

An excerpt from

AS DEAD THINGS DO

a novel by TYLER CHRISTENSEN

Before me, the sun danced on the surface of the green, murky water. The trees on the far side of the pond, which was about a hundred feet across, drooped. Spanish moss clung to their branches dangling just above the glassy surface.

A man stood on the shore directly across from me.

Facing the water, he wore black pants and boots which sunk into the brown muck of the shore. The bottom of his pants was caked in mud, and he was wet up to his knees. He wore a dirty white shirt, stained in sweat and buttoned crookedly. Tall and thin, his long arms straight at his sides like a life-sized nutcracker, a glass bottle in one hand. His bald head was pink with sunburn as he stared down into the water.

I stepped to the edge of the water, perching myself on a large rock to keep my bare feet from the mud, and raised a hand to shield my eyes from the sun.

“How you doing?” I called across the water.

The man didn’t acknowledge my presence at all.

“You alright?” I called again, louder.

Still, he didn’t look up.

I rubbed the pen in my hand with my thumb, trying to decide what my next move should be. I certainly didn’t recognize the man, but that’s not to say he wasn’t a family friend, there with Bart’s permission. I didn’t want to shout out, accusing him of trespassing in the off chance that it was some distant relative I’d yet to meet or something. Plus, he wasn’t hurting anything. If anything, I was more concerned for his well-being than I was about the legality of his being there.

He stared down at the water, the sunlight reflecting off the surface and dancing across his face. I leaned forward, trying to get a look at that face.

“Sir, you alri—” My foot slipped from the rock, splashing down into the cool water and sinking immediately into the brown muck below. I swore and swung my arms, nearly losing my balance altogether as I fought to yank my

foot free of the suction created by the mud. Freeing my foot and regaining my balance, I hopped back onto the shore, looking up again, expecting to see the man watching me with a laugh of amusement.

But he was gone.

The shoreline where he stood was bare. In the brush beyond, I could hear the rustling of dry grass as he apparently hurried away into the forest.

I waited a moment, ensuring he had really left and marveling at the speed at which he had somehow gotten out of sight. The more I thought about it, the more unlikely I realized it was that he had moved from the shore to the obscurity of the tree line as quickly as he had.

I considered following him. If he had whistled at me, clearly it was for some reason. He wanted me here to show me something. Showing himself just to hurry off, it would make sense that he wanted me to make chase.

I scanned the shoreline, considering the path I would have to take to arrive at the other end of the pond, and the mounds of twisted dead branches, perilous muck, and sharp rocks I'd have to maneuver, barefoot no less, and decided against following. Shrugging, I almost turned away to head home when I noticed something in the water.

It was him.

He floated face down, drifting soundlessly beneath the overhanging trees draped in Spanish moss. His white shirt stood in stark contrast to the murky, shadowed water, the sunburned top of his head facing my direction.

It made no sense. There was no sound, no splash or movement along the shoreline. The water was peaceful and undisturbed as if the body had been floating there for days. I hadn't actually seen him walk away, rather just assumed the rustling of the brush was him.

Common sense took a back seat for the moment. Regardless of how it happened, there was an old man drowning, if not already dead, less than a hundred feet in front of me. Without another thought, I threw myself forward, landing hard on my belly against the water and clawed wildly, propelling myself quickly across the pond.

"Hang on!"

Muddy water in my mouth and nose tried to slow me, stinging my eyes and earthy in my nostrils. I kicked, feeling the slimy tendrils of vegetation reaching up from the bottom of the pond.

A little further.

Beneath the overhanging trees.

I felt the bottom – rocky and slick – and pushed myself up in the chest-deep water. I slipped, falling forward and into him as I slung my arm up and over his back, grasping to flip him over.

My fingers sunk into thick, wet grass.

I pulled, and the grass and mud clumps ripped out in my hand.

What the hell?

It wasn't a man at all...