

Web of directions helped to snare extortion suspects

Businessman aided FBI's plan

★ Randy Collier
and Charles Kelly
The Arizona Republic

Extortionists threatening to cut a limb off a Paradise Valley businessman's son forced the man to follow a complex series of directions and to bury \$250,000 in a suitcase, according to a federal affidavit released Friday.

As Marc Kaplan was led from place to place around Maricopa County on Feb. 13, FBI agents kept him under watch and identified suspects in the case, the affidavit says.

The affidavit was released Friday in connection with the initial appearance of two men arrested on one count each of using the mail to extort money.

Appearing before U.S. Magistrate Morton Siver were Michael Grant Miller, 24, of the 1600 block of South Harris Drive, Mesa, and Mark Andrew Nelson, 31, of the 6800 block of East Cochise Road, Scottsdale.

A preliminary hearing for both men is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Wednesday before Siver.

James Ahearn, special agent in charge of the Phoenix FBI office, said more arrests are expected.

The affidavit gave this account of events:

On Feb. 7, Kaplan, who owns Health and Nutrition Laboratories, 455 E. Shea Blvd., got a letter that had been written on a computer and postmarked in Phoenix the day before.

The letter demanded that Kaplan pay \$250,000 in one week or his 12-year-old son's arm or leg would be removed.

The letter told Kaplan that he would receive further instructions in a phone call at 2 p.m. Feb. 13 at his office.

Kaplan notified the FBI, and agents got court orders to install

tracing devices on his business phones.

Kaplan got a call from one of the extortionists at 2:17 p.m. Feb. 13, and was told to go immediately to a closed Security Pacific Bank branch at Tatum and Shea boulevards, where, on a pole, he would find a note with further instructions.

FBI agents traced the call to a pay telephone at a supermarket in Chandler. A fingerprint taken from the phone by Mesa police later was matched to Miller.

Kaplan went to the bank and found a note telling him to go to Saguaro Lake Boat Ramp No. 2 for further instructions. Before he arrived, FBI agents monitoring his movements spotted cars owned by Miller and Nelson near the ramp.

Nelson and Miller were among four males seen near the cars, Nelson holding a mobile cellular telephone.

At a picnic area near the ramp, Kaplan found a suitcase and another note. In summary, the note said, "You are being watched. Take your shirt off and turn around slowly."

The note also told Kaplan to put the \$250,000 in the suitcase and drive to the mostly vacant Estrella development 20 miles west of Phoenix, then bury it at a certain spot.

After the lake, Kaplan stopped at the McDonald's restaurant at Arizona 87 and Shea Boulevard. Nelson's car arrived shortly thereafter, and a passenger who got out of the car appeared to be observing Kaplan. As an FBI agent approached Kaplan's car, the passenger returned to Nelson's car, which left immediately and drove to the apartment complex on Shea Boulevard where Nelson lives.

Kaplan drove to Estrella and buried the suitcase as directed, but the money never was picked up.

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Mon, Sep 30, 2019