

*The Daily Mirror*  
Monday May 18, 1970

## LENNY MAXTED FOUND DEAD

*Farewell Note: Please Forgive Me*

The man once voted Britain's top comic has been found hanged – just three days after announcing his engagement. His fiancée discovered his body, surrounded by sleeping pills and empty gin bottles, in the Wiltshire cottage where he was staying. Maxted, 40, had been dead for several hours. Police do not believe anyone else was involved.

With his partner, Jack Flowers, Lenny Maxted became one of the nation's best-loved funny men following the brilliant success of the TV series *Please Turn Over For Jack and Lenny*. Often praised for his faultless timing, Maxted's languid manner was a perfect foil to Flowers's machine-gun delivery. But viewers caught a glimpse of his personal torment when he broke down during a guest appearance with Jack Flowers on the TV show *Close Up*. The interviewer, veteran broadcaster Geoffrey Wallace, was criticised for encouraging a tearful Maxted to tell the audience about his alcoholism. Flowers commented afterwards, 'Lenny isn't a happy man. He's been overworking and he needs a rest.'

Maxted had not been seen in public since he announced his engagement to Alice Conway, a 24-year-old former nightclub hostess. He left a farewell note addressed to Miss Conway which included the words 'I love you, please forgive me.' Their agent and close friend Donald Findlater said last night, 'I don't know how I'm going to break the news to Jack. There may have been artistic differences, but they were the best of friends.' Jack Flowers is currently on holiday in the Mediterranean.

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## Prologue

**Maynard's Farm, Duck End, Oxfordshire**

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> August, 1976**

I had the dream again last night. I'm at the bottom of a lake looking through the window of a car. Everything's gin-bottle green, murky, and there's a skeleton sitting behind the wheel, dressed as a bunny girl. The ears are perched on the skull, jaunty, the collar and bow-tie are hanging round the neck vertebrae and the body's dressed in the satin costume, black, the colour we all used to want because it was slimming, with two empty cone-shaped cups sticking out in front of the rib cage.

Someone comes up behind me and rubs my face with a trail of waterweed. At first I don't mind because it's pleasant, sensual, even – but then they start to twist the weed round my head and neck and it's choking me so I try to grab it, pull it away, but I can't do it. I lean forward to bang on the window of the car to get help but I can't reach and I'm being dragged down and I can't escape and I think I'm going to die.

Then I wake up with the sheets tangled round my neck, feeling guilty, and I can't make the feeling go away. Because I know who it is, all right. The skeleton in the car.

It's replaced the Lenny dream, the one where I find his body. Ever since I got that newspaper cutting in the post, three days ago.

## Chapter One

### BODY FOUND IN LAKE

Falling water levels led to gruesome revelations yesterday when a car containing human remains was fished out of a lake on the Ivar Park

estate in Wiltshire. A police spokesman said that the skeleton, which has not yet been identified, may have been in the water for several years.

I don't know who sent it. There wasn't a letter, just the cutting, with the date, *Sat, Aug 14<sup>th</sup> '76*, scrawled across the top. Don't recognise the writing. London postmark. Could be anyone. But why send the cutting to *me*? That's what I don't understand.

I remembered the girl who disappeared. Another bunny. Kitty. Lenny'd slept with her. Mind you, he wasn't the only one, not by a long chalk. It was in the summer, 1969, during our bad patch. Seven years ago. I thought I'd left all that behind. Well, I'd tried to. That's why I came down here.

Nobody even noticed Kitty was missing. It wasn't surprising, really. There must have been a couple of hundred people at that party, and from what I can remember, most of them were so out of it they probably didn't know what planet *they* were on, never mind anyone else. I don't think it was actually reported for a few weeks, but I'm pretty sure the police never found anyone who'd seen her after that night. At least, that's what everyone said.

Ivar Park House was down near Salisbury Plain. Massive. Stables, gardens, woods, the lot. And a lake. Definitely a lake. Kitty'd been wearing her bunny costume. We weren't meant to take them out of the club, but someone – maybe even Lenny, because he was the one who brought her along – must have slipped the security guard a few quid not to look into her bag. I remember her coming down this huge flight of stairs at Ivar and people cheering, but that's all.

It was weird, because they couldn't find anyone who'd given Kitty a lift or seen her leave the party or anything, and she didn't exactly blend into the background, dressed like that. Nothing about the costume in the paper, though, but then it's probably rotted or been eaten by fish or something after this long. I suppose it would have stayed underwater forever if it hadn't been for the drought. There must be somebody out there who wishes it had.

To be honest, I didn't pay much attention at the time. Me and Kitty were not what you'd call the best of friends, but in any case, our whole – well, our whole world, if you like – was pretty free and easy, people coming and going. Even Kitty's flatmate she'd gone off to stay with a boyfriend, but she didn't know who. Not surprising, because Kitty wasn't exactly famous for saying 'no', if you see what I mean.

