

# Captured

Neil Cross



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A CBS COMPANY

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# 1

Kenny wrote the list because he was dying.

Earlier that morning, an MRI scan had revealed that a malignant brain cancer had germinated in the moist secrecy of his skull like a mushroom in compost.

He had six weeks, maybe less. Aggressive chemotherapy and a brutal, invasive procedure called a partial resection might extend that by a month. But Kenny didn't see the point.

So he thanked his doctors, left the hospital and went for a walk.

It was mid July, and the humid afternoon was beginning to cool. The pavement smelled of rain evaporating from hot concrete.

On Castle Green, Kenny sat down. He wore cargo shorts and a T-shirt. He had a head of dandelion white hair. He watched the office workers and the cars and the buses and the taxis. Then he called Mary.

She answered on the second ring, a cheery: 'Hiya.'  
'Hiya.'

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'You okay?'

'Yeah!'

'You don't sound it.'

Years before, Kenny and Mary had been married. They weren't married any more, but you never stop knowing someone's voice.

Kenny said, 'So – you fancy meeting up?'

'I can't tonight, love. I've got stuff.'

'For five minutes? A sandwich.'

'Oh, look. By the time I get down there . . . Tomorrow, maybe?'

'I can't tomorrow. I've got a client.'

'The day after, then. Thursday? Are you okay?'

'I'm great, yeah. I'm good.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'So let's do Thursday, then. Picnic lunch if it's sunny?'

'That sounds good. I'll give you a call.'

He said goodbye, hung up and put the phone in his pocket.

He made sure he had his house keys and his wallet. He went to pick up the prescription of anticonvulsants and corticosteroids that would make his next few weeks a bit more comfortable.

Then he strolled to the bus-stop. It wasn't far, and he was in no hurry.

## 2

The village was outside Bristol, on the North Somerset Levels. It took the bus a while to get there, but Kenny didn't mind.

Sometimes, when he had a lot to think about, he took the bus. It relaxed him. And he liked taking the bus; he liked the way it jerked and jolted, picked up passengers, set them down. He liked the way people called out 'Cheers, driver!' as they alighted.

When the bus reached his stop, Kenny disembarked.

The village was old, houses raised from stone the colour of short-bread. There was a church which dated to the Norman Conquest. A scattering of commuter new-builds stood on the outskirts.

Kenny lived in what had been a gamekeeper's cottage. You walked half a mile outside the village, turned off the main road, down a bumpy lane with trees either side and grass growing in the middle, and there it was.

It had been remodelled and extended many times. The last refit, sometime in the 1950s, had added an indoor bathroom.

Outside the cottage stood many corrugated outbuildings and the

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rusting carcasses of Morris Minors – they'd been there when Kenny bought the place, a decade before.

Brambly hedges and a mad overgrowth of rhododendrons edged a fast-flowing brook. Across all this, Kenny had a fine view of dairy farmland and the motorway, heading east towards the Cotswolds and west towards Wales.

He lived in the largest and brightest room, arranging it like a studio flat, with a bed and a wardrobe and armchairs and bookcases and a television.

This room gave him direct access to the kitchen. Beyond the kitchen a long corridor gave on to a number of cold, damp bedrooms which Kenny never used. It also gave on to the large conservatory he used as a studio.

Even on overcast days, the conservatory had a good light. It was full of easels, half-completed paintings, sketches, paints, brushes, rags, jam jars.

Kenny had a talent for faces. It made him a pretty good portrait artist.

He'd tried other things; for a few years he'd worked as a designer for a little advertising agency on the Gloucester Road, designing logos for local firms. He illustrated promotional brochures, did some work for the town council.

But these days, he just did portraits.

He sat there, in his favourite chair, and he thought for a while. Then he went to find a notepad and thought for a while longer, chewing the end of his pen, before writing:

Mary

Mr Jeganathan

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Thomas Kintry  
Callie Barton

It was a list of people he'd in some way let down. He'd decided to use the time he had left to put things right.

# 3

Mary was sitting on the grass in Brandon Hill Park, with Bristol spread out below her. She was reading a book, waiting for him.

As Kenny approached – a rucksack slung across one shoulder and a carrier bag in his hand – she smiled a big smile, her Kenny smile.

Lowering himself to the grass, Kenny said: ‘You’re looking lovely.’ She waved a hand, pretending to blush.

He opened the bag, passing her a small bottle of freshly squeezed orange juice and a fruit salad in a plastic pot. She passed him a BLT. They sat eating for a bit, throwing sandwich crusts to the greedy squirrels. Then Kenny said: ‘So how’s it going?’

‘Gangbusters. You?’

‘Not too bad. I’ve been doing some thinking, though.’

‘About what?’

‘Nothing really. Just stuff.’

‘Stuff like what?’

‘Like, are you happy?’

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‘Oh, stuff like that.’ She frowned at him – it was a silent question. ‘I’m happy, yeah. The kids make me happy. Stever’s an asshole.’

Stever was a kind man, and Mary loved him. She and Stever had been married for five years.

Kenny was godfather to their children. He loved the kids – he liked to scream and roll on the floor and join in. He liked to read them bedtime stories, doing all the voices. He liked to draw pictures for them, too – Transformers and ballerinas, cats and dogs and Jedis and monsters made of dripping bogies.

He nodded, now, thinking of it, and unzipped the rucksack he’d brought along. From inside, he removed a fat bundle of sketches, knotted with hairy string.

Mary said, ‘What’s this?’

Kenny gave her the bundle. It contained many sketches in charcoal, pencil and watercolour on scraps of paper and envelopes and a few hasty oils on ragged squares of canvas.

