

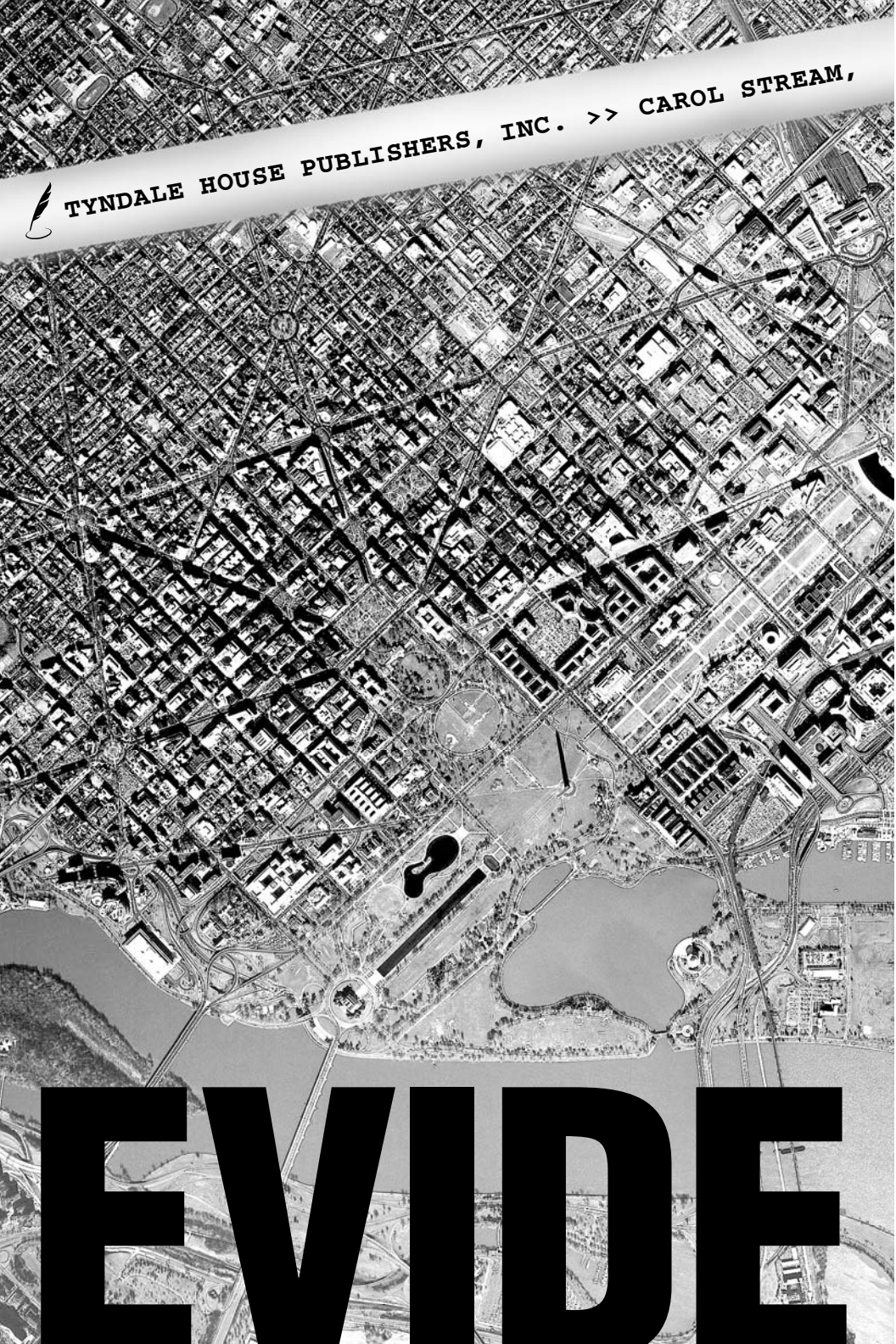


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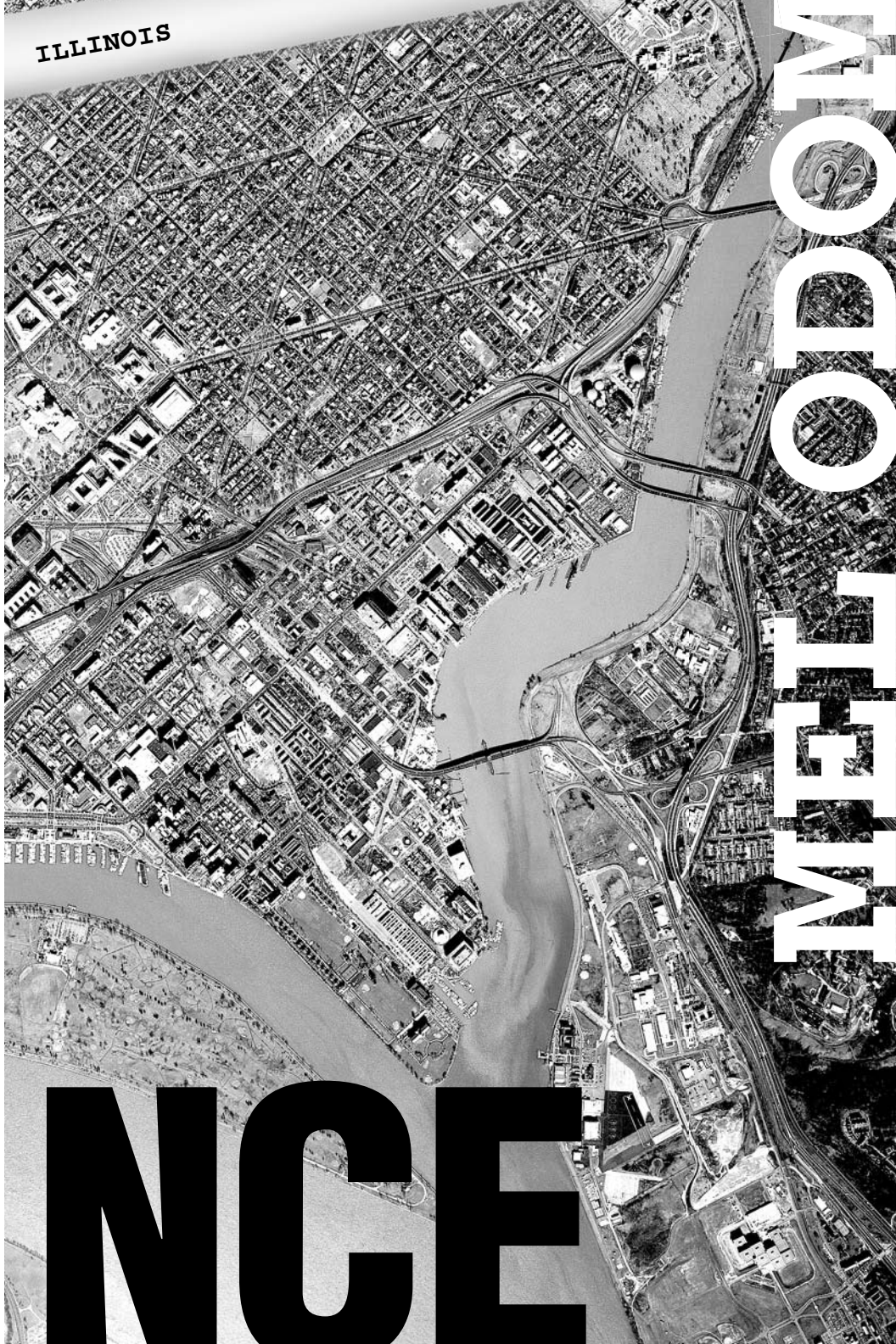
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>> SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO...

>> ARTICLE FROM THE RALEIGH,
NORTH CAROLINA, NEWS & OBSERVER.

SERIAL KILLER STRIKES CLOSE TO HOME

Hunters discovered the body of 16-year-old Chloe Ivers in Jacksonville two nights ago. The discovery ended a two-day search for the missing girl, who had been abducted from her home in Raleigh.

Police spokesman Craig Tyler confirmed the murdered girl's identity after her stepfather, Congressman Ben Swanson, learned of the tragic circumstances.

"That poor child was horribly murdered," Detective Tyler says. "But we believe we've got her murderer in custody."

Officers apprehended Isaac Allen Lamont early this morning. Three other police agencies want to speak to Lamont regarding murders in their cities and states.

"We've got Lamont cold on four other murders," Federal Bureau of Investigation Special Agent Ted Griffen says. "The FBI has listed him as a known serial killer for almost a year. He's just been hard to catch. It's a shame Lamont wasn't caught before this happened."

Congressman Swanson has agreed to give a statement to the press at a later date. United States Navy Lieutenant Laura Ivers Swanson, Chloe's mother, is based at Camp Lejeune and was unavailable for comment.

