



*Tomorrow's Path*

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London W1F 8AN  
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First published in Great Britain in 2015.  
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2020.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-2695-0

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon LT Pro by  
Allison & Busby Ltd

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has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced  
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Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

## *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 uncooperative, 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 an 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’s 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.’

\* \* \*



The following weekend, Jessica read an article about Childering's acrimonious break-up and forthcoming divorce in the Sunday papers and saw a photo in a scandal rag showing him with a bandaged head where his wife had thrown a vase at him. That must have happened soon after he'd been on *The Sally Mennon Show*.

If his marriage had been going sour, no wonder his female characters had become either unsympathetic or pale shadows.

But he still shouldn't have talked to her like that.

The phone rang and when she picked it up, it was her father.

'We've . . . um, got a bit of bad news, love.'

'What's wrong, Dad?'

'Your mother's got breast cancer.'

'Oh no! What stage is it at?'

'It's early days, so she stands a good chance of recovering, but I thought you should know. Perhaps you can get home more often at weekends. She'd like that and we have to keep her happy.'

'Of course I will. I'll come up tonight.'

'No, don't do that. She'll think she's worse than they've told her. They said she stands a good chance of recovering, thank heaven.'

'I'll come up to Lancashire next weekend then.'

'Don't be anything but positive. Don't even hint at . . . anything else.'

'I won't, Dad. How are you coping?'

'I'm doing fine. No one needs to worry about me.'

When she put the phone down she had tears in her eyes. Cancer! She couldn't bear the thought of it. She'd have to go home far more often now. She *wanted* to go, to keep an eye on her mother.

Two weeks later, Jessica's section leader told her the manager of their area wanted to see her.

'What about?'

He hesitated. 'Your future.'

'Oh.' She'd been half expecting this. The company made a big thing of 'developing' staff and promoting internally. Only she wasn't seeking a promotion. All she wanted was to tick along in her job and carry on writing as much as she could.

He made a shooing motion so she went along the corridor and knocked on Fran's door.

'Ah, Jessica. Come and sit down. I'd like to discuss your future in the company.'

She could guess what was coming.

'It's about time we gave you some overseas experience. How do you fancy a stay in New York?'

'I'd hate it.' She spoke without thinking, blurting out the truth, something she couldn't seem to train herself out of. She could have kicked herself when she saw Fran's disapproving expression.

'Oh? Why is that?'

'I'm not fond of big cities.'

'New York is where our head office is. We only send our most promising people there. You're one of

the quickest learners we've ever employed.'

'Thank you. But there's something else: my mother has just been diagnosed with breast cancer.' She hated using her mother as an excuse, but consoled her conscience with the thought that her mother would benefit from more visits if Jessica managed to stay in England.

'Oh dear! I'm sorry to hear that. Of course this isn't the time to send you overseas. Do you mind me asking how bad it is?'

'She's just started treatment, so we're not sure what's going to be happening.' Tears came into her eyes and she fumbled for a tissue.

'We won't send you away yet, then. Where do your parents live?'

'Rochdale, to the north of Greater Manchester, only we still think of it as Lancashire.'

'Would it help to get a posting to our Leeds office for a while?'

'Yes. I think it would.'

'It'll mean a sideways step, less keeping up with the pointed end of new developments.'

'It'd be worth it.'

'I'll see what I can arrange.'

Jessica went back to her section and reported the conversation, not expecting anything much to happen for a while.

But she hadn't counted on Fran's famous efficiency. Within the week, her manager had arranged to shuffle some staff round and post Jessica to Leeds.

That meant she needed a car and had to find herself somewhere else to live, not to mention packing up her possessions.

Inevitably her writing suffered, but her mother's delight at having her living closer made up for that, and her father was delighted to be able to help her find a car, for which he paid.

She was shocked. 'You shouldn't have done that, Dad. You must let me pay you back.'

'Our Peter gets a car from the business, and it's about time you had some benefit from my success, too. We're a registered company now, with two shops, and both are doing well. Our Peter's got plans for another one. Eh, he's a go-getter, that one is.'

Her brother wouldn't be happy about her getting one, she was sure. She and Peter weren't close and all he seemed to care about was making money. 'But I don't work in the shop, so why would I be entitled to a car?'

'Because you're our daughter and we'd love to help you. Why did we go to Australia for a few years and work so hard, if not to be able to give you and your brother better chances in life? You can't both inherit the shops, and the way you two have always fought and quarrelled, you couldn't run the company together, either. But you'll still get your share one day. You must let me slip you something every now and then. Family comes first with us Lords.'

That had been dinned into her since childhood. She gave him a big hug. 'Thank you, Dad.'

Her father's casual reference to Australia made her dream of it again that night. She'd been seven when the family came back to England. Her mother hadn't been able to settle abroad, so far away from their family, but Jessica had been born there and knew nothing else. She'd been deeply upset at being brought to a strange, cold country, where she was the youngest in her generation, an outlier age-wise, and had no real friends amongst the Lord clan, not even her older brother.

One day she would go back to Australia to see if it was as wonderful as she remembered: the sunshine, the wide blue sky, the beaches and, above all, the more relaxed feel to the place. One of the first things she'd do was visit the Swan Valley, near Perth. Her parents had taken her and her brother there a couple of times. Jessica hadn't been old enough to taste the wine, of course, but she'd loved seeing the vineyards, with their rows of dark green vines, and had enjoyed picking her own bunch of grapes. But she couldn't go yet, not till her mother was better.

She settled down easily into the small branch in Leeds, making friends with Lisa, and going out with Thomas a few times. She was quite prepared to go to bed with him, but as they agreed after a preliminary and unsatisfying fumble that ended with them both feeling vaguely embarrassed, they made better friends than lovers. She was beginning to worry that she hadn't met any guy she wanted to sleep with, was beginning to think there was something wrong with her.

In the meantime, she was still obsessed with her writing and it saved her sanity while travelling to and from Lancashire.

To everyone's relief, little by little her mother made progress.

Jessica wondered what had happened to the writing competition and had mentally dismissed it, deciding she'd not got anywhere. Then one day she received a letter saying that due to there being 1,200 entries, the verdict would be delayed, but that she had got through to the last thirty.

That made her day.

At twenty-seven, Jessica told herself, she had plenty of time to achieve her ambition of getting her novels published.

But she missed having solid writing time, missed it so much.