

LONGLEAF

FOREVER FOURTEEN

My name is Jason, and I am fourteen years old. I have always been fourteen years old. I will always be fourteen years old. Or so it seems. That's the way my parents will think of me. Even strangers will think of me as forever fourteen when they see the dates chiseled into the tombstone. My full name will be engraved there: WILLIAM JASON CALDWELL. And carved under my name will be the dates: the year of my birth and this year—the year they found my dead body out here among the longleaf pines.

Okay, so I'm not dead yet. Who knows, maybe I will live to see fifteen. It's not looking good, though. Leah and I have been wandering around in this forest for hours now. Leah is a year older than me. I'm sorry I got her into this mess, and I don't dare let on how scared I am. She's sleeping right now or at least pretending to. I'm supposed to wake her in a couple of hours so that she can stand watch while I get some sleep. We don't know where we are. Somewhere in a longleaf pine forest. We ran deeper and deeper into the forest until we could run no more and had to get some rest. I hope Carl Morris and his brothers are resting, too.

There are several things that can kill you in the long-leaf pine forest: eastern diamondback rattlesnakes, timber rattlers, cottonmouths and the occasional alligator, just to name a few of the reptiles. Bobcats are known to be in these woods, and there are rumors of black bears. I'm not saying they would kill you, I'm just saying they could if they wanted to. Then there are the fire ants, mosquitoes and ticks. So even if we somehow escape from the big critters like Carl Morris and his brothers, the West Nile virus and Lyme disease are bound to get us. Fourteen forever. Forever fourteen.

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A WINDOW SEAT

It started last Sunday because I had to have a window seat. We were flying into Pensacola, Florida so that we could drive up into the Conecuh National Forest where my mom hoped to photograph and record a dusky gopher frog and a Pine Barrens tree frog. My mom is a herpetologist—that's a biologist who studies reptiles and amphibians—and for her it's not enough to look at frogs in a book. She has to see and hear for herself, and so we, Mom, Dad and I, were going to spend the first full week of April camping in the national forest and listening for frogs. This might not sound like much of a spring break until you realize that my little sister had stayed behind with our grandparents. A week with nobody croaking except the frogs was going to be sweet.

The Conecuh National Forest is in Alabama on the Alabama/Florida line about fifty miles northeast of Pensacola, and I think we were flying over the Conecuh when I saw what I saw out the airplane window. The pilot had already announced our descent into Pensacola. They told us to fasten our seatbelts and put up our seats and trays. The flight attendants were collecting cups and peanut wrappers,

and I had my face pressed against the glass watching out the window. My dad and I were in the next to the last row, far enough behind the wing that I had a good view of the ground below. Well, not the ground so much as the tops of trees. Lots of trees. Lots of the same kinds of trees with a carpet of emerald green tree tops that seemed to go on and on forever. It was kind of a shock to my eyes when the trees opened up around a small lake. And there at the lake were these three people pushing a vehicle of some kind into the lake. I say “people” because at the time I didn’t know they were Carl Morris and his two brothers. I say “vehicle” because I couldn’t tell whether it was a car or truck or what.

“Dad, look!” I screamed. “Look! Look!”

I leaned back in my seat so he could see out the window.

“The thickest carpet of pine tops I’ve ever seen,” said my dad.

“Longleaf pines,” said my mom from the seat in front of us, “an incredibly rich and diverse habitat for all sort of wild critters.”

“No,” I said, “didn’t you see it? Those people down at that little lake . . .”

“Lake?” said Mom.

“What lake?” said Dad.

I undid my seatbelt and stood up. “Did anybody on this plane see that small lake down there in the trees?” I called out.

Heads turned throughout the plane; nobody spoke up. Dad pulled me back down into my seat. “Fasten your seatbelt,” he commanded at about the same time the flight

attendant showed up.

“Fasten your seatbelt,” the flight attendant demanded, “and I’ll have to ask you to please refrain from yelling.”

“I witnessed a crime,” I said, “at least I think it was a crime. You’ve got to make an announcement. Maybe somebody else on the plane saw it.”

Dad leaned over me and looked out my window. “Pensacola Bay,” he said.

“No, back in the trees,” I said.

“I have to prepare for landing,” said the flight attendant. “When we land you can tell your story to the police at the airport. Do not stand up again until we come to a complete halt at the terminal gate.”

“You’ve got to make an announcement,” I said. “Get on your intercom and ask who else saw it. There were people, three of them, pushing a car or a truck or something into the lake.”

The flight attendant was already gone to the back of the plane. My guess was, and I was right, he was not going to make any kind of announcement about a car or a truck or something being pushed into a lake.