ME SCENE  **NCIS**  **CRIME SCENE**
NAVAL CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIVE SERVICE

- >> UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
- >> CHAPEL HILL, NORTH CAROLINA
- >> THE PRESENT
- >> 2014 HOURS

“Folks, no matter how this game finishes, you’ll have to admit that you’ve been treated to a rare night of collegiate basketball,” the announcer rumbled. “Any time the Tar Heels lock horns with the Blue Devils, you can bet pride is on the line.”

Will Coburn sat in one of the twenty-one thousand baby blue seats that filled the Dean E. Smith Center and watched the basketball game with avid interest. His seven-year-old daughter, Wren, sat beside him with a big bucket of popcorn in her lap. She’d never been to a basketball game before and had begged to come along when Will had asked Steven to join him.

With the tension of the divorce still hovering between Will and his fifteen-year-old son, Will had wanted a father-son night. But Wren, excitable and eager, was hard to refuse. She’d bowled Steven over before he’d had a chance.

Or maybe, Will had to admit ruefully, his son hadn’t wanted to spend an evening alone with him.

Even before the divorce had finally come through a couple months ago, Will’s love of the sea and his Navy career had driven a wedge between his family and him, and his marriage hadn’t survived it. Even after Will

had asked for and received shore duty at Camp Lejeune in his native North Carolina, the damage already done, together with whatever flaws had been in the marriage to begin with, had proven insurmountable. He'd lost his wife, but he hoped his relationship with his kids would remain solid.

Tonight was something of a test for that. School was out for spring break, and Will had gotten visitation for the next few days.

Wren had been an easy sell. Steven, on the other hand, had come only with extreme reluctance, and Will really didn't know what had turned the corner on his son's decision.

One of the Tar Heels players pulled up and shot a three-pointer that bounced harmlessly from the hoop. A Duke University player jumped and pulled the ball in, then fired it to a teammate who was already streaking down the court.

"No!" Wren shrieked, jumping up.

Will grabbed the popcorn bucket before his daughter managed to dump it all over the spectators in front of them.

The player put the ball on the ground for two quick dribbles, then went airborne, skying for the hoop. A Tar Heels player leaped after his opponent, managing to foul him on the shot but not enough to knock the shot away.

"No!" Wren shouted again. "That's five fouls, Holby! You're out! You're not going to do us any good sitting on the bench!"

The two college-age young men seated in front of Wren turned around to her, smiling broadly.

"You tell him," one of the guys said good-naturedly. He held up a hand.

Wren high-fived him without hesitation.

Will smiled. That was Wren. Open and engaging to a fault, she had never met a stranger. She was her father's daughter. She had Will's black hair and green eyes, and she was built tall and slim. From the time she was born, Wren had seemed to know that the world had a place in it for her. Her self-confidence was a marvel to behold.

The buzzer sounded as the two teams set up for the free-throw shot. The refs received notification that Holby had hit his five fouls and had to be removed. The tall, lanky player went out to a burst of applause.

"Now we're giving up too much of the paint," Wren groaned in frustration.

The audience remained on their feet, hooting and jeering as the Duke University player got ready to shoot. Four minutes were left in the half, and the Tar Heels had just dropped three points behind. The extra point made it four.

Everyone sat down again.

“How did you learn so much about basketball?” Will asked his daughter.

“TV.” Wren’s green eyes watched as the players inbounded the ball.

“I thought you watched *Scooby-Doo*.”

“Sometimes.”

“But you watch basketball.”

“When baseball’s not on,” Wren replied, as if that explained everything.

“Oh,” Will said. “I didn’t know you liked sports.”

“I do. They’ve got softball sign-ups at the rec center. I want to play, but Mom says maybe we’ll be too busy.”

Another Tar Heels player shot from outside and missed.

“Don’t just heave it up there!” Wren groaned. “*Share* that rock! Man!”

Duke recovered and went downcourt again, but when the fast break didn’t come together, the coach called a time-out.

“Maybe I can talk to your mom,” Will said. “About the softball sign-ups.”

“That would be cool.” Wren munched popcorn, looked at the scoreboard, and heaved a despairing sigh.

Steven glanced at his father reproachfully. He looked more like his mother, with dark brown hair and blue eyes. “You know,” Steven said in a cold, hostile voice, “you might want to give Mom a break. She doesn’t need you rolling another responsibility over onto her.”

Will curbed his immediate impulse to reprimand his son for his impudence. He took in a breath and let his anger go.

