

RANSOM SEASON 1, EPISODE 4: FINDING MCKAY

Art Rascon: On the morning of Friday, September 15th 1995 with the confession of the ransom caller Irene Florez in hand, FBI agents requested a warrant to arrest Hilton Crawford.

Paulette: They did let us know that you know they were going to arrest Hilton Crawford. But we were not to talk about it.

Art Rascon: McKay had now been missing for two and a half days. By that time, Carl and Paulette had started connecting the dots about Hilton as well.

Paulette: people just started coming forward with just all these little tiny tidbits. And they watched everybody who came and went. Who didn't show up was Connie and Hilton Crawford. Bingo there you go ...

I just, What do you say? Why would you do so stupid fool hearted thing to a child.

Evil stupidity, idiot. If you had only called and asked for money, we could have helped you. We would rally your friends around you.

And that's when the FBI was like, they were mad. They were like we're getting McKay. And you could see it in their face. You could tell they were hyper focused on that.

Art Rascon: Law enforcement still had no idea where McKay was.

Bob Lee: Our primary concern is the safe return of McKay. And the key to that is Hilton.

Art Rascon: Bob Lee was among the FBI agents and Sheriff's deputies that set up for the arrest down the street from Crawford's home.

Bob Lee: we probably had 12, 15 agents and police officers there at the time.

Art Rascon: The officers prepared for the worst. Hilton was a former cop, running a security guard company, so he was presumed to be armed and dangerous. They waited until he left for work.

Bob Lee: At about 6:30 We had an arrest team that went to Hilton's house. He was outside the house, getting into his car.

Art Rascon: Officers sped in and blocked Hilton's driveway with their vehicles They leapt out, guns drawn and yelled for him to exit the vehicle hands in the air.

Bob Lee: And there were four of us that approached him.

Art Rascon: Hilton got out of the car slowly, and raised his hands as the officers drew near. They leaned him against his car, cuffed him, and patted him down to search for weapons. But he was unarmed.

Agent Donnie Miller remembers how the commotion drew neighbors out of their homes.

Donnie Miller: They're angry with us. And there were women who were crying. And they say you have the wrong person. That man could not have done this.

Art Rascon: With McKay still missing, time was of the essence, so investigators began to question Hilton immediately.

Bob Lee: We brought him in the house and I started to interview him about the kidnapping.

Art Rascon: The officers sat Hilton down at his dinner table and undid his handcuffs. He asked to speak to his wife, but the officers told him no.

Bob Lee: I approached him really two ways. First of all I wanted to let Hilton know, the evidence that we had amassed against him so far, and told him that there was absolutely no doubt that he had kidnapped McKay Everet and these are the reasons why.

Art Rascon: Agent Lee brought up how Bill Kahn had seen his Car leaving the scene of the crime, that Hilton had lied about when he'd checked into the hotel, and that Irene Florez had confessed and ratted him out.

Bob Lee: And to try to get him to talk to me, I was developing a theme that his wife and kids live in the community. And how she was going to be perceived in the community depended in a large part on how he reacted right now, And he was cold, that had no, no effect on him.

So then I turned it and put him you know, how Hilton A lot depends on how you're going to be treated when you're in prison. And all of a sudden he started sweating, his face turned red, and he fell out of his chair. We called for medical attention. He said no, he was fine. I asked him if he would continue talking to me. He said he would. Then, a short time later he said he better talk to an attorney. Generally when he says I need an attorney all questioning stops. But there is one exception and it's a public safety exception. I said Hilton, I need to know one thing. Is McKay in danger right now? And he looked at me and said, No, he's not in any danger.

Art Rascon: From KSL Podcasts, I'm Art Rascon. This is Ransom, Position of Trust

Episode 4: Finding McKay

[Music]

Art Rascon: It was September 15th at around 8:00 a.m. two-and-a-half days from when McKay disappeared. Officers re-shackled Hilton Crawford to take him to the Montgomery County Jail. He made a final request. He wanted them to bring the car up close to the house to avoid his neighbors seeing him in handcuffs. Bob Lee told him the car was close enough and led him out the door.

Agents searched Crawford's home for possible evidence. Among the items they collected were a gas station receipt from the night of McKay's kidnapping, two cellphones and a pager, a shotgun and a revolver, and a folder that contained a large number of credit cards.

FBI agent Cindy Rosenthal was assigned to monitor Hilton's wife Connie Crawford.

Cindy Rosenthal: They needed someone to stay with Mrs. Crawford. And so I spent a lot of time at Mrs. Crawford's house.

