

State Police on the scent of possible dognapping

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LAS CRUCES - For the past four weeks, Orlando Sandoval's 3-year-old daughter has asked about Tulip.

"Everywhere we went ... 'Is this where Tulip is?' 'Daddy, are you going to go get Tulip?'" Sandoval said Friday.

Thursday night, Sandoval was finally able to tell her 'yes.'

"She was just so excited," said Sandoval, a New Mexico State University graduate and former NMSU firefighter who is now the Angel Fire, N.M., fire chief. "She just couldn't hardly stand it."

It's not entirely clear how the beloved family bulldog, reportedly pregnant, ended up 375 miles from home, in Las Cruces, but New Mexico State Police is investigating the possible dog-napping. The purebred English bulldog, worth between \$2,500 and \$3,000, disappeared Aug. 21 - exactly four weeks ago.

"It was basically like somebody stole my kid," Sandoval said Friday. "She's as much a part of the family as anybody. And when we found out somebody had found her? It was just great to be able to have our dog back."

Tulip was a gift to the Sandoval family, given by friends who weren't able to keep her. Sandoval's father stopped by the family's home the afternoon of Aug. 21 and noticed her disappearance.

"The dog never left - she was always on the porch or she was underneath the camper," Sandoval said. "She never left the yard."

If thieves took her, she might have been their only target. The family's garage was left open, and Sandoval's thousands of dollars of tools were untouched.

"We pretty much knew she was stolen," Sandoval said.

The next day, they papered the town with fliers, but nobody had any leads until a confidential informant came forward in Las Cruces.

Tulip was recovered Thursday morning at a residence in the West Picacho Avenue area, said Curtis Childress, Do-a Ana County's animal cruelty investigation team coordinator.

"We were really on a time crunch on this," Childress said. Tulip is scheduled to have a C-section delivery - common among the breed - on Tuesday, he said, and "you don't want it to go into labor and something happens to these pups."

It's not clear if the Las Cruces are the suspects, Childress said. They told investigators they found the dog, and might just be "good-hearted people who want to help," he said.

Sandoval offered the Las Cruces who had Tulip a reward, but they declined to take it. No criminal charges have been filed, but that's not the focus of the family right now, Sandoval said.

"We're really glad to have our dog back," he said.

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