All night long—in fact, since Will had picked his son and daughter up from their mother’s house earlier in the day—Steven had given him the cold shoulder. Fewer than a hundred words had been exchanged in the last four hours.

“Mom’s got a lot to do,” Steven went on. “She doesn’t just kick back in some office somewhere and tell people what to do. She’s busy taking care of us.”

Anger and pain mixed inside Will. He hadn’t wanted the divorce, but he hadn’t been given a choice. No one seemed to realize that. Having both a family and a military career was hard, but other people managed it. Frank Billings had.

Thinking of Frank hurt. Even though most of a year had passed since Frank’s murder, Will still felt that loss. He suspected that he always would. Frank had been close to him, his second-in-command on the aircraft

carrier they'd served on as well as in the Naval Criminal Investigative Service unit Will commanded.

Sitting there, hurt and angry, Will wondered what Frank would have said to one of his sons if he'd been faced with this situation.

Frank wouldn't be in this boat, Will realized. Frank's relationship with his wife and kids had been solid from start to finish, and he'd even had enough time and love left over in his life to be a godfather to Steven and Wren.

Steven stared at Will, as if daring him to say something.

Insubordination wasn't something Commander Will Coburn easily tolerated. But this was family, and rank didn't have its privileges in family. And Steven's rancorous behavior was something new.

Thankfully, the Tar Heels stole the ball when it was inbounded and flipped it downcourt for a quick basket. Wren reared to her feet, and Will once more managed to save the popcorn bucket from a tumble.

Then his cell phone rang.

A quick glance at the caller ID let Will know the call was business. The number belonged to NCIS Director Michael Larkin. Larkin knew Will had cleared his schedule for this night with his kids; he wouldn't have called if it weren't important.

Will flipped the phone open and answered. Steven gave his father a look of derisive disgust, then looked away.

"Coburn," Will answered.

Larkin spoke in a clipped manner, his New York accent coming through. Before he'd taken the job as NCIS director, he'd been captain of homicide detectives in Manhattan. "Sorry to call you, Will, but something's come up."

"I'm listening."

"I know you're with your kids, but we have a situation. A fifteen-year-old girl, the daughter of a Marine captain here at the base, has been kidnapped."

The announcement sent a chill through Will. Any case that involved kids struck too close to home. "What do you need, sir?"

"You. And your team. We think we know where the girl is being held, but I want you people to take her out of there."

"Aye, sir. Driving from here to there is going to take two and a half hours. And the game is almost over. There's going to be a traffic jam."

"I've got a helicopter coming to meet you. It should be there in five minutes. Call me when you're moving."

Will folded the phone and stood up. "Come on. We've got to go."

Wren looked up at him in disbelief. “Now?”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“But there’s only two minutes left.”

“I know.” Will took his daughter by the hand and excused himself as they made their way down the row. He glanced back at Steven, finding that his son hadn’t moved. “Let’s go.”

Steven frowned.

“Now,” Will said, his voice taking on the timbre of command. “Or it’s going to be a long week without phone and Internet privileges.”

Brimming with teen hostility, Steven stood and grabbed his jacket.

As Will made his way through the crowd with Wren in hand, looking back over her shoulder to watch the game, and Steven in tow at least ten feet back, he unlimbered his phone and called his team.



>> 2021 HOURS

Outside in the parking lot, the March chill slamming into him with gusto, Will returned his phone to his pocket and examined the night sky. He’d reached all his team.

Shel McHenry had been on the firing range, which was par for the course for the big Marine gunnery sergeant. Maggie Foley had been attending an art lecture in Jacksonville. Estrella Montoya had been home with her six-year-old son. And Remy Gautreau had been out with one of the young women that always seemed to flock around him.

“Is somebody in trouble?” Wren asked.

Will glanced down at his daughter. “I’m afraid so.”

A troubled look tightened her face. “Is it going to be okay?”

In the past, Will would have been tempted to tell her sure, everything would be fine. But last year they’d buried Frank Billings. That had changed a lot of things. Will could no longer just pat his daughter on the head and tell her yes. She wouldn’t believe him.

He squatted down, putting his eyes level with hers, and took her hands. “I hope so. I’m going to try to make it be okay.”

“’Cause that’s your job.” Wren still looked pensive.

Will smiled reassuringly at his daughter. “That’s right. It’s my job.”

“I just want you to stay safe.”

“I’ll do the best I can.” Will glanced over her shoulder at Steven. He stood about ten feet away, arms wrapped around himself, not looking in their direction.

Helicopter rotors sounded overhead.