Cindy Rosenthal: She was very shocked, as I remember had no idea.

Cindy Rosenthal: She was not handling any of this well and she wasn't very talkative to me. So I just, I didn't push her. I wasn't there to talk to her and interrogate her. I was there to make sure she was safe, make sure that the home was safe and things like that. But when she was putting on her makeup she'd just kind of put her hand over her face and start crying.

And she seemed like someone who was very concerned about her reputation in the community. And I think that bothered her a lot about what people were gonna think of her. I just remember when we finally left that there was news crews all in front of the house. So that wasn't fun either.

Reporter: The upper middle class splendor of rivershire holds graceful homes, wealthy residents and as of seven o'clock this morning, a crime scene. FBI agents gathered evidence at the residence of the suspect in the kidnapping of a 12-year-old boy.

The neighbors search for questions but the FBI is not answering many that are keeping a tight lid on this investigation into the kidnapping and even the search for the boy but the Montgomery County Sheriff's says all involved operate on the assumption that McKay Everett is still alive.

Art Rascon: Cindy Rosenthal, the Agent assigned to monitor Connie Crawford, was dumbfounded that McKay had been kidnapped by a close family friend.

Cindy Rosenthal: It was just so hard to believe that someone who, who was loved by that family would do such a horrible thing. It was just, it was really shocking.

Art Rascon: But at the same time, Hilton's friendship with the Everetts gave her hope that McKay was still alive.

Cindy Rosenthal: They have a close relationship. He knows this child, he wouldn't kill him.

Art Rascon: The Everetts' neighbor Nancy Kahn had a similar thought after Hilton was arrested.

Nancy Kahn: He's gonna be okay. You know, it was just, you know, a bad, bad mistake. You know, so McKay somewhere. We'll get him back.

I mean the biggest thing on all of our minds is where was he?

Art Rascon: Nancy says she went over to see the Everetts after Hilton's arrest.

Nancy Kahn: They say, men Don't cry and all that, but they do. Carl was very, very, very torn apart. And of course, Paulette being, you know, the loving mother she was to Mackay she was just devastated. You know, and just so hopeful, though, both of them were very hopeful that they would see him again.

Art Rascon: Five miles away, in the Montgomery County Jail, Hilton Crawford had tears in his eyes. He allegedly told a jail guard that he needed to phone his wife because he'd made a terrible mistake. He said, that McKay was being held in Louisiana by a man named Remmington. Hilton said that Remmington was supposed to put McKay on a bus and send him back to Houston. and that he'd show up any day now.

But when investigators heard this story from the guard and tried to get more details out of Hilton, he clammed up.

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Hilton might not have been opening up to law enforcement, but one of his friends was. When investigators arrested Hilton, they'd found some crumpled up sheets of paper in his pockets with names and phone numbers on them.

Bob Lee: One of the sheets of paper had Billy Allen's phone number on it.

Ralph Harp: One of the special agents over there had gone up and interviewed this person.

Art Rascon: Allen said that he knew Hilton Crawford through horse racing, but he didn't know anything about McKay or the kidnapping.

But five minutes after the agent left, Allen called him back.

Ralph Harp: And said, I need you to come back up here to my place, I need to talk to you again.

Art Rascon: Allen told him he hadn't been completely honest, and after consulting with his wife, he'd decided to come clean.

Allen ran a storage facility in Lumberton, Texas and Hilton had shown up the morning after McKay disappeared.

Bob Lee: He had met Billy Allen after he checked out of the Best Western in Beaumont.

Art Rascon: Allen says he returned home from an errand around 7:30 a.m. and his wife told him Hilton had called trying to reach him. Allen called Hilton's home and got through to Connie, who he says, gave him a number where he could reach Hilton. But when he called that number he didn't get through.

Allen went to work at the storage facility, and a bit later Hilton showed up and asked him to store a large green bag.

Bob Lee: And he took the agents to the storage shed and gave them the bag that Hilton had placed in there. And it contained a 45 caliber automatic pistol

Art Rascon: Investigators took the bag as evidence, then continued searching the storage facility. Inside they found a car that Hilton had reported stolen three years earlier. Hilton had filed a claim, saying his wife Connie's jewelry was in the trunk when the car was stolen. He'd gotten around \$40,000 dollars from the insurance company

That night, deputies woke Hilton up every half hour, shining a flashlight onto his face until he opened his eyes. They told him that he was on suicide watch, and that it was standard protocol, but to him it felt like harassment like sleep deprivation. Paulette had trouble sleeping that night as well.

