

THE UNSOLVED MYSTERIES PODCAST | THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TABITHA TUDERS

Episode 56 Transcript

JAMIE PULLEY: From the very moment that mom called me and told me that Tabitha didn't make it to school that day, I knew something was wrong, because Tabitha followed the rules and mom instilled everything in her. Come straight home, go straight to the bus. In that current moment, I felt that she was taken, and she wasn't taken by good people.

NARRATION:

IN A QUIET NEIGHBORHOOD IN EAST NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE, A LARGE POSTER HANGS OVER THE PORCH OF A MODEST FAMILY HOME. IT'S THE PHOTO OF YOUNG TABITHA TUDERS. IN 2003, TABITHA IS 13 WHEN SHE HEADS OFF TO SCHOOL ONE TUESDAY IN APRIL. SHE MISSES HER BUS THAT MORNING AND NO ONE KNOWS WHY. SHE ALSO DOESN'T SHOW UP FOR SCHOOL, AND BY THE END OF THAT TUESDAY AFTERNOON, EVERYONE IS DESPERATELY SEARCHING FOR TABITHA.

I'M STEVE FRENCH, AND THIS IS UNSOLVED MYSTERIES: "THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TABITHA TUDERS."

IT'S 7:30 AM AT THE NASHVILLE HOME OF 13-YEAR-OLD TABITHA TUDERS. SCHOOL MORNINGS ARE ALWAYS BUSY AT THIS HOUSE ON LILLIAN STREET, WHERE TABITHA LIVES WITH HER MOM DEBRA, HER DAD BO, AND HER OLDER SISTER JAMIE.

JAMIE PULLEY: Mom always got up before everyone else and left for work. Dad would get up afterwards. That particular morning, Dad woke up and woke her up, told her to get ready for school, and then he left. I worked late nights, so I was always asleep when she got up to go. So, the last thing we know is Dad woke her up and, um, she was to get up and get ready to get to the bus stop.

NARRATION:

WITH HER SISTER JAMIE FAST ASLEEP, TABITHA SETS OUT FOR THE SHORT WALK TO THE SCHOOL BUS. SHE REGULARLY CATCHES THE BUS AT ONE OF TWO STOPS THAT ARE WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE. AND ACCORDING TO HER FAMILY, SHE ALWAYS FOLLOWS HER MOTHER'S RULES FOR SAFETY AND ALLOWS HERSELF ENOUGH TIME SO SHE DOESN'T MISS THE BUS.

JAMIE PULLEY: Mom always let her know that if there wasn't anyone at the first bus stop, to take a peek down the hill to see if there were children down there and go ahead and walk down to the second bus stop so that she wouldn't have to walk by herself. Of course, Mom always told us not to talk to strangers and prepared us for those types of things. But as far as the bus stop goes, those were her rules. Just don't wait by yourself.

NARRATION:

LATER THAT TUESDAY, TABITHA'S MOM, DEBRA, RETURNS HOME FROM HER EARLY MORNING WORK SHIFT. BUT LATER THAT AFTERNOON, SHE BEGINS TO REALIZE SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG.

DEBRA TUDERS: I get home from work every day at one o'clock. She gets home at four. Then when she didn't get home at four, I gave her just a few more minutes to make it down the hill to the house. And then by then, I knew something was wrong because she was never late. She was always on time.

JAMIE PULLEY: Typically, she would walk through the door at the same time every day. So, this particular day, she did not walk through the door. So, Mom gave it a little bit of time just in case the bus was running late, and Tabitha still didn't get there. So, she went up to the school to try to get in and see if there was anybody there, if anybody had any answers.

DEBRA TUDERS: I went to the school, and when the first time I went up there couldn't get nobody to the door. Then, finally I was able to get in, but I couldn't find nobody. So, I left. I came back home. I called my husband. I told my husband that something was wrong cause Tabitha wasn't home. So, we went back to the school when he got there. And a custodian finally let us in, and I asked the guy, I said, "Sir, is there anybody else in this school besides you?" And he said, "There's a teacher and some kids around the corner," and I told my husband, I said, "Just pray that she's down there." And we went around there, and we talked to that teacher, which was one of her teachers, and he said that she wasn't there all day.

NARRATION:

OVER EIGHT HOURS HAVE PASSED SINCE TABITHA LEFT THE HOUSE. DID THE YOUNG TEENAGER SIMPLY SKIP SCHOOL AND RUN OFF SOMEWHERE? HER PARENTS AND SISTER JAMIE INSTANTLY DISMISSED THAT THEORY AS HIGHLY UNLIKELY.

