

Gordon Lewis

Secret
To
Sultan

The follow on book to *Secret Child*

The boy grows up and follows his dreams

Chapter One

The Deal

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I awoke, as usual, to the sound of my alarm clock. With the warmth of the sun shining into my bedroom, it felt as if life couldn't be much sweeter. It certainly didn't feel like today would be etched on my memory for all the wrong reasons, but simply just another day of working long hours in a job I truly loved. The forecast on the radio was for another hot summer's day, which was to be expected as London was in the midst of a heatwave. I moved around my new house drinking countless cups of tea, much to do with my Irish upbringing. I left the house without breakfast, knowing it would be served at work; just one of the perks of my job. My boss was a demanding and impatient man; a well-known television director. He would expect me and the television crew to be at the north London location with the cameras ready

and in position before he arrived.

I was young, and my mind was in constant overdrive. If you didn't know me, you might think I was a little hyperactive at times. But who could blame me? I was in the world of entertainment, meeting and working with famous people. However, I did have one big regret. I hadn't spent as much time with my mother and stepfather as I would've liked. Cathleen and Bill were very understanding and never made any fuss about it. Still, I felt terrible for not visiting more often. Deep down, I knew the phone calls were never as good as seeing them face to face.

'Don't worry about us; you're doing exactly what you've always wanted to do. Things don't just happen y'know, you have to work hard to succeed in show business.' Mum would always tell me this when I visited her in the little free time I had. With these constant reminders and encouragements all my life, Mum had made me determined and self-sufficient from a very early age. The mindset she taught me was probably a necessity for her own survival, rising from the difficult situation she found herself in having me out of wedlock in 1950s Ireland. Despite having to keep me a secret from the world for nine years, my mum led by example to instil a very good work ethic in me. Somehow she always made me see sense when I needed it most. Mum took a

keen interest in the showbiz personalities I was working with and constantly asked me about them like they were old friends. It was as if she had met them, but all her information came from newspapers or the television and occasionally, me. It was her way of staying close to me, which I found both comical and delightful at times.

Mum never looked her age and was always young at heart. Her piercing blue eyes, which I inherited, made her a very attractive and engaging person. Having me late in her life meant it was quite a struggle to bring me up, and being a single mother in the 1950s was a real taboo in Ireland. On top of that, I was very boisterous and always pushing my luck. I really was quite the little devil and not at all easy to control; I put it all down to my unusual circumstances. To her credit, my mum was incredibly patient with me. She was relentlessly positive and believed that anything was possible if you only try. Even though I saw little of Mum in my younger years because she worked full time in Dublin, our relationship was a close one and we had a deep understanding of one another. There was only one thing we did disagree on.

After working in the entertainment world for several years, I had already seen many people with addictions. She was addicted to her beloved cigarettes. When she knew I was coming to visit, Mum would open all the windows and get out the air freshener to cover up the

traces of her smoking.

‘Ah, I smell the air freshener again. How many have you had today?’ I enquired, only half playfully.

‘Oh, stop it – you cheeky little devil! I have this one vice, my only indulgence. Can’t you let me have that?’ She made a face of disapproval.

‘I’m just saying, it’s not good for you, Mum. Only because I care about your health.’

‘I know you care, but don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. Have you had anything to eat? I have a lovely Irish stew in the pot...’

My mum knew just how to change the subject of a conversation when she needed, and she knew the way to my heart was food. I loved Mum’s cooking and had really missed her food since moving into my new house.

Bill, my stepfather, was much older than my mum. But with relentless effort and energy, I kept him young. He had worked as a master carpenter in the film industry since arriving in London from Dublin in the 1950s, and later worked in the theatres, building sets and scenery for the live shows. When Mum and I came to London to join Bill, he couldn’t work me out; it wasn’t for want of trying. Looking back, it took time for him to get to know me. It must have been tough for Bill to adapt to the new responsibility of being a husband and a father all at once. Before Mum and I arrived from Ireland, Bill was

your typical Irishman and a happy-go-lucky bachelor. I wasn’t sure about him to begin with. Who is this man who’s getting a share of my mother’s love and affection, I found myself wondering. However, his patience and gentle ways finally found a way with me. Bill also got used to my ways eventually. As the years quickly passed, I learnt to trust and love this good, kind man who did the best he knew how for the woman he loved – my mum.

