

The Disappearance of Madeleine Fischer

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My daughter was taken 15 days ago. Since then, my life has been a blur of phone calls, panic and crying, and a profusion of waiting. My wife cries herself to sleep every night and whispers Madeleine's name through her sobs. My son, who is only nine years old, will come up to me every day and ask when he will see his sister again. Neighbors, friends, and classmates of Madeleine will approach me with somber eyes and softly express their sorrows. At first, I had hope. She had only been gone for one day. Maybe she went to stay at her best friend's house. Maybe she got a flat tire and was stranded on a road somewhere. Maybe she got in trouble at school and had to stay all night long as punishment. I knew it wasn't rational thinking, but it's crazy what the mind will come up with when it wants to avoid reality. Then two days passed. That's when the police started looking into foul play. That's when everything started spiraling out of control. My Maddy. My baby girl. Gone. Missing. You hear about these stories on the news, but you never expect it to happen to your kid. Madeleine is a normal girl and a good kid. These things aren't supposed to happen to people like Madeleine. She isn't wrapped up in drugs, and she doesn't have an abusive boyfriend. These things aren't supposed to happen to good, normal people like us. Madeleine is a junior at Summit Creek High School in our small town of Summit Valley. She is a straight A student. Madeleine is the smartest girl in her grade, but she is known more for her looks. As she grew up, people always commented on my beautiful daughter. She's cheer captain and she fits the mold. Madeleine is taller than most of the other girls. She keeps her hair in immaculate blond curls that I know she spends hours on every morning. Her eyes are a sparkling green just like mine. Her cheeks are always rosy. There is seldom a moment when she isn't smiling. Madeleine is popular and is loved by her peers and her teachers. She was voted homecoming queen last fall. Madeleine works at the local coffee kiosk in the center of town called Caffeine Central. Madeleine has had that job since the summer of eighth grade. The worst thing to happen at Caffeine Central was when some teenagers got bored and teepeed the kiosk. So every day after school, she drives herself to the kiosk and works from 4:00 until 8:30 at night. March 1, was just like any other day. A normal Tuesday. The only day of the week where Madeleine works alone. I went off to work and said goodbye to Madeleine and her brother, Tommy. Madeleine dropped Tommy off at his elementary school and continued on to high school. She went to every class period and attended cheer practice for the full two hours after school. Then, she drove to Caffeine Central. She laughed and smiled as she took coffee orders. She always made people happy. The last person to see her was Mrs. Craddock, who stopped by at 7:45, like she does every day. And then Madeleine was gone. At first, it was just a missing person's case and the police were not that interested in getting involved. They told us to call her friends and drive around town looking for her. Then after 48 hours, the police decided to check the security footage. A man in a black ski mask pulled up to the drive through window and pointed a gun right between Madeleine's eyes. The video didn't pick up on the dialogue, but I assume the man told her to get in the car or else he would shoot

her. Madeleine walked out of the kiosk with her hands above her head and got in the passenger seat of the car. That is the last footage of her. Thirteen days have passed and there is nothing new. Thirteen days. Thirteen days since I have seen my little girl. Thirteen days since I have seen her shining smile, wrapped her tight in my arms, or helped her on her calculus homework that she always struggles on. I've been so worried about her, I can't eat or sleep, and that's all I've been thinking about; finding her. The search for my daughter consumed me, but I never really thought about what it would be like if we found her and she wasn't ok. What if I never get to speak to her again? What were my last words to her? I can't even remember what the last thing I said to her was. Now, I just miss her. I don't care about the search and the police and the stress this has caused us. I just want to see her again. I love her and I want her to come home. I have begun to lose hope. The police called. My wife and I are supposed to drive to the police station, but what are they going to tell me? Oh look we have your daughter and everything is all good? That seems unlikely. Even if they did have Madeleine, everything would not be all good. No matter how Maddy comes back, nothing will ever be all good again. She was kidnapped. A gun was pointed at her face. She looked death in the eye. That changes everything. When I get to the police station, I sit down with Lieutenant Smith. He has been in charge of Madeleine's case. He tells me they haven't found any new information. No surprise there. He looks at me with solemn eyes. I can see the hope fading from them day by day as well. My wife stifles a sob. She's never been an optimist. For me, that's all I have. Then, the phone rings. Lieutenant Smith answers the call.