JAMIE PULLEY: We come from, uh, a good family and type that really never had anything to run from. She didn't get in trouble. She made good grades. Had the best parents we could ask for.

DEBRA TUDERS: She was more like a little homebody. She was always with me, except for when we were at school and work. She loved to read to the neighbors.

JAMIE PULLEY: She laughed a lot. She joked a lot. She had joke books. And we would just find her randomly just coming up wanting to tell you a joke out of her book or read you a joke.

DEBRA TUDERS: You know, Tabitha was a petite little girl. She was so tiny. She was probably four foot nine. She only weighed like 100 pounds, 90 to 100 pounds. She has pretty blue eyes. She was a beautiful girl, but me and her were so close.

JAMIE PULLEY: My parents held up the best that they could. That was their baby. And just, me being a mom, you know, if I lose my kids for five minutes, I'm freaking out and, um, they didn't sleep. They didn't eat. They basically just held on to each other and comforted each other.

DEBRA TUDERS: I think somebody just picked her up at the bus stop and just took her. They had eight hours to get away before I ever knew she was gone, and you know, I blame the school for not calling me, letting me know that she wasn't in school. I don't know why they didn't call.

NARRATION:

THE METROPOLITAN NASHVILLE POLICE ARE IMMEDIATELY CALLED IN ON WHAT WILL BECOME ONE OF THE BIGGEST MISSING PERSONS CASES IN THE CITY'S HISTORY.

MATTHEW FILTER: Tabitha would have been missing, at that point, probably about nine or 10 hours, because she left the house at about 8am and nobody realized she was missing until after 4pm.

NARRATION:

MATTHEW FILTER IS A DETECTIVE WITH THE METRO NASHVILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT AND HE'S CURRENTLY IN CHARGE OF TABITHA'S CASE. AT THE TIME OF HER DISAPPEARANCE, DETECTIVE FILTER WAS A UNIFORMED OFFICER IN THE PATROL DIVISION.

MATTHEW FILTER: She disappeared right near her home, between her home and her school bus stop. So, the search, initially, in the initial days, was heavily focused on the neighborhood that she lived in. In 2003, East Nashville was, what I would call, more of a urban type setting, neighborhood it was very, very close to the downtown area. They went all out with the search. I mean, they did everything that, and utilized every tool that they had available at the time. It consisted of not only checking yards, but knocking on doors, talking to people, using dogs to try to find her scent, doing water searches. I mean, you name it and they did it.

JAMIE PULLEY: We, as the family, set up, like, a command center at one of the local churches. And we made missing persons posters, knocked on doors, put them on telephone poles, in businesses. Wherever anybody would let us drop off a picture, we would.

NARRATION:

AS DETECTIVES DIG INTO THEIR INVESTIGATION, THERE ARE FEW WITNESSES AND EVEN FEWER CLUES. THEY HAVE NO IDEA IF TABITHA WAS ABDUCTED OR IF SHE IS A RUNAWAY, BUT ALL THE EVIDENCE SEEMS TO SUGGEST FOUL PLAY.

MATTHEW FILTER: Yeah, when they search her room, they didn't really find anything remarkable. They didn't find that she had taken any clothes with her. They didn't find that makeup or anything had been taken, what little bit of cash money that she had was actually in the room. She didn't take that with her. There was no indication that she had packed up and left or intended on being gone for a long period of time. The only real piece of evidence that they found inside the room, that is still kind of a mystery to us today, um, was they found a handwritten note that just had the initials "T.D.T" and "M.T.L".

NARRATION:

INVESTIGATORS ARE CONFIDENT THAT "T.D.T" STANDS FOR TABITHA DANIELLE TUDERS, BUT THE INITIALS "M.T.L" ARE A MYSTERY.

MATTHEW FILTER: They looked at all the students that she went to school with and people that were within her circle of friends and nobody had the initials "M.T.L."

NARRATION:

TABITHA'S FAMILY ALSO TRIES TO FIGURE OUT THE MEANING BEHIND THOSE CRYPTIC INITIALS.

JAMIE PULLEY: There was a family friend. Their son had those same initials, but we aren't certain that those initials were meant for him. I believe he was younger than Tabitha, but I don't think they ever called him in to do any questioning or investigating on that.