Bill was looking forward to taking life easy with his recent retirement but Mum had other ideas.

‘Bill Lewis,’ she said, ‘are you going to spend all your free time in the pubs now, are you?’

‘Yes, my dear. I’ve just retired having spent over fifty-one long years working. Can’t I have some time to relax for a little while, please?’

‘Sure, have some time to rest, but there’s plenty of jobs that need doing around the house. The sooner you get them done, the better. Or perhaps I should retire too and let you do all the cooking and cleaning from now on?’ Mum replied.

‘Soon enough, Cathleen. I’ll get round to them! I’m taking Brandy for his walk now, he knows it’s time.’

‘Stopping off at the pub on the way?’

‘Just for a quick pint on my way back,’ he admitted.

Mum knew all of Bill’s habits and ways. Like a lot of Irishmen, he cherished the atmosphere of the pub. He

was no saint but he was an honest and compassionate man. Knowing Mum, I was sure she would find a way to keep him busy in his retirement years.

On that hot sunny morning, as I arrived at the Rainbow Theatre in north London, I only had the day ahead of me on my mind. The theatre was now a live music venue, and as I walked through the doors, memories from years ago came flooding back. I was greeted by a friendly stage doorman who offered to show me around. The truth was, I already knew the place inside out. I used to visit the Rainbow Theatre religiously with my best friends Gerard and Brian Greene every Saturday morning to watch the black and white Batman films. I would pay to get into the theatre and then let my friends in through one of the side doors, collecting the money from them myself. Nothing much had changed over the years, except for the addition of some more bars around the venue. Alcohol had replaced ice creams.

Around the corner, in Finsbury Park, was the laundry shop where Mum worked as the manager when we lived in that area. Life was not easy for immigrant families looking to rent rooms, with signs in shop windows saying 'No Irish, no Blacks, no dogs'.

I'll never forget the day I received two free tickets from one of Mum's best customers to see The Beatles live on stage in the same theatre I now found myself working in.

The tickets were like gold dust; I could have sold them for a lot of money. But seeing The Beatles was not an opportunity I wanted to miss. Bill decided that I was far too young to go on my own and was going to accompany me.

'Are you sure you want to go to the concert?' Mum asked him. 'You're always complaining about The Beatles and their long hair. You say they can't sing and you're forever comparing them to The Bachelors from Ireland. Don't you think Gordon might like to take a friend with him instead?'

Secretly, I think Bill did want to see The Beatles, if for no other reason, just to see what all the fuss was about. When we arrived at the theatre, every seat was taken. When they finally came on stage, much later than expected, everybody went wild with excitement. The teenage girls in front of us stood up and started screaming.

'Girls! Girls! Please sit down! You're blocking the stage! And stop shouting,' Bill exclaimed. He was completely ignored, of course, and soon he was holding his hands over his ears. I joined the crowd and started shouting, standing on the seat to see the band.

'All this noise! It's not music! Are you enjoying this, Gordon?'

I ignored him and continued shouting and singing along while standing up on the seat. Bill got up after

the second song and spent the rest of the evening in the theatre bar. As for me, I was loving every minute. The whole atmosphere was electric and I knew, from that night, this was the world I wanted to be part of one day.

The television crew soon turned up in their numerous vehicles and began unloading equipment ready for the day. The catering truck was already serving breakfast. Soon the heavy cameras were lifted into their positions to capture the stage performance. The client for this video shoot was AWB – Average White Band. They wanted three live music videos for the marketing of their new album. Like a lot of bands and artists they arrived late, which was quite normal in the rock and roll world. However this meant I was already getting behind schedule. Sometimes you can easily make up the lost time, if you're lucky. But luck was not on my side today. As the producer, I would need to have a chat with the dubious theatre guy and ask for extra time, however he wasn't particularly easy to track down.