Overnight she and Carl came up with a plan. They knew if they wanted McKay back alive, their only hope was getting through to Hilton Crawford. They decided that since Carl knew Hilton better, he'd make an appeal to Hilton directly. And since Paulette knew Hilton's wife Connie better, she'd talk to Connie. The next morning, Saturday September 16th now 3 and a half days since McKay had disappeared. Paulette was feeling strange, and she was having trouble moving one of her legs.

Paulette Norman: I couldn't drive myself, my neighbor drove me and Connie was at her sister's house and the driveway was a long driveway. I said don't pull up in the drive too far because we're unannounced and we're uninvited. As I was getting out Connie ran down the driveway clutching a bed pillow screaming at me, McKay's dead McKay's dead I know he's dead. Hilton hired a hitman.

Art Rascon: Paulette says she asked Connie what she meant and how she knew that. And Connie yelled something about blood in the trunk of the car. Connie was clearly extremely upset. At the time, Paulette didn't know what to make of what Connie was raving about.

Paulette Norman: So I got her back in the house. They were eating hamburgers. And Connie's youngest son, I sat down on the sofa and he knelt down on his knees. Saying he was sorry, he was so so sorry. And it just didn't feel right.

Art Rascon: Paulette's mind kept returning to what Connie had yelled in the driveway about Hilton hiring a hitman and McKay being dead.

Paulette Norman: I noticed there was a bedroom off to the side. And I asked Anne Marie, that's Connie, Sister, if I could take Connie in there and talk to her. And I took her in there,

Art Rascon: After Hilton's arrest, The FBI had told Paulette that they were still searching for McKay and going off the assumption that he was alive, so Paulette didn't know if Connie was panicking and assuming the worst or if Connie knew something about Hilton's crimes that law enforcement didn't.

Paulette Norman: and started asking her questions, and she started answering me. So I went back out and I said, I need Pencil and paper. So I went back in and when I would ask her questions, I would write the answer down. I asked her. When did she know something was wrong? I asked her to tell me the circumstances.

Art Rascon: Connie told Paulette she had just learned that Hilton had made a bad business decision and lost a lot of money.

Paulette Norman: She said that they were in a chicken business and shipping chickens on big boats. As she was talking, I thought this is so bizarre.

Art Rascon: To Paulette, Connie's story didn't make much sense.

Paulette Norman: I first thought, this is nothing but a cover for drugs. And he's been associated with very, very bad people.

Art Rascon: But now wasn't a time to speculate about what had driven Hilton to do this. Paulette had come to ask for Connie's help.

Paulette Norman: I said, I need you to get down to that Jail house and you don't come out of there until you've a map of where my son is. And I said you do that today.

Art Rascon: Paulette had completed her part of the plan, but it had taken everything out of her.

Paulette Norman: I got back home. I told Carl, you know, I'm not okay physically. it feels like I have been mutilated with shards of glass. And I said I have got to lay down I'm not okay.

Art Rascon: Around noon that same day a jail guard told Hilton Crawford they were moving him to a new cell. They walked him into a bullpen cell with a TV inside it. On screen, Hilton saw

Carl Everett In jeans and a red polo shirt, standing in front of a row of microphones holding a football. The ball had writing on it in permanent marker were the words 'From: Uncle Hilty.'

Carl: In my heart. I know you would never harm my son. You loved him like your son, you gave him his ball. He called you Uncle Hilty. I still love you as I talk to you right now but help me get my son back. I don't know what else I can tell you other than I'd love to bring this ball down and and and take you with me and and go out and wherever McKay is at and let's go play ball with him this afternoon. That's what I'd love to do right now. And hilton all it is is a decision on your part.

Art Rascon: We don't have the full audio of this press conference, but we know from newspaper reporting that Carl's plea continued.

"Three weeks ago, we were at your home playing with this ball, and when we got ready to leave, I said, 'Go give Uncle Hilty a hug. And McKay came over and hugged you and kissed you on your forehead"

Carl: I don't know what has happened. I don't know who stole the dreams in your mind and your heart and in your mind. But Hilton please don't take anything that's bad out on someone who's never done anything but good.

Art Rascon: As soon as the press conference finished, it began again.

Carl: In my heart. I know you would never harm my son. You loved him like your son, because you gave him his ball. He called you Uncle Hilty.

Art Rascon: The jail had recorded the live broadcast and looped it. Carl's pleas echoed and reverberated, bouncing off the hard surfaces of the jail cell walls and Hilton's own hard exterior was starting to crack.