"Is this Lieutenant Smith?" a distorted voice asks on the other end.

"Yes. Who is calling?"

"I've been keeping up with the Madeleine Fischer case. You're in charge, huh?"

"Yes, I am." A light switch seems to have flipped in the lieutenant's face. Hope glimmers in his eyes. "Do you have any information?"

"Well, I have Madeleine sitting right here next to me. Does that count as information?" the grim voice continues.

The hope fades from Lieutenant Smith's eyes. My head is heavy. I can't think straight.

Lieutenant Smith locks his eyes with mine, and I don't know what to do.

"Are you telling me you're the one who took Madeleine Fischer?"

"One and the same!" A cold cruel laugh echoes from the other side.

"HELP! He has me tied up and I-"

"I told you to shut up or I'd tape your mouth again!" he threatened.

That man took my Madeleine. He has her tied up. He's going to tape her mouth closed. I know he took her. That was her on the phone. I would recognize her soft, sweet voice anywhere.

Though, I am not used to the panicked tone she used as she pleaded for help.

"Give me my daughter back you psychotic piece of crap!" I don't know what possessed me to take the phone, but once I grabbed it, I could not let go.

My wife lays her head down in her hands and cries silently. She flinches as the man says,

"Ahhh, the father. Nice to meet ya! Your daughter here is a real treat. Real cute, too. Nice,

good kid. I really picked out a great one. You did a great job raising her. Too bad you didn't focus more on self defense and personal safety." The man laughed to himself on the other end. "You sadistic freak!" I screamed at him. The lieutenant yanked the phone from my hands. Lieutenant Smith started speaking calmly. "Our team at the police station is tracking the location of this call right now. You are not in the position to be baiting anyone. We can and will make your life a living hell once we catch you. I think--"

"I'm gonna stop you right there. This is Summit Valley. We both know the newest technology you guys have is from 1993. No one is tracking this call, and even if they were, you would never catch me. I'm not an idiot. I'm prepared for this kind of stuff. I've seen James Bond ya know. Mission Impossible, that kind of thing. If I'm going down, it's not gonna be because of a phone call."

"You seem rather confident" was the lieutenant's only reply.

"I've been preparing for a while. Really made sure I had everything set straight before I put my plan in action. This is the sorta thing that you can't mess up on." The man laughed again. There must be something wrong with him. I don't know how anyone in their right mind could be so screwed up in the head.

"Hey! You guys still there?" the man asked frantically. His agitation caught me off guard, after all we were the ones who needed him on the line, but I did not think anything of it.

"Yes, we are still here."

"Phhh, well good. I haven't even got to the best part yet."

"And what would that be?" Lieutenant Smith questioned.

"I'll give her back." I exhaled a breath I did not even know I was holding. He'll give her back. I was not expecting that. It seems too good to be true. Still, my hope flickers, even when I don't want it to. I don't want to have my hopes come crashing down, but against my will, my heart wants to believe that his man could be telling the truth.

"What's the catch?" the lieutenant asks. "There's always a catch with you crazies."

"I AM NOT CRAZY! I hate it when people call me crazy. Sure, I kidnapped a girl, but I'm not crazy. A crazy person would eat someone's heart, or cut off the victim's head, or drink the victim's blood, or save a toe from every victim. Now that's something a totally psychotic, clinically insane person would do. I wouldn't do something like that. So tell me I'm not crazy." I looked at the lieutenant. That man was the definition of crazy. He is clinically insane. But I beg the lieutenant with a pleading glance to tell that psychotic man who has my daughter's life in his hands that he is sane. Lieutenant Smith only nodded a confirmation to me.

"You're not crazy," he said to Madeleine's kidnapper.

"Yeah, I know. Anyways, about the whole kidnapping thing. I'll give you the girl back in three days in exchange for \$500,000 dollars." Half a million dollars. We don't have that kind of money. I mean we live in Summit Valley, what does he expect? No one here has got that kind of money.