We were working on the last song, 'Let's Go Round Again'; the television crew were into the music, tapping their feet to the song. The playback was extremely loud with the band miming to the song. Just then, my runner came up to me and informed me that Bill was on the telephone wanting to speak with me.

'Can you tell Bill I'm dealing with a problem and I'll

call him back later? Thanks.' The runner went off.

The theatre guy appeared at last and I told him I would need an extension to finish the last song. He wasn't particularly eager to agree and wanted to close the venue at the time we previously agreed. I had to try and use some magic on him, which was all part of my job. I asked him to walk with me to the top floor bar for a beer, knowing he probably wanted some cash in hand to allow us to overrun and finish the shoot that night. His attitude changed when the cash was handed over and I was pleased to have secured some extra time. My runner returned, sprinting up to me at speed. He was gasping for air and I could tell something was wrong.

'Gordon, I was looking for you, Bill is still holding on the phone. He said it's urgent and that he's at the hospital!'

I was shocked and immediately rushed to the phone at the stage door.

'Hi, Bill, what's wrong?'

'Sorry Gordon, didn't mean to take you away from your work but your mum is in the local Tottenham hospital.' Bill explained in his usual calm way. He was never one to panic.

'Is she okay, Bill? What's wrong? Did she have an accident?' My mind and heart were racing.

'No, not an accident. I'm not sure what the problem

is, Gordon. She kept falling into this deep sleep, on and off. It got me worried so I called the doctor. After he examined her, he asked that I take her to the hospital.'

Bill tried to reassure me she was in good hands with the doctors and nurses. I wasn't totally convinced, though. I couldn't understand how this was happening; Mum was always healthy. The last time she'd been to hospital was to have me, 23 years ago.

'Gordon, you can't do anything for her at the moment – she's asleep. Come when you finish work, I'll be here at the hospital waiting for you.'

'Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can,' I said.

The last time I was in a hospital was in Dublin when I was six. I needed to have my tonsils out and it's safe to say I didn't enjoy the experience. Mum could only come to visit me in the evenings after work and she'd sit and talk with me while playing with my hair. Before my tonsils were taken out, she promised me a new cowboy outfit if I was a good, brave boy. A few days later, I walked out the hospital with my new cowboy hat and gun. Mum always knew how to deal with me; she could read me like a book at that time.

Mum came from an Irish generation who were suspicious of hospitals, believing you either came out alive or died in there. Walking into the hospital later and looking for Mum's ward, I felt an icy apprehension in

the pit of my stomach. I wasn't sure what to expect. I kept thinking about Mum's doubting words, 'alive or dead'. They played on my mind, repeating over and over like a broken record. Usually I would have gone out for dinner and a drink after a production 'wrap'. But the last thing on my mind that night was food. I found Bill sitting beside Mum's bed where she was sleeping. He looked dapper and smart in his customary suit and tie, but a look of concern hung on his face.

'How's Mum? What did the doctor say?' I asked, apprehensively.

'Oh, there you are. She's okay, I think. All the doctor said was that they'd carry out some tests over the next couple of days and let us know. Pull up a chair, Gordon, she's been asleep for the last few hours.'

'It's okay, Bill, I prefer to stand,' I replied.

I was restless and paced a few steps, trying to shift the nervous tension knotting itself in my stomach. I didn't know what was wrong and I couldn't do anything for her. The insufferable feeling of helplessness was eating away at me already. This was another side to my nature; I like to be in control. After about twenty minutes, a nurse suggested we leave as it was late. She assured us Mum was in good hands so I decided to invite Bill to have a night-cap at the pub near the hospital. I knew a drink would go down well with him that evening.

It was after a few drinks when Bill revealed that Mum had not been her best for a while, but she had insisted that he did not mention anything to me.

‘She didn’t want to make any fuss over her appetite and the weight loss. She didn’t want you to be worrying about her,’ Bill admitted.

I was completely taken aback with what Bill told me. I had thought of myself as a relatively insightful and perceptive person until that moment. However, the true extent to which I had been wrapped up in my own dreams was now becoming apparent.

‘Your mum always looks forward to seeing you, Gordon, she’s so proud of how well you’re doing. She knows you love your work and that you need to spend a lot of time there.’