[Carl pleading]

Art Rascon: It was the afternoon of Saturday September 16th, 3 and a half days since McKay disappeared Hilton Crawford sat trapped in a Montgomery County Texas jail cell as television blared a looping press conference, with his friend Carl pleading for him to tell investigators how to locate Mckay.

Sometime that afternoon the looping tape of the broadcast stopped.

A prison guard walked into the room and told Hilton someone had come to the prison to see him. They brought him to a visitor's room, where he saw his two sons sitting behind a plexiglass wall. 30-year-old Chris and 26-year-old Kevin passed a phone back and forth with one another to speak to him.

We don't know exactly what transpired in this conversation but the younger son, Kevin, spoke to an FBI agent immediately afterwards, and that agent wrote a report about it.

The contents of this report have never previously been published.

FBI: Kevin Crawford indicated that his brother Christopher spoke first. He spoke to his father mainly regarding immediate financial needs.

Art Rascon: Although their mother Connie worked, Hilton was the one who managed the finances and he had all the family's bills sent to him at his office, so with Hilton in jail, Connie was concerned about keeping the lights on at home.

FBI: Kevin Crawford also said his father apologized to him for using four of his credit cards. Kevin did not know the time frame that his father had used the cards, or which of the cards he had used.

Shortly thereafter, Kevin had the opportunity to speak in more detail with their father with regard to the kidnapping of McKay Everett. He indicated that his father was sorry and embarrassed about the difficulties he had caused his family and his father told him that he had made a mistake and was grief stricken.

Art Rascon: Hilton told Kevin that he had gotten himself into a horrible financial situation and that the whole kidnapping fiasco had started with a man named R.L. Remington. The FBI took note, because this was the same name he had mentioned to the jail guard the night before.

FBI: His father told him he had first met R.L. Remington at the Louisiana Downs Racetrack, located just outside Shreveport, Louisiana. Remington told him that he had a group which had executed a series of successful kidnappings which always ended with the return of the kidnapped victims.

Art Rascon: Hilton told Kevin that Remington had been cagey. He had asked for Hilton's contact information, but had never given Hilton his own.

FBI: Anytime they spoke on the telephone, Remington always called him. It was Kevin's understanding that his father never really knew Remington's identity and that the name may have been a fake name.

Art Rascon: Hilton said that as Remington learned about his financial problems, Remington told him that a kidnapping could be the solution.

FBI: At Remington's continued urging, Hilton indicated that he had undertaken the kidnapping.

Art Rascon: But Hilton said it was a third individual who had actually knocked on the Everett's door to abduct McKay.

FBI: Hilton told Kevin that the other individual (who was not further identified) was dressed as a police officer. He grabbed McKay, put a hood over his head, and threw him into the trunk of their automobile.

Art Rascon: Hilton told his son that because McKay had the hood over his head, McKay never saw him or knew that he was involved.

FBI: After grabbing the child, they drove straight to Louisiana where the child was passed to a high-dollar maroon automobile bearing a Thibedeaux Motors dealer insignia. Kevin Crawford said his father told him that McKay Everett suffered one cut on his arm while held in the trunk. It was his understanding that the child was to be taken to New Orleans. His father also told him that it had been planned that the boy would be put on a bus and sent home in the event the kidnapping did not go as expected.

Art Rascon: If Hilton's story proved true, there were now three accomplices who remained at large: R.L. Remington, the unnamed man who'd put the bag over McKay's head, and the driver of the maroon car that they'd met in Louisiana. We reached out to Hilton's sons to ask them about their recollections of this conversation, but they declined to speak with us.

Hilton was opening up to his family about his crimes, but the former cop, still wasn't ready to talk to law enforcement.

That afternoon, police in Houston arrested the ransom caller, Irene Flores. They tried to use the new information about R.L. Remington to get her to talk but she insisted she'd never heard of him. She said she'd only dealt with Hilton, and her only involvement was making the ransom call.

Sheriff Guy Williams says investigators started searching for records of a man named R.L. Remington in Louisiana

Guy Williams: All the investigators were running on adrenaline, trying to do everything they could to get McKay back.

Art Rascon: As law enforcement worked the case, the rest of East Texas was on pins and needles, waiting to hear more about the investigation. Sheriff Williams' son went to the same school as McKay.

Guy Williams: He told his mama later that the teachers will come up to him in school and say, is there a thing from your dad about McKay? And he goes, I don't know. I'm seeing my dad in three days.

Art Rascon: But detectives weren't sure if R.L. Remington was even the accomplice's real name. They'd need something more concrete from Hilton. That night, Sheriff Guy Williams decided he'd take a shot at getting Hilton to talk.