"I- what? \$500,000? I can't... that's a lot of money! I would have to sell my house or figure something out. I can't come up with that in three days" I express to him.

“My deal is final. Remember what’s on the line here. I know I’m so much fun to talk to, but this isn’t some business negotiation. I will *kill* your daughter if you don’t give me the money in three days.”

“Give it to him,” my wife whispered.

“I’ll figure something out,” I replied. I would do anything to get Madeleine back.

“Well goodie! In three days time, 7:50 at night, leave the money in red suitcases at the west train station. You know the one?”

“Yes, I know the one,” the lieutenant answered.

“Leave the money on the train that leaves at 8:00, and I’ll give you the girl. Oh and make sure it’s in twenties! Also, if any of your officers attempt to stake out the station and catch me, I will shoot the girl dead right then and there. No one, and I mean no one, tries to come anywhere near me. Not that you’ll be able to catch me anyways, but just as a... precaution, we’ll call it.”

I nodded to the lieutenant. “Yes,” he said.

The line cut off.

I don’t know what to feel. My Maddy is coming back. I will get to see her again. Smell her hair. Hug her tight. Tell her I love her. But, she will never be the same again. This experience is the kind that would traumatize any person for life, especially an innocent girl. I can’t imagine Madeleine having to deal with that. I don’t want her to face those kinds of struggles, but I guess there’s nothing I can do. I wasn’t able to protect her. Besides, I would rather her have to live with all of that trauma than not live at all.

Lieutenant Smith assures me that when we make the switch he will have back up in case of an emergency. The officers will not follow us closely because we don’t want to make Madeleine’s captor feel “threatened” (his words, not mine), but we will definitely need reinforcements. The lieutenant told me I did the right thing, agreeing to that man’s terms. It doesn’t feel like it. As we drive home, all I can think about is how Madeleine will have to be with that man for three more days. A lot can happen in three days. Look what happened in ten minutes. Just because she was alive on the phone ten minutes ago does not mean that man won’t change his mind and torture her or do something even worse. I know I did everything I could to get her back, but this doesn’t sit right with me. I need her back now.

My wife begins making phone calls out to all of our family and friends, begging them for loans, once we get home. I hear her crying over the phone. I don’t know what to say to make it better for her. I don’t think there is anything I can say. She cries herself quietly to sleep tonight. I pretend I don’t hear her as tears trickle down my face. One of us has to stay strong. I can’t let her see my tears as well.

We go to the bank and begin a long endeavor of pulling all of our life savings out in cash, signing documents, and getting loans to make up for all the money we don’t have. Somehow, by the will of God, we scrape by enough.

It’s day three. The day we get her back. My wife and I then start shoving wads of \$20 bills into red suitcases. \$500,000 worth of twenty dollar bills actually. It turns out that half a million dollars in twenties fills around four suitcases full of cash.

I ride in the front seat of Lieutenant Smith's car with the four suitcases in the back. Although the officers cannot make a move, there are 12 police cars following us in case anything goes down. I take two of the suitcases out of the back, and the lieutenant takes out the other two. As I walk to the designated drop-off spot, all I can think about is Madeleine. What do I say to her once I get her back? How do I make her trauma better for her? How can I make it up to her for failing as a father? But another question lingers at the back of my mind. And it's not about Madeleine; how do I catch this monster and punish him for everything he put my daughter through?

Lieutenant Smith stops and places the suitcases on the train. I do the same with mine.

"Leaving in two minutes!" the announcer says over the intercom. Then I see it. A large trunk, the same blood red color as the suitcases with the money. There are holes punched in the sides of the trunk. I stop dead in my tracks. He shoved Madeleine in that trunk. Her tall body was crammed into that box with just a few holes to breathe. I am gonna get that monster. Thinking about him pulled me out of my stupor. I run across the station to the trunk. I hear the whistle of the train taking off with the trunks of money in the background, but all I can focus on is getting to my Madeleine. I unlatch the clasp of the trunk and crack it open. I can see my little girl's luscious, blonde curls. This is it! I am getting my daughter back. Red. What is all of that red? I open the trunk all the way. The only thing inside is Madeleine's bloody, severed head.