Even with Bill’s reassurances, I felt guilty listening to him talk about Mum. He lit another cigarette.

‘I should’ve said something when she started losing weight. I saw it but I didn’t ask. I didn’t think much of it,’ I said, feeling completely lost.

‘I didn’t think much of it either at first. Not until she started feeling weak and falling asleep in the chair. She’s usually so energetic,’ said Bill. ‘You know it’s not in her nature to complain.’

I began to realise Mum had been putting on a show of normality for me and making Bill play along with the

masquerade.

Days turned into weeks in the hospital and the doctors were still trying to find out what was wrong with Mum. She was still losing weight and rather weak. Bill and I were becoming more and more distraught at the fact they hadn’t diagnosed the problem. Our lives had been turned upside down; Mum was the glue at the heart of our family. One evening I arrived at the hospital and a doctor asked to speak with me. He said they believed that a prescription prescribed by my mum’s general practitioner had been the cause of her problem. Bill and Mum lived in Broadwater Farm in Tottenham, one of the biggest council estates in the country. She was chased one evening after work and the incident had caused anxiety for which Mum was prescribed some medication. After the hospital diagnosis, and a change in prescription, we could see a turning point in her recovery.

‘I can’t wait to get Cathleen out of this place, Gordon. It’s really miserable in here, you know. The smell of antiseptic is a constant reminder of death and disease. And the food is awful,’ Bill said. ‘Not that she’s eating much anyway,’ he added.

‘With some luck, she’ll be out of here in a few days,’ I replied, feeling confident at last.

I had spoken too soon. Two days later, she developed pneumonia and had fluid in her lungs. I had always

known Mum to be a fighter with an unrelenting positive attitude. Although we were presumably feeling the same devastation, I did not disclose my feelings to Bill. Mum started refusing to eat and we both felt as if she was beginning to give up. Seeing her lying in the hospital bed was a wakeup call to the inevitability of mortality and that it was only a matter of time until her life came to an end.

The next morning, I was in the hospital again with Bill trying to reassure me.

‘She’ll be fine, you’ll see. Don’t worry, Gordon.’

I appreciated his efforts but as we stood by the bedside, I couldn’t help thinking the worst. My mind drifted to wondering how Bill would cope without Mum in his life. The doctors had asked Bill to remain by Mum’s bedside and keep talking to her. He was very committed and did this religiously each day. But still Mum remained in a strange deep sleep without any real movement except for the rise and fall of her chest. Bill would arrive at the hospital early in the morning and stay until the evening. He would talk about all the enjoyable things they had done in their time together. With all his heart, he did not want to let her go. It was very distressing and painful for me to watch.

‘I was thinking about building that new kitchen area you always wanted – to make room for all the jars of jam

you’ll make this year. When you’re better, we’ll look to have a lovely holiday somewhere nice,’ Bill would say, gently holding and stroking her hand, never taking his eyes from her even for a second. It seemed as if he was trying to create something eternal between them.

I was ringing the office every few hours from the public telephone within the hospital, using small bags of change. My boss was understanding but he relied on me solely to deal with artist management and the record company people, who could be crazier than the artists they represented. My sleep was fitful as I didn’t want to miss anything and I lived in constant fear of what might happen next. I found myself frequently visited by nightmares and would wake up anticipating the words, ‘She’s gone’. But still I couldn’t bring myself to discuss this with Bill.

One evening, almost a week after her pneumonia, Bill and I were getting ready to leave the hospital. Just as Bill was telling Mum that we’d be back in the morning, she opened her eyes. In that moment she looked happy; some semblance of her old self for the first time in forever. She didn’t say anything, only smiled. Bill moved up close and kissed her. I was momentarily overjoyed but my fractured nerves quickly took hold and I thought, could this be it? Is this how it’ll end? But then, to my happy astonishment, she said ‘Any chance of a cup of tea?’ We

laughed; of course the first drink she asked for was tea, not water. I saw this as a good omen.

I rushed to inform the nurse and then got her the cup of tea. A sort of nervous relief descended upon Bill and I, but we weren't sure how long this would last.

