

Chapter One

Jessica Lord had been waiting for this television programme for two weeks and had even refused an invitation to the cinema, because her favourite author, Jivan Childering, was going to appear on Sally Mennon's *People in the News*. It was a rare opportunity to see a writer who normally went to extreme lengths to avoid publicity and who was becoming famous for his tangles with the press.

She tied her hair back, cleaned her spectacles and got ready to enjoy herself. After pouring a glass of wine, she found the box of chocolates she'd been saving for a happy occasion and curled up in the corner of the couch with her feet up. It was Saturday night, after all.

She looked down at her book with its author photo. Childering was one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen. Or else the photo in the book had been touched up.

As the programme began and he was introduced to the studio audience, she sighed. No, it hadn't been touched up. He really was gorgeous, with his straight blue-black hair and dark eyes. Just as the newspapers said, he seemed to have inherited the best from both parents, the height and clear-cut aristocratic features of his English mother, the graceful carriage and olive skin of his Indian father.

Until he opened his mouth. And then this brilliant author, whose latest book had hit the bestseller lists within days of being published, turned wooden and unco-operative, answering the interviewer's questions with monosyllables. From the way the two of them looked at one another, they

were not on good terms.

The wine remained untasted on the table beside Jessica, and when the unopened box of chocolates slid to the floor, she didn't bother to pick it up.

Sally's questions were tactless and deliberately provocative, but Childering wasn't handling them well. She was trying to get him to talk about his childhood and how badly his mother's family had treated him. She didn't mention his mixed race specifically, but that was clearly what she meant when she called him 'the cuckoo in the nest'.

His wooden expression was replaced for a moment by anger at the phrase, then he said, 'Is my childhood relevant? I was told you wanted me to talk about my latest book tonight.'

'Yes, of course I do. And later on we'll have the viewer segment. We've picked three questions for you to answer. So . . . tell us about your new book, Jivan. What does your intrepid hero get up to this time?'

Just as he opened his mouth to reply, Jessica's telephone rang.

'Oh, no!' For a moment, she debated leaving it, but she could never bear to do that, so picked up the phone. 'Yes?'

'Is that Jessica Lord?'

'Yes.' Quick, she thought, whoever you are, tell me what you want and go away! And you'd better not be trying to sell me anything. She continued to stare at the television screen, trying to follow what Childering was saying about his book.

'Jessica,' said an unknown voice, 'your question has been picked for use during the Jivan Childering interview tonight.'

'What?'

The voice repeated what it had said in a bored tone. 'Would you like time

to fetch your question?’

‘No. I can remember it.’

‘Then if you’d like to hold the line for two or three minutes, we’ll connect you to the studio and you can speak to Mr Childering. Oh, wait – can you just turn down the sound on your TV first? We’re getting a bit of echo.’

She did as he asked, then waited, trying to control her nervousness as she held the phone to her ear and listened to the programme through it.

‘You’re through,’ said the voice.

‘Good evening, Jessica Lord from London.’ Sally was smiling across at her from the screen.

‘Good evening, Sally and Jivan.’ Jessica was pleased that her voice had neither wobbled nor risen nervously at the end of the phrase.

‘You have a question for tonight’s guest, I believe. Go ahead.’

‘Jivan, I’ve read all your books, and loved them.’ She paused, expecting him to smile or say thank you.

He did nothing except incline his head slightly. His face was expressionless again and his eyes were glazed with what looked suspiciously like boredom.

She persevered. ‘I’d like to ask you why the women in your last book had such minor roles? Your other heroines were so real, I could almost see them walking down the street, but in *Swift Justice* the women seem very colourless, fading into the background . . .’ Whoops, had she gone too far? But this defect had haunted her, because even his minor characters were usually vivid.

She watched the television screen and saw his face grow tight and shuttered, which surprised her. Surely a famous writer would be used to all

sorts of questions and not get angry?

‘In the book you mentioned,’ he said slowly, as if speaking to a half-wit, ‘the story focuses on the male characters and it’s they who carry the action, so the women *are* unimportant. One has to be true to one’s story, you know.’

‘But Laura’s intervention marked a crucial turning point in the action. Surely a man whose life she’d saved, who had just gone to bed with her, wouldn’t have walked out and left her without a word afterwards.’

Jivan sighed audibly. ‘It’s very true to Sam Shere’s character for him to walk away. We can’t have him in a permanent relationship, you know, or how would I get him into his next adventure?’

His tone was so patronising Jessica felt insulted. ‘How can the female character be unimportant? You wouldn’t even *have* an ongoing hero without Laura.’

She could see the amusement building up on Sally Mennon’s face.

‘Laura saved Sam’s life by mere chance,’ he insisted.

‘And by some quick thinking, not to mention bravery,’ Jessica insisted.

‘Look, this discussion is getting us nowhere. *Nowhere!* If you feel you can do better yourself, go ahead and produce a bestselling story dominated by women.’

By now, Jessica was angry enough to shout back, ‘That would be as unbalanced as your last book.’

‘Then go ahead and write a *balanced* tale.’ His voice was dripping with sarcasm and he was glaring at the cameras.

Sally was smiling openly.

‘I will. In fact, I’ve written one already.’ She’d entered it in a writing competition but it would be a while before she found out the results.

He made a visible effort to control his anger. ‘Then as fellow writers we’ll just have to agree to disagree, won’t we?’

She opened her mouth to reply, but—

‘Thank you, Jessica,’ cooed Sally. ‘And good luck with your own writing. Now, our next viewer should be on the line. Are you there, Paul Jones from Taunton?’

Jessica put down the phone and walked back to the couch. Turning up the sound, she sat through the rest of the interview and found it as bitterly disappointing as the first part.

The other viewers asked innocuous questions like: ‘How do you start writing a new book?’ and ‘Where do you get your ideas?’ Jivan gave brief and unrevealing answers.

The undercurrent of animosity between him and his host was quite obvious and in Jessica’s opinion was unprofessional on both sides. When the show ended, he got up and strode out of the studio before the credits had started playing across the screen.

‘And that concludes our interview with the famous writer, Jivan Childering,’ Sally tone was mocking. ‘A rare treat.’

Another voice took over. ‘Next week’s guest will be—’

Jessica switched off the TV set, but didn’t move. She was disappointed and still angry.

After a few minutes, she went into the spare bedroom and switched her computer on, muttering, ‘I *will* get my novels published. If not this one, then the next. And it’ll include strong men *and* women characters, thank you very much, Mr Childering.’