If I'd had to guess, I'd have said she'd hooked up with a rich punter and gone abroad somewhere. You could get yourself very well taken care of if you played your cards right and she was always pretty good at looking after Number One.

I don't *know* that it's her. It just says remains, skeleton. But if I'm supposed to know – well, there's no one else it could be. I didn't like Kitty. With good reason, I might add, because she was a real bitch, what my granddad would have called 'a right piece of work', and I was pretty glad – no, more than glad. I was delighted – when she didn't come back to the club. But you wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy, dying like that. It doesn't bear thinking about. And now I can't stop thinking about it. Some things you can't. You try, shut the door, but they're always there, waiting to jump out at you. Like finding Lenny. I mean, usually, when I think about Lenny, it's Lenny when he was alive, but if I wake up in the night or it catches me off-guard or something, that's when it all comes back.

The anniversaries are the worst, and the week before. Just dreading it, knowing what it's going to be like. Each year, when it comes up, I think, it has to be better this time, but it never is.

I walked into Lenny's body. The room was pretty dark and I didn't realise what it was, but when I looked up all I could see for the first couple of seconds were these bulging eyeballs looking straight at me. His head was like a balloon, up by the ceiling, dark red, and his body just hanging down from it like a sack or something. He'd done it with a belt. Wide leather belt. But I didn't know that till later, because I just took one look and ran straight out again. The guy who was with me – the taxi driver – he got the police. He said I was screaming, but I don't remember. I just recall a dull feeling, as if my brain needed sharpening – they'd given me a tranquiliser or

something – and when I tried to sleep, later, I saw those eyes again, straining to pop out of his face. And I kept telling myself, that isn't my Lenny, my Lenny's gone.

That was why I married Jeff, really. I kept saying to myself that I was getting on with my life and getting over it, but really it was because I was trying to keep hold of Lenny, or at least keep the feeling of closeness, the life I should have had with him. I was trying to re-create it, somehow. I didn't realise, until it all fell apart, that that was why I'd done it, and perhaps... oh, maybe there was a bit of me that always knew it wasn't going to work, but after what happened with Lenny I was in a mess and I needed someone and Jeff was *there*.

I don't mean it could have been anyone at all. Jeff was great looking, glamorous and talented – he's a photographer, that was how we met in the first place. He told me he'd look after me and God knows I needed it. I wasn't exactly pretending he was Lenny, but I think that's sort of what I expected from him, which wasn't fair. Jeff didn't have that much of a sense of humour and he was quite a closed person. Tough. More like Jack than Lenny in that way, now I come to think about it. Quite hard, in a way I wasn't used to, and I thought it meant he was strong, because Lenny'd been so... not weak, but... Well, you looked after Lenny.

It wasn't just women, everybody did it, even Jack. People always did things for him, and because he was charming and kind and terribly grateful, it made them feel they'd done something useful and good. He used it to his advantage, of course, played it up, but he really could be pretty hopeless. I mean, I'll never forget watching him trying to open a tin of baked beans, and that was when he was sober. But Lenny *connected* with people, that was the point, and Jeff didn't. Not in that way. He liked to get one up on them, and I could never understand that. Actually, I think that's what his affairs were about, it was the secrecy he liked more than the actual sex. You know, being able to chat away to someone knowing that he was knocking off their wife or girlfriend and they had no idea. I kept telling myself it didn't matter – not the affairs, because it was a couple of years before I found out about those, but just the way he was. I mean, you can't be down on someone because they're not someone else, can you? And we had a lovely home and a nice life, but it never really came together. I'm not blaming Jeff, it was my fault as much as his. The timing, apart from

anything else, because it was less than two years after Lenny died when we got married and I just wasn't ready for it.

I had a calendar once, with quotations on it and there was one that said, 'Life is lived forwards but understood backwards.' It's true, isn't it? If you ever understand it at all, that is. I'm starting to wonder. I mean, I've been over and over Lenny's death in my head, but I've never come up with any real answers. Except that I failed him. It always comes back to that. It's like those words you sometimes see on gravestones, *If loved could have saved him, he would not have died*. But you can't save people with love, can you? You should be able to, and it happens in books and things, but you can't, not in real life.

The cottage where Lenny killed himself was on the same estate. It belonged to the bloke who'd had the party. Marcus's father was the Earl of Ivar. He died a few years ago. Marcus, I mean, not his dad. Drug overdose. He can't have been more than thirty-five.

This cutting's from the *Mirror*. That's the paper I get, if I get a paper at all. Even if I do, I hardly ever get round to reading it. Just use it for lining the guinea-pigs' hutch. You'd have a job lining a matchbox with this little scrap. Might as well chuck it away. Concentrate on routine. Looking after the animals, riding – *life*, really. Roll up your sleeves and keep pedalling, as my granddad used to say.

But it's hard when you're on your own a lot. I wish there was someone I could talk to, someone I trusted enough, but there isn't, really.

I thought I'd made myself safe here, but I don't feel safe any more.

I'm frightened.