

STATE EMPLOYEE NOW A SUSPECT IN CON'S ESCAPE

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Thomas Fortunato, a worker at the state Center for Forensic Psychiatry in Ypsilanti, helped veteran convict **William Day** escape from the maximum-security facility last week and then was robbed by Day when the two reached Kentucky, law enforcement officials said Thursday.

State Police and FBI investigators originally believed Fortunato, 36, of Lakeland, near Brighton, was kidnapped by Day.

But Fortunato, who was picked up by FBI agents Wednesday night in Tampa, Fla., after spending at least four nights at shelters for the homeless, admitted helping Day escape, investigators said.

"He was an accomplice. It was planned ahead of time," Trooper Ernie Bucks of the State Police post at Ypsilanti said Thursday.

Day, 35, who state prison officials described as a smooth talker with all-American looks, "is the subject of a nationwide search," said Kenneth Walton, special agent in charge of the Michigan FBI office.

"I think he (Day) did a carrot-and-stick number on Fortunato," Walton said. "The only question is what was he using as bait at the end of that carrot. I think when it's all sorted out, we'll discover that Day played on weaknesses or concerns that Fortunato had . . . and that's a con."

DAY, WHO has three previous escapes from state prisons or camps, was transferred to the Forensic Center in May from the State Prison of Southern Michigan at Jackson, where he was serving a 5-to-7 1/2- year sentence for assault, writing bad checks, kidnapping and prison escape. Day was treated for severe depression at the center and escaped a day before he was due to return to Jackson, corrections officials said.

Day and Fortunato, a 14-year state employee who was an assistant supervisor of security aides at the center, were reported missing around 6 a.m. Dec. 4.

Walton said Day escaped in a laundry basket that "was pushed out to a waiting pickup truck owned by Mr. Fortunato."

Before the escape, investigators said, Fortunato withdrew \$5,000 from a personal trust account.

"They drove down to Toledo, ditched the pickup truck, picked up a rented car and drove to Louisville, Ky., arriving there Thursday night," Walton said. "They checked into a Holiday Inn and then dropped about \$1,000 in singles bars in an area along the Dixie Highway."

Dixie Highway is a five-lane road that runs from the western end of Louisville into southwestern Jefferson County and includes a strip of bars and pornography shops.

"AT 10 A.M. Friday, while Mr. Fortunato was shaving, Day took all but \$50 of the money and the car keys and disappeared," Walton said.

He said Fortunato took a bus to Mobile, Ala., where he arrived Friday afternoon, then hitchhiked to Panama City, Fla., and then on to St. Petersburg, where he began staying in missions because he had run out of money.

About noon Saturday, Fortunato phoned his wife, Becky, and told her he had left his dark blue 1987 Dodge pickup in the parking lot of a General Motors Corp. plant in Toledo.

It was at this point, investigators said, that they began to believe Fortunato had aided Day in his escape.

During the conversation with his wife, investigators said, Fortunato told her he was "in over my head." Investigators then discovered that Fortunato had reserved a 1986 light blue Buick Skylark from a Toledo rental car company for Nov. 25 -- the day investigators now say the escape originally was to occur.

"From St. Petersburg, Mr. Fortunato then went to Tampa, where he again stayed in missions, until Wednesday night, when he called his wife," Walton said.

At 9:15 p.m. Wednesday, Walton said, Fortunato called and told his wife he was at a doughnut shop, "hungry, cold, out of money and he wanted to come home."

THE FBI was notified and two agents found Fortunato 45 minutes later in a phone booth near the doughnut shop.

Since no warrants were issued against him, Fortunato's mother-in-law provided money to have him flown back to Detroit Thursday morning, Walton said.

Fortunato, wearing a white T-shirt with no coat, faded green corduroy pants and wire-rimmed glasses, was the last passenger to get off a Delta Air Lines flight around noon Thursday at Metro Airport. He was met by two State Police detectives, who took him to the Ypsilanti post, where he was interviewed.

"He was then released, pending further investigation," Bucks said. "No warrants have been authorized. Fortunato is back with his wife and they are resting somewhere."

Bucks said investigators "will discuss the case with the Washtenaw County prosecutor at some point, following further interviews with Fortunato."

When asked if Fortunato indicated why he helped Day escape, officials declined comment.

Walton said the nationwide search for Day is "focusing somewhat" on the New Orleans area, where Day has relatives.

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Fortunato

Thomas Fortunato, left, is escorted out of Metro Airport by a State Police officer Thursday.

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