The sketches showed Mary laughing over breakfast – the Sally Bowles haircut she’d worn then all askew and kohl smudged under her eyes; Mary with her fringe obscuring her face, frowning as she winds a Felix the Cat clock; Mary barefoot in cotton pyjamas, sipping from a steaming mug.

She’d been a good model – indulgent, patient, entertaining, impervious to cold and cramp.

She flicked through the sketches, chuckling. She had happy, nostalgic tears in her eyes. ‘Look at my hair!’

‘I liked your hair. You had nice hair.’

She gathered the sketches like playing cards. ‘So what’s all this in aid of?’

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‘Nothing. I just thought – they’re gathering dust in a drawer. You might as well have them.’

She was toying with the string that had bound the sketches. ‘So this would be the point where you come out and tell me what’s actually wrong.’

He gave her a big smile. ‘Nothing! I’m just sorting things out. I thought – what’s the point of me hanging on to these? I thought you might like them.’

‘I love them.’

‘Good.’

‘You should be famous. You’re so good.’

He smiled because she was kind. And he knew he couldn’t cross Mary off the list today, because he didn’t know how to put right what had gone wrong between them a long time ago.

They finished their picnic lunch, then stood to leave because Mary had to get back to work. She kissed Kenny’s cheek and squeezed his elbow and said ‘Love you’, and she ruffled his brush of scruffy white hair.

He said, ‘Love you, too.’

And having thus failed to begin putting his affairs in order, Kenny went to catch the bus home.

## 4

After work, Mary went home to a Victorian terrace on a steep hill in Totterdown – a brightly painted house on a street of brightly painted houses, blue and yellow and green.

She put her bags down in the hallway and looked in on Stever and the kids.

Stever was reading a book of Ray Bradbury short stories; it had a lurid 1970s cover design. Otis and Daisy were watching Cartoon Network.

Mary gave the kids a hug and a kiss and asked how their day had gone, but they didn't say much. That was okay: her real time with them would be later, sitting on the edge of the bath while they soaked, chatting while they dried themselves and got into their pyjamas, reading them stories and playing What Else? with Otis.

She gave Stever a kiss, too. He was in cut-off jeans, rubber flip-flops and a washed-out *Prisoner* T-shirt – Patrick McGoochan's face crazed and faded after years of washing and tumble drying.

Stever had very long hair and a big auburn beard. Back in the early

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days, Mary had nagged him to shave it off because it tickled when they kissed. He'd sulked a bit, but done as she asked. His face had looked blinking and helpless, so Mary apologized and told him to grow it back. Now the tickle of it was a comfort to her, a sign of house and home and quiet well-being.

She sat with her hands on her knees and her back straight, looking at the screen. Stever glanced at her over his book, then folded the corner of a page and put it down. 'What's wrong?'

He always knew. That was one of the things about him.

She said, 'I met Kenny today. Up by the Cabot Tower.'

Once, Stever and Kenny had been best friends. They used to drive out to the country in Kenny's old VW Combi and fake crop circles together, using planks and lengths of camping rope and tent pegs. They were still friends, although things weren't the same.

Stever said, 'How is he?'

Mary said, 'Come out here a minute?'

Stever frowned and stood, brushed hair from his face, followed Mary to the narrow hall, closing the door on the sound of *Spongebob Squarepants*.

'He gave me these,' Mary said, and showed Stever the bundle of sketches.

Stever undid the string, shuffled through them. He looked at Mary. 'Why?'

'I don't know.'

'Is he all right?'

'I don't know.'

'Should I go out there and talk to him?'

'He won't talk to you. Not if he won't talk to me. He'll just clam up. He pretends nothing's wrong – especially to us.'

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‘Well, I ought to give him a buzz. Ask him round. We’ll catch a few old vids – *Day of the Dead*, whatever. I’ll take him down the New Found Out.’

Mary took Stever’s hand in both of hers, lifted it to her face, butterfly-kissed his knuckles. ‘Let’s leave it a few days.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah. I’ll give him a call tomorrow. Make sure he’s all right.’

The next day, Mary called Kenny during her morning break. She phoned him again at lunchtime, and again in the late afternoon, but Kenny didn’t answer.

On the bus on the way home, she texted him: ‘U OK? X.’

He didn’t answer that, either.

Mary still owned the little black address book she and Kenny had once kept by the phone. The pages were full of addresses added and scored-through over many years. These days, she kept it in a little drawer upstairs.

She dug it out and found the mobile number of a woman called Pat Maxwell. She dialled it, heard a tentative, gruff: ‘Hello?’

‘Hi, Pat! It’s Mary. Kenny Drummond’s Mary?’

‘Kenny’s Mary?’

‘You remember?’

‘Pretty little Mary with the dark hair?’

Mary was disarmed by that, and wished she wasn’t.

Pat said, ‘What can I do for you, love?’

‘I was wondering if Kenny had been in touch?’

‘What – your Kenny?’

‘Yes, my Kenny. As was.’

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'Not for donkey's years. Why?'

'No reason.'

'You're sure?'

'Well, to be honest we've been a bit worried about him.'

'Why's that?'

'It's nothing, it's silly really.'

'Silly enough you need to call me? Is it the Kintry business?'

'No, it's not that.'

'You're sure?'

'Pretty sure. Pat, I'm sorry. It's probably nothing. I don't want to be a pain.'

'You're nothing of the sort, love. I'm glad you called. Tell you what I'll do; if he does get in contact I'll give you a call. Let you know. How's that?'

'That would be great. I mean, it's probably nothing. But yeah. Thank you.'

'No problem. How's the kiddies?'

'They're great.'

'Good for you.'

Mary gave Pat her number, just in case, then hung up.

She'd hoped that hearing Pat's voice would put her at ease. But it had made things worse.

So had the mention of Thomas Kintry.