Glancing up, Will spotted the distinctive dual-rotor design of the Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight cutting through the night sky.

Will's phone rang and he answered. "Coburn."

"Commander Coburn, this is Express Zero Niner," a young male voice said. "Director Larkin sent us to pick you up, sir. You should have a visual on us from your twenty."

"Copy that, Express. Visual confirmed."

"Great. We can't put down, but we've got a basket ready."

Will took a Mini Maglite from his pocket, switched it on and waved it over his head. The bright light knifed through the darkness. The helo had already drawn the attention of some of the people loitering in the parking lot.

"I'm providing a visual, Express. Do you see me?"

"Affirmative, Commander. We have your visual. Reading you five by five."

"My kids are here. Can we get them home?"

"Roger that, sir. Director Larkin sent along a special agent to take care of that for you. We'll drop him when we pick you up."

Will folded his phone and turned to Steven. Despite his son's attitude and the pressing need to address it, Will stayed on task. *Take care of what's necessary. Deal with incidentals later.* "Steven."

Steven looked up at him.

"I don't know how long this will take," Will said. "I need you to take care of your sister."

Steven nodded.

"If you need anything—"

"We'll be fine."

"I know you will. But if you do need anything, call Chief Petty Officer McBride. She'll get you what you need."

Steven nodded again.

The Sea Knight hovered overhead. A cargo bucket appeared in the side doorway and started down. A lone figure held on.

"You feel like driving?" Will asked.

Steven looked at him. He'd gotten his driver's permit a month ago. "I haven't driven at night much."

"I'd planned on letting you drive back to base tonight. Once you're off campus, the traffic won't be as bad as it was when we came in." Will reached into his jeans pocket and took out his keys. "If you're up to it."

"Yeah."

Whatever mood gripped Steven, it would have been almost impossible for a fifteen-year-old boy with a brand-new driver's permit to pass up an opportunity to drive. Will just hoped that whomever Larkin had sent to get his kids home didn't regret it.

"Let me grab my gear." Will trotted over to his dark metallic blue Chevrolet Avalanche Z71 and keyed the electronic locks. They popped open at once. He couldn't help thinking that the 4x4 truck was a lot for Steven to handle, and Will really liked the truck. *It's your kid*, he told himself. *Let it go. You can always replace a truck.*

He reached into the back and took out the locked equipment case he carried with him wherever he went. With the NCIS posting, he was never truly off duty. He had to be ready to roll at a moment's notice. Spare gear at home and in his vehicle was a must.

He turned to Steven. "If something comes up and you need me, I'm only a phone call away."

Steven nodded but didn't look entirely convinced. Still, getting to drive appeared to have mollified him somewhat.

You're not supposed to have to bribe your kids to like you, Will told himself.

He tossed his son the keys.

Steven caught them but made no move to step toward his father.

"Hey, Dad." Wren grabbed Will around the waist and hugged him tightly.

"You have a bedtime tonight," Will said.

"Okay."

"And it's the bed. Not the couch."

Wren rolled her eyes. *Okaaaay.*

Will kissed her forehead, knowing the clock was ticking, thinking of the girl being held in a situation he'd never want his daughter in. Footsteps sounded behind him and he turned.

"Commander Coburn? I'm Special Agent Fulton." The young NCIS agent looked flustered. "I don't know if I'm supposed to salute or shake hands."

Most of the NCIS teams were made up from civilian sectors. Many agents didn't have prior military service. Will's team was different. Except for Maggie, who served as profiler for the unit, and Nita Tomlinson, the team's medical examiner, the rest of the team was still military.

Will took the man's hand, then quickly introduced him to Wren and Steven. "Get them home safe. They can handle it from there. Steven's driving. He just got his driver's permit. Take care of my truck."

Fulton looked uneasy. "Uh, Commander, I don't—"

“You’re in the NCIS, Special Agent Fulton. You’re trained for difficult situations. Riding as copilot for a beginning driver is not as hard as it gets.”

Will’s tone brooked no denial of responsibility.

“Yes, sir.” Fulton snapped to attention. He saluted, getting it wrong but at least going to the effort. “I mean, aye, sir.”

“Bye, Dad,” Wren called.

Will waved one last time, then sprinted for the cargo bucket hanging from the Sea Knight’s side. The rotor wash blew litter around the parking lot.

As he was pulled toward the helicopter in the bucket, Will thought about his son driving his truck and offered a brief prayer that God would see his son and daughter home safely. Then he turned his thoughts—and his prayers—to the kidnapped girl.