NARRATION:

A CANVASS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD TURNS UP ONLY A COUPLE OF WITNESSES WHO CLAIM TO HAVE SEEN TABITHA IN THE MOMENTS BEFORE SHE VANISHED.

JAMIE PULLEY: So, the lady on the corner house, she said that she did see her that morning, walking to the bus stop. But going down to the second bus stop, there was a gentleman that lived on the left-hand side, Mr. Manning, and he said that she was walking down the hill with a piece of paper in her hand. From there, he basically said he shut his door, um, and did not see her after that. And then there was a little boy at the second bus stop who said that he witnessed her getting into a red vehicle.

MATTHEW FILTER: He saw Tabitha walking towards the bus stop. Now, he said that he saw a red car pull up next to her, and Tabitha got into the car with him, or he believed that Tabitha got in the car, because the car drove off and she was gone. The only thing, he described it as a red kind of a sportier looking car, and it looked like there was an African American male driver.

DEBRA TUDERS: She was always taught not to get in a car with a stranger. So, it had to be somebody that she knew if that would have been said. Because I don't think, no other way she would have got in the car.

MATTHEW FILTER: There was no screaming or there was no fight scene or anything. And I don't know if he actually saw her get in the car, but I think he just made the assumption that she did because she wasn't there any longer. Even though he was the only person at the bus stop that claimed to have seen this, one of the things that does lend some credibility to his statement is when they were doing an initial search using tracking dogs, the dogs ran the track and followed Tabitha's trail all the way to this point where the student saw the red car pull up to Tabitha. That's where the dogs lost her scent.

NARRATION:

SINCE TABITHA WOULDN'T JUST GET IN A CAR WITH A STRANGER, POLICE BELIEVE THE DRIVER MAY BE SOMEONE KNOWN TO HER. THEY GATHER THE BEST POSSIBLE DESCRIPTION FROM THE YOUNG WITNESS.

JAMIE PULLEY: Red car, black male with a ball cap on, is the way that he described it.

NARRATION:

IT'S NOT THE MOST DETAILED DESCRIPTION, BUT IT'S ENOUGH TO QUICKLY IDENTIFY A POTENTIAL SUSPECT — SOMEONE WHO'S INTIMATELY CONNECTED TO TABITHA'S SISTER, JAMIE.

JAMIE PULLEY: There was a ex-boyfriend of mine that, he was a black male who wore ball caps. So, he was looked into by the detectives.

MATTHEW FILTER: I believe he did drive a red car at that time. And of course, he was an African American male. You would almost think that if Tabitha did get into this car voluntarily, it certainly would have been with someone she knew. But I know that Jamie's boyfriend at the time denied having any involvement in it, and there was no way to connect him or nothing that we could find that would have put him in that area at the time. That's probably why they didn't look at him too hard, because I think he had a punch out on the time clock or something, and he would have been punching out right about the time she would have been walking to the school bus. And I don't think they felt that he would have been able to drive from his place of work to where she was last seen within that timeframe.

JAMIE PULLEY: Yeah, so he went through the interview process just the same as all of us family members did. He submitted to a polygraph and he was cleared, I guess, through the process of the polygraph and the interviews.

NARRATION:

SO, WHO WAS THE DRIVER OF THAT RED CAR?

MATTHEW FILTER: I would have to say that she got picked up in that red car, and she had to have known the person that was driving that car at the time. And whoever that person is, that would be the primary key to unlocking the mystery.

JAMIE PULLEY: If, in fact, she did get into this red car, what happened or what was being done to make her get into this car, basically? Did the person on the inside have a gun and said get in or did they, "Your mom's hurt. I have to take you to your mom." Or, you know, we've gone through all of these different scenarios of what would have made her get into a car with someone that she didn't know and we're not sure.

NARRATION:

AND WHAT HAPPENED TO TABITHA AFTER SHE WAS ABDUCTED IS ALSO A MYSTERY.

NARRATION:

THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSING TEENAGER CONTINUES FOR WEEKS, THEN MONTHS, THEN YEARS. BECAUSE OF THE HIGH-PROFILE NATURE OF THE CASE, COUNTLESS LEADS AND SIGHTINGS POUR INTO THE POLICE DEPARTMENT AND EACH ONE HAS TO BE THOROUGHLY INVESTIGATED.

NEWS REPORT: Good evening. There may be a new twist in Nashville's most high-profile missing persons case.

NEWS REPORT: This is Channel Five. Jason Lam joins us now with this new development. Jason, this is big news. What's this tip?