Over the next few days, the senior hospital consultant wanted to do a few more tests as he was still unsure of Mum's condition. She was making slow progress. Bill always had the telephone number of wherever I was working, just in case he needed to call me. Mum was lucky to have friends and family who came to see her. She was very well-liked and appreciated. Her nephew, Dennis, and his wife, Nellie, would make her laugh, offering to place bets on horseraces for her. She grew up with horses in Ireland and they shared the excitement of the races. Other family members came over from Ireland to see her, perhaps fearing the worst.

'I've had enough of hospitals, Gordon. Please take me home. Tell the doctors I want to go home,' she asked, almost pleading with me.

'We want you home, Mum, but we have to see what the results of the tests are first. I heard Nellie and Dennis were here again earlier today.'

'Yes, they were. It's kind of them to visit so often.' Mum paused. 'The truth is, I don't really want people to see me like this; I'm embarrassed. I look a mess, I'm so

frail. It's awful, Gordon.' Her weak voice choked as she spoke and I felt my own throat tighten.

'Please talk to the doctors. They'll listen to you. Just let me go home,' she continued. I was beginning to well up and I didn't trust myself to speak so I just hugged her.

'I'll speak to the doctor, okay?' I whispered, knowing that she wouldn't be able to leave the hospital any time soon.

Bill pulled me aside and told me that Mum was still putting on her best show for me, and that she'd been really down; completely uninterested in visitors and food. The only time she would look at herself using the small mirror was when she knew I was on my way.

'I'm going to look for the consultant doctor to discuss Mum's situation,' I told Bill while trying to swallow my rising anxiety. I was still putting on a brave face for them both. A nurse came up to me unexpectedly and asked if Bill and I could join her to see the doctor in his small white room.

'I'll come to the point, gentlemen. We've looked at the x-ray of Mrs Lewis's lungs and I'm sorry, but I don't have good news for you,' the doctor said, matter-of-factly. My heart sank as I looked across at Bill, who was looking equally as worried. The doctor put the x-ray on the lightbox and pointed.

'We've noticed her loss of interest in people and her

surroundings. Mrs Lewis is probably suffering from depression due to the length of her stay in hospital. All of this hasn't helped, but we need to work fast to operate and remove the cancer.' The word cancer came as a complete surprise.

'You said cancer' I said, not quite believing what the doctor was telling us.

'Yes.' He paused. 'We will have to remove one half of her lung to make sure it doesn't spread.'

'She will survive?' I asked, tentatively.

'She has a good chance of surviving the operation itself, though her weak health does add additional risk. As for the cancer, that's another matter.'

'But you can help her, right?' Bill butted in. The doctor paused and looked at me before he replied.

'Yes, we'll do our best, but her life will be limited as the cancer looks aggressive.' I sensed that the doctor was preparing us for the worst.

'How long are we looking at?' I asked, dreading what may follow.

'Could be as much as one year. Perhaps a little longer, with some luck.' There was an awful silence. Bill and I didn't know what to say.

The doctor broke the silence, insisting that we consent to the operation now so that it would be rushed through the next day.

'Would you prefer to inform Mrs Lewis, or do you wish me to discuss the cancer and operation with her?' the doctor asked, looking at me. This felt unreal.

'I'll talk to my mother about it. Leave it to us, please,' I said after a moment of pulling myself together in the wake of the shock the doctor had delivered.

We walked out of the office, back to Mum's bedside, in a daze. We were unable to speak. As I saw her looking tired and dejected, I made an extra effort to compose myself and be strong, as she had been for all these years. I told her she would be having an operation tomorrow in the same manner you might tell someone they are going to have their hair cut. I did not mention anything about her cancer.

I asked Bill to join me in the pub; we needed more than a stiff drink that evening, for sure. As we sat down in Bill's regular corner of the pub, he pulled two tablets out of his jacket pocket and then took them with his Guinness. The poor man was on medication to cope with the stress he had been under for months. I had been relying on alcohol to relax after work. Bill looked at me and asked the question I'd been expecting since we left the hospital.

'How and when will you tell our Cathleen?' His face was ashen with concern.

