

Tapas for two... then parents' nightmare began

By Sandra Laville, Martin Wainwright, Dale Fuchs in Faro

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The telephone rang at around 11pm at Trish Cameron's home near Glasgow. She picked it up to hear the voice of her younger brother. "He was distraught, breaking his heart," Mrs Cameron said. "He said: 'Madeleine's been abducted, she's been abducted.'"

Hundreds of miles away in Portugal's western Algarve Gerald McCann, whose job as a heart surgeon demands a calm, steady nerve, had lost any semblance of control and was crying down the telephone to his older sister. Just an hour earlier he and his wife Kate had returned to their ground floor apartment in the Ocean Club holiday resort to find that three-year-old Madeleine, the little girl they had left asleep in her white pyjamas, had disappeared.

Their two-year-old twins, Sean and Amelie, lay undisturbed in their cots beside the bed, making the absence of the child they call Maddy all the more haunting. Nothing appeared to have been stolen from the room, but the shutters seemed to have been forced, the window was open and the main door unlocked, according to the family.

It was Mrs McCann who walked in first. Minutes later she ran out screaming, according to her sister in law. In the confusion and melee that followed, the police were called and other holidaymakers woken to carry out a search for the three-year-old, amid hopes that she was merely sleepwalking.

But by the time Mr McCann picked up the phone to his sister in Dumbarton the thread of hope that Maddy had simply climbed out of the window and wandered off had been eclipsed by the growing certainty that she had been snatched while he and his wife ate tapas just 100 yards away within the holiday complex.

The luxury resort in Praia de la Luz, where Moorish-style villas sit amid sub-tropical gardens overlooking a beach of white sand, was transformed into a crime scene yesterday.

Portuguese police used a sniffer dog to check around the complex. The five storey block where the McCanns were staying was sealed off and forensic experts were dusting the shutters and windows of their two bedroomed apartment for fingerprints. Those holidaymakers who were not taking part in the continuing search for any sign of the child were handing out photographs of her in the hope that someone either within the resort or outside in the small village of Praia de la Luz would have spotted her.

"She is an absolutely beautiful wee blonde girl with blue green eyes," said Mrs Cameron. "Her one distinguishing features is that one of her pupils runs down into the iris of her eye, her right eye."

The Foreign Office said a liaison officer from the Serious and Organised Crime Unit was in touch with the Portuguese chief of police. Two officials from the British Consulate in nearby Portimao were with the family to help them as they dealt with the police, a spokesman said.

The couple were being interviewed yesterday afternoon by Portuguese detectives, who took them through their movements on Thursday night in detail.

Mrs McCann, a GP in Leicester and her husband, who works in the world renowned cardiac unit of Glenfield Hospital, in the city, flew out to the Algarve with eight friends last Saturday for the week-long break.

Maddy, their eldest child, was going to be four next week and was due to start school in September. Family friend Jill Renwick said it was the first time they had been away somewhere with the children and that they had chosen the resort with care. "This is the first time they have done this. They are very, very anxious parents and very careful and they chose [the resort] because it is family-friendly," she said.

Throughout the week the family enjoyed the facilities in the resort, which boasts four swimming pools, the beach and childcare from 7.30pm to 11.30pm for those parents who want it.

On Thursday night the McCanns went out after 8pm, having put their three children into their pyjamas and seen them fall asleep in their bedroom in the apartment. "They weren't out for long, and they could see the apartment from the restaurant" said Brian Healy, Madeleine's maternal grandfather.

Mrs Cameron said the couple checked on the children every half hour; the last check was made after 9pm by Mr McCann. Some time between then and around 10pm when his wife walked into the room to find Madeleine missing, the family believes an intruder broke in and snatched the girl.

Mrs Cameron said: "Nothing had been touched in the apartment, no valuables taken, no passports. They think someone must have come in the window and gone out the door with her."

Paul Moyes, 47, from Cheshire and his wife Susan, who own a holiday apartment in the same block as the McCanns, said they were woken at 11.30pm by a knock on the door and asked to join in a search for a missing girl.

"We went down to the beach with scores of other people to look for her," said Mr Moyes. "The police arrived at around midnight and by that stage we were already out looking. There were uniformed police, plain clothes and even off duty local officers who joined in.

"The search went on all night, people were using torches, and in the morning police sniffer dogs arrived."

By 4.30am exhausted holidaymakers began drifting away, having found no sign of Madeleine. Back home in Dumbarton, Mrs Cameron spoke to her brother again at 10am yesterday.

"It was frustrating for him then because between 5am and 7am the police seemed to do nothing, they were standing about," she said.

But the manager of the resort, John Hill, said everything was being done to try to trace Madeleine. "It was a very emotional and very frantic night and everyone did a fantastic job of getting involved and trying to search the area," he said.

Throughout yesterday the search continued for Madeleine. Mrs McCann's parents, Brian and Sandra, flew out in the afternoon from Liverpool to join their daughter and son-in-law, who met as young doctors in Glasgow and married nine years ago in Liverpool. Mrs Cameron also packed a bag to fly out to help her younger brother.

At the McCanns' family home in the village of Rothley, Leicestershire, neighbours and friends were praying that Madeleine would be found alive and well. "We are absolutely devastated," said Penny Noble. "They are a really nice family and good neighbours. They are delightful. We see them take their bikes up and down and going for walks. Madeleine is a very happy-go-lucky little girl".

Another neighbour, Tracey Horsefield, said that the family "idolised" Maddy and the twins. She said: "They were really protective of the children. I'm just praying that she's not been abducted. Let's hope that for some reason she just wandered off."

At the cardiac unit in Glenfield Hospital, staff were at work yesterday with one eye on the phone - hoping to receive the call which would tell them their colleague's child had been found safe and well.

Doug Skehan, a consultant cardiologist who works with Mr McCann, said: "The mood in the hospital is one of great concern and we hope that Kate and Gerry will have their daughter back very soon."

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