JASON LAM: Well, Shannon, it's that Tabitha may have been spotted more than 700 miles away in the town of Fremont, Nebraska.

NARRATION:

EACH LEAD IS FOLLOWED UP NO MATTER HOW FAR AWAY FROM NASHVILLE... AND DETECTIVES COME UP EMPTY.

NEWS REPORT: Hi, everyone. The latest tip on where to find Tabitha Tuders may have been part of an overseas scam.

NEWS REPORT: Tuders is the missing 13-year-old from East Nashville. New at six, police tell News Channel Five's Mark Bellanger how a man may have been trying to use the Tuders case to hitch a free ride to the United States.

NARRATION:

TABITHA'S FAMILY FIND THEMSELVES RIDING A ROLLER COASTER OF HOPE AND DESPAIR WITH EACH NEW DEVELOPMENT.

JAMIE PULLEY: We did have a particular tip that came in in Las Vegas. We looked at pictures of this certain person and my family actually made a trip out to Las Vegas to try and see this girl and they come back with no success. But every day, I see someone that I have to question myself. I create scenarios in my head, I think, but I'll pass someone, and I know it's not her. I know it's not her. But I have to turn around, and I have to go back just so that I can see that person one more time to convince myself that it's not her.

NARRATION:

OTHER LEADS HAVE POINTED TO A LIBRARY, WHERE IT WAS REPORTED THAT TABITHA MIGHT HAVE BEEN USING A COMPUTER TO GO INTO CHAT ROOMS BEFORE SHE WAS ABDUCTED. BUT THAT IS ULTIMATELY ANOTHER DEAD END.

NEWS REPORT:

MALE ANCHOR: Good evening, a teenage girl possibly abducted and pushed into sex trafficking. That is what police now think happened to Tabitha Tuders nearly 17 years ago.

FEMALE ANCHOR: News Four's Joshua Cole is live there, where police are focusing their search for answers now and Joshua, who police believe did this?

JOSHUA COLE: Well, when I talked with the lead detective here today, he tells me that even after 17 years he remains hopeful that she could be alive.

NARRATION:

IN 2020, METRO POLICE ACT ON NEW TIP THAT TABITHA'S DISAPPEARANCE MAY BE CONNECTED TO A SPRAWLING PIECE OF RURAL PROPERTY IN HICKMAN COUNTY, 60 MILES SOUTHWEST OF NASHVILLE. A SEARCH TAKES PLACE ON A SIX-ACRE PLOT OF WOODED LAND WHERE THERE IS A SMALL, ABANDONED

HOME. LIKE THE PROMISING LEADS THAT CAME BEFORE IT, THIS LATEST SEARCH DOESN'T YIELD ANY SIGN OF TABITHA OR ANY HINT AS TO WHAT HAPPENED TO HER. FOR THE NASHVILLE POLICE, THE INVESTIGATION HAS BEEN A LONG AND DIFFICULT CHALLENGE.

MATTHEW FILTER: I would say, there's probably been at least six or seven detectives that have been specifically assigned the case as the lead investigator over the last 19 years. Unfortunately, in 2003, the technology that we got today just wasn't around. So, we're very, very limited as to what we're really able to do back then and even with the lack of evidence and, and stuff just because of the nature of the case today. There really isn't a whole lot that technology is going to help us with in this investigation. When I initially got the case assigned, I, like I do with any cold case that I get, I first thing I do is I start reviewing over the case file. What investigative efforts have been done? What kind of leads had been followed? What kind of leads are still lingering out there that hadn't been resolved yet? In a case like this especially, you don't have a crime scene to work with. You've got a 13-year-old girl that basically walked down the street from her house and just vanished and there's just no one to go talk to about it. There's nobody that really saw anything that really seems to know anything. There's no physical evidence. It's just a total lack of evidence in the case that makes it really difficult to know what direction to go.

NARRATION:

TABITHA'S DISAPPEARANCE HAS HAD A PROFOUND EFFECT ON HER SISTER JAMIE, AND HOW SHE'S DECIDED TO RAISE HER OWN CHILDREN.

JAMIE PULLEY: I tried to make them understand because my older two were around one years old when she come up missing. And over their entire life, like, they've never been able to have a sleepover. If kids wanted to hang out with my kids, they have to come to my house. And you know, I never dropped them off at the mall. And when they went skating, I went skating with them, because I was always in fear that something was going to happen to my kid. So, I turned into that helicopter mom, more so, I feel, because of what happened to Tabitha. I've always had a fear that someone was going to take my kids away from me also.