I chose my words carefully. 'Bill, I'm going to have to ask you to trust me on this.' I was trying to bring back

some of my usual positive and up-beat self. ‘Can you promise me you won’t tell Mum she has cancer? We can call it the ‘C’ word between us.’

He hesitated in a kind of bewilderment. ‘What are you talking about, surely we have to let her know.’ I could tell Bill was very uncertain. ‘Sorry, Gordon, I’m not sure this is the right thing to do.’

‘Bill, trust me. If we tell her she has cancer, she’ll just give up. No offence, but I know my mum better than anyone in the world.’

He stared thoughtfully into his pint and then took another big gulp of the black nectar. In the minutes of silence that followed, Bill lit up his fourth cigarette. He was chain-smoking.

‘How are you going to tell her about the shortening of her life without mentioning the ‘C’ word?’

‘I don’t know yet. Give me until tomorrow night to think about it. Please don’t ask me anymore questions, Bill. I just want to keep her alive, to extend her time with us.’

We spoke very little about it for the rest of the evening. As I put Bill in a black cab later on, he asked me if I was sure what I was doing. I tried to hide my unsettled mind with a weary smile and nodded to reassure him.

When I got home, I did something I don’t normally do. I opened a bottle of red wine to drink on my own.

I wasn’t ready for bed; my mind was still processing the events of the last 24 hours, the last week. The last few months. The television was on in the background, helping to drown some of the relentless noise inside my brain. I was on my second glass already, knowing I would drink the whole bottle before going to sleep. All I could think of were the memories of me and Mum in Dublin, and arriving in London to live with Bill. I found myself taking out photos of me with them both when I was a teenager. Happy memories of the past were quickly overwhelmed by guilt. I’d been taking Mum for granted for too long, and with the deterioration of her health came a nauseating realisation: loss was very real and terribly permanent. I kept thinking I should have done more for her; my wakeup call had seemed to come too late. The house phone started ringing; it was past midnight. It could only be the hospital calling at this time. Once again, I braced myself for the worst and picked up the phone.

‘Sorry to be ringing you so late. Did I wake you up?’ It was Bill.

‘No, it’s okay. I’m up. Are you alright?’ I spoke as soberly as I could.

‘I need to talk to you. I hope you understand,’ he stammered. ‘I can’t sleep.’

‘It’s alright, Bill. I can’t sleep either.’

There was a pause from Bill, and then he just broke down and began to cry. I tried so hard to comfort him and reassure him that something good would come out of this, without crying myself. I had to be strong for him.

‘I’m so sorry Gordon. I just can’t believe what’s happening, and what’s going to happen to Cathleen...’

It was more comfortable to talk on the phone that night, for some reason. But I could tell he was on the hard stuff, probably brandy.

‘What are you drinking?’ I asked, pouring my third glass of red wine, searching for some kind of emotional comfort. I was not great at expressing my real emotions. I let Bill talk about the old times and what a great woman Mum was to us both. I was welling up too. He reminded me of all the beautiful things she did for me and how much he loved her. When we had finished talking and I put the phone down, my emotions finally got the better of me. For the first time since this nightmare began, I found myself crying uncontrollably. I was just relieved nobody was around to see. There is so much pride in me and I never let things get the better of me. But the idea of losing Mum was just too painful to comprehend and there was simply nothing I could do.

Pouring the last glass of wine from the bottle, I decided to do something I never thought I’d do. I was raised as a Catholic until, at the age of thirteen, I lost my faith in the

church and decided I didn’t need religion anymore. But there I was kneeling on my red carpet floor, making the sign of the cross like a faithful Catholic.

‘God, I’m really not good at this. I don’t go to Mass and I don’t believe in the Catholic Church. But if you are there, I need your help. Please forgive me for what I am about to ask but I believe only your help can allow my mother to live for many years to come. Can we do a deal? Sorry, I told you I’m not good at this. If you let Mum live, I will try so hard to be a better person; I might just surprise you.’

I blessed myself, got up off the floor and I drank the last drop of red wine. I was now smashed. The next morning I awoke dehydrated with a hangover. But I remembered everything from the night before and my deal with God.