Guy Williams: I don't know I got this, I don't know, feeling, thought to go to the jail and talk Crawford. We didn't have anything to lose. And everything to gain But we knew that the Odds are McKay being alive. Every hour that passed were diminished.

Art Rascon: It was now Saturday, four days since McKay had disappeared. According to the national center for missing and exploited children, more than 90% of abducted children are recovered within 3 days.

But ransom kidnappings are so rare that the center doesn't even keep statistics on them, so in many ways this kidnapping was uncharted territory.

Still, Guy Williams realized it was key to get Hilton to talk as soon as possible.

Guy Williams: You know, a lot of times a criminal will only he, wants to talk to the, top dog. He wants to feel important. And so I played that to my advantage because I hadn't played that card yet. So I went to the jail. And one of the advantages of being the sheriff is you come and go where you want to go, and I went back to his cell.

And I sit down so that I know you've got an attorney. But my main goal Hilton is to get that boy back. I've heard all the stories in my life and you arrest a guy and, hey I was on my way to turn myself in, or, I knew I'd messed up and I did it because my momma or because, you know I've heard all those stories. So you gotta learn just to listen to it and play the game with them. Because it's a game. They're trying to see how smart they are and you're trying to think, you know, how you can outsmart them.

Art Rascon: Sheriff Williams knew Hilton a little bit. Hilton's wife Connie had been his son's first grade teacher.

Guy Williams: And I said everybody screws up at least once in their life, and it's how they respond to that mess up, is uh, how you measure their character. And he put his head down, he kind of lowered his head a little bit. And as I said, I'm not asking any questions. That's all I got to say.

Art Rascon: Sheriff Williams says Hilton seemed to be stifling tears, and there was a long pause.

Guy Williams: And, you know, you saw a little kink in the in the armor. And he says, I need to call my attorney. Would you wait around?

Art Rascon: Sheriff Williams handed Hilton a phone, and walked to an adjacent room to give him some privacy as he called his attorney.

Guy williams: I walked over to one of our main tickets with some of our deputies there and drank a cup of coffee. And he was on the phone, and all of a sudden, he, he looks through the window, and He motions to me to come back. And I walk in the cell and he hands me the phone. It was his attorney. He says he wants to talk to you. Don't talk until I get there. And I'm in route.

Art Rascon: Hilton also wanted to speak to his wife Connie. It was agreed he could speak to Connie while he waited for his attorney to arrive.

Guy williams: I told Hilton we'll be back with him and a little bit and I called Bill Jones with the FBI and told Bill what had happened. And he says I am in route, as we didn't have a clue where McKay was and that was our primary goal right in was to find, find that young man.

Art Rascon: Connie Crawford and her two sons arrived at the jail, and Sheriff Williams escorted her back to an interview room to speak to Hilton.

Guy williams: You could tell she lost a lot of sleep, cried a lot, had bags under her eyes. Wanted to believe in her husband but didn't want to believe the worst.

Art Rascon: They spoke for about half an hour before Hilton's lawyer, Jim Adams arrived and joined them. Sometime later, Connie left the room, makeup running down her face. Then Hilton's attorney emerged and said that Hilton wanted to talk to investigators.

But Hilton was looking for assurances. Adams said that Hilton didn't want to go to prison in Louisiana. By this point the FBI agent, Bill Jones, had arrived at the jail, and Adams asked Jones to commit to a federal prosecution.

As an attorney, Adams should have known that it was the job of the prosecutors, not law enforcement, to decide which jurisdiction would prosecute Hilton. But 77-year-old Jim Adams wasn't a criminal attorney, he was a tax attorney, who'd helped Hilton through a bankruptcy four months earlier.

Sheriff Williams and agent Jones told Adams that they couldn't make him any promises or deals. All they wanted was the truth.

The three men went into the room, where Hilton sat waiting at a conference table.

Guy williams: So the lawyer came there. Bill came and I knew I had one shot at it. So I had a yellow pad and a pencil or a pen and I sit down across the table from and I just pushed over to him and I was like, you know what I want, tell me where he's at. Because I knew that a confession was great. But where that boy was was the same as a confession.

Art Rascon: Hilton's hands were shaking so much that at first he couldn't even pick up the pen.

Guy Williams: I remember he says, Do you know what Whiskey Bay is? I said yes on Interstate 10 in the Atchafalaya swamp, he goes, You'll find him here.

Art Rascon: Next Time, on Ransom.

Tannie Shannon: law enforcement personnel in general, were pretty much split down the middle over whether or not he actually did this

Paulette: I was yelling at McKay going look at me, just look at me one more time and he never turned around.