NARRATION:

FOR TABITHA'S FAMILY, THERE HAS BEEN NO CLOSURE AND NO RESOLUTION, BUT THE MEMORIES ARE STILL VIVID AND THEIR HOPE HAS BARELY DIMINISHED.

JAMIE PULLEY: I 100% have hoped that she will still be alive, but so many things have gone through my head, maybe to make myself feel better about her not being home. But definitely I haven't dismissed the fact that she could be with a family, but I've also not dismissed the fact that she could be in a very bad situation.

DEBRA TUDERS: We were always together except for — I'm gonna cry — except for work or school. And then when we'd go places, she would sing in the car, and everything, and then when she come up missing, when I'm driving, I was driving the car to hear her sitting over singing. And I just start laughing because she would look at me and laugh. It was, it was... that was all the time. Yeah, I miss my daughter so much.

JAMIE PULLEY: Mom and Dad still have the same little, tiny house and they've always said over the years that they'll never leave because if Tabitha does so happen to get away, she needs to know where to come back home to, and that's the only home that she had ever known. So, they're scared to move and leave that place because she may not know where to, where to find us.

DEBRA TUDERS: She's still got her stuff in her room and all her little trinkets. I just go in there and dust them off, and her makeup. But I know sometimes when, at the beginning when she was missing, I would go in her room and sleep sometimes, so I can feel like I was close to her. It was hard at the beginning. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I felt, I guess, guilty because I didn't eat because that felt like she wasn't eating, so why should I? It was a lot of things going through me in the beginning.

MATTHEW FILTER: To solve this case, what it's going to take is someone to come forward. I know that there is somebody out there. I know there's at least one person out there that knows what happened to her. And I would be willing to bet that there's other people, especially after 19 years, that know what happened to her.

NARRATION:

THE FBI IS OFFERING A \$50,000 REWARD FOR INFORMATION LEADING TO THE RECOVERY OF TABITHA TUDERS AND THE PROSECUTION OF THE PERSON OR PERSONS RESPONSIBLE FOR HER DISAPPEARANCE. TODAY, TABITHA WOULD BE IN HER EARLY 30S. SHE HAD BLOND HAIR AND BLUE EYES, AND AT THE TIME SHE WENT MISSING, SHE WAS FIVE FOOT ONE AND 100 POUNDS. SHE ALSO HAS A BIRTHMARK ON HER STOMACH AND A SCAR ON HER FINGER. BOTH OF HER EARS ARE PIERCED. EVER SINCE TABITHA DISAPPEARED, NEARLY TWO DECADES AGO, TABITHA'S FAMILY HAS HUNG A MISSING POSTER FOR TABITHA ON THEIR FRONT PORCH, A BEACON TO REMIND THE WORLD THAT THEY HAVE NOT GIVEN UP ON FINDING THEIR MISSING DAUGHTER.

JAMIE PULLEY: You know for us, we do. We hold on to hope and hold on to faith that we're going to get her back one day and seeing the efforts that we have made to keep her out there and, um, in the public eye and all the things that we've done to try and find her, I feel pretty positive that she would be proud and that she would feel loved and that she would feel important.

DEBRA TUDERS: We still love her no matter what. If she could just, please come home. We miss her so much. She knows I love her. She knows that we will never stop loving her. Just want to say if you know whoever's got her, please just let her come home. Somebody out there knows something and they gotta give, you gotta give one day. I believe she's still here. I just don't know where she's at.

NARRATION:

IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TABITHA TUDERS, ANONYMOUS TIPS CAN BE MADE TO NASHVILLE CRIME STOPPERS AT 615-74CRIME, OR CALL THE METRO NASHVILLE COLD CASE UNIT AT 615-862-7329, OR LEAVE A TIP AT UNSOLVED.COM.

NEXT, ON UNSOLVED MYSTERIES:

MAGGIE ZINGMAN: I called and I did that typical mom message of, "Brittie, I know you're okay. But really, this really begins to worry me when you don't call back. I went from being worried Thursday night to being totally devastated about five hours later.

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Unsolved Mysteries is a production of Cosgrove Meurer Productions and Cadence 13, an Audacy company.

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From Cadence 13, editing, mixing and mastering by Chris Basil and Andy Jaskiewicz.

Production support by Sean Cherry, Ian Mandt, and Ava Feneberger.

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Thanks for listening to Episode 56 of Unsolved Mysteries.