yes. Fascinating point, actually."

"You think that our needing to go look for a restroom is a fascinating point? You are so full of c-r-a-p!"

The shark flag was still green. Chris wondered where he might find a meat suit.



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