Lovereading.co.uk

Queen Mum

Kate Long

Published by Picador

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

Click here to buy this book and read more

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One

Video night last Monday. Manny's been going through a surrealist phase so we had a selection of Luis Buñuel films. Juno had made her own crisps out of parsnip shavings and black pepper and put them in a wooden bowl in the middle of the rug. Tom and I supplied the wine – huge row in the middle of Tesco's about that. 'I'm not spending so much,' Tom had said. 'It's only bloody Juno and Manny next door.'

I was out of the lounge when the first film started, so I didn't see the title.

'What's this one?' I asked Tom.

'*Large Door*, apparently,' he said. I could tell he was hacked off. He's an action-thriller man.

Juno stretched across with the video case for me. *L'Age d'Or*, I read. I caught her eye and she smiled indulgently; luckily, Tom didn't see.

After a while the woman on screen, who looked like Clara Bow, started rolling her eyes and sucking the toe of a life-size male statue. I got the giggles then, I couldn't help it. Tom started to laugh too, then, after a while, Juno joined in. By the time we got to a scene with a bishop being thrown out of the window, I was helpless. My cheeks were

wet and Tom's face was flushed and shiny. So the evening was going to go well after all.

The video finished and Manny switched the TV off. 'I never thought of it as quite so hilarious,' he said, smiling, and there was just that edge to his voice.

So, I thought, got it wrong again.

Cestrian Park's a place of hidden codes. You think, when you buy a house, it's yours to do up as you see fit. But it's not. There are, oh, *things* you have to have. Basket of logs, verdigris planters, antique French wall clock, Belfast sink, one of those granite pestle and mortars on your kitchen top. Your curtains are Sanderson, Zoffany or Osborne and Little; Laura Ashley if you're slumming it. And that place you go and sit in to watch the TV, it's the drawing room, not the lounge. This is Farrow and Ball country.

I remember standing outside, just after we'd moved in, looking at this double-fronted Edwardian house, twice the size of the one I grew up in. I stood on the gravel drive and I thought, It's ours. I can't believe we've been so lucky.

The afternoon following our surrealist evening, Juno came round buzzing with excitement.

'Ally,' she said as she stepped over the threshold, 'I've been a naughty girl.'

'I find that hard to believe,' I said. 'Sainthood's your stock-in-trade.'

We went though and sat in the front bay window where I could watch for Ben coming home from school. She knows I need to do this.

'I had a phone call this morning,' she went on, brushing her wavy hair behind her ears. 'You'll never, ever guess.'

'No, you're right, I won't. Get on with it.'

She was hyper, more than usual. Her skin's quite dark so it doesn't often show when she colours up, but it did now. 'It was a TV company.' She put her hand to her mouth as if the news was almost too shocking to be let out. 'Ally, listen – I'm going to be on television!'

'Oh my God.' I caught myself mirroring her movements, brought my hand down and gave her a hug instead. 'Really? When? What for?'

'You won't believe it . . . I'm going to be on *Queen Mum*!'

I gaped at her.

'Have you seen it?'

'Where the women swap houses and then the viewers vote for who's the best mother? Bloody hell, Juno. I'm, I'm amazed. My God.'

'Why?'

'Well – what can I say. I wouldn't have thought it was your cup of tea.'

She giggled. 'To tell you the truth, it's compulsory viewing in our house. It's the only early evening programme Manny watches. He finds it fascinating from a sociological point of view.'

I could imagine him saying this. 'Will he be fascinated to be in it, though?'

'Good question. No, he'll go mad at first. He doesn't even know I've filled in the application form.'

'Juno, you crazy girl. He'll have some kind of Gallic fit.'

'He will, won't he? But he'll come round, given time and flattery.'

Emmanuel Kingston on television; I could see him, but more reading the news or presenting an arts programme, Thinking Woman's crumpet. Reality TV?

'You're dangerous, you are,' I laughed. 'So how come you've managed to apply without telling him? Don't you have to both give your permission?'

She took a deep breath. 'OK, I'm ahead of myself. I filled in the form on the Internet weeks ago, and I had a call back this morning to say we're through to the next stage, which is an individual telephone interview. I've scheduled that for Wednesday night, so I'll have to tell him when he comes home this evening.'

'And what do you reckon he'll say?'

'Oh, I'll talk him into it, I always do.'

That was true. The adventures they'd had were all instigated by her. Skinny dipping in the Indian Ocean, being extras in *Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves*, taking a midnight picnic in a haunted house. Bungee jumping on their tenth wedding anniversary, which she'd have done on her honeymoon if she hadn't been pregnant.

'OK. Then what?'

'If the phone chat scores top marks, they come round to the house and do a more in-depth interview. Suss out the neighbourhood; check *you* over, probably.' She grinned and touched my knee. 'No need to worry. There are loads of applicants, the guy was telling me. We may not get accepted.'

'You will.' I knew she would, too. Things happen for Juno. 'When's it kick off?'

'They'd start filming next month; it airs six months later. So, what, August? September?'

An old lady walking past outside looked in and waved. Mrs Beale. Waving at Juno, not me, because Juno runs her to the nursing home every week to visit her husband. There was no way Juno was going to lose at *Queen Mum*. She does everything, and does it well.

'God. Cameras in our street.' I wondered what the neighbours would think. I could just picture Tom's face when I told him. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Sure.'

'It's just . . . ' I paused, not sure how the question would sound. 'Why are you doing it?'

'For fun.'

'It seems like a lot of effort, commitment—'

'Risk?'

'No, I didn't mean that. It'll be very *public*, though.'

'Do you think I won't be any good?'

'Get away. You'll win the whole series. Everyone'll vote for you. *I'll* vote for you about ninety times.'

She laughed again, throwing her head back, her eyes glinting. 'Bless you, Ally. It's a good question, though. I'd better get it straight by the time Manny comes home, hadn't I? I'm doing it because I want to, basically. Because it'll be an Experience, and I'm always up for one of those. Plus I'll get the chance to re-evaluate my relationships with everyone. It'll make Manny and the girls realize how much I do for them—'

'Depends who you they get in your place,' I said mischievously. 'Won't you be nervous you might get *supplanted*?'

I saw a little frown cross her brow.

'I suppose so. Actually, no. Manny and I are really strong together, and, how can I put this without sounding like a crashing snob? They do tend to pair you up with a, a contrasting sort of family. So a woman who wouldn't be anything like me. Makes for more exciting TV. And the things that Manny loves about me, this other woman wouldn't have them. And she'd run the house in a way he wouldn't like.'

I thought about this. What would be the opposite of Juno? A woman who didn't care about anything; a slob, a slut, someone with no style or charm. The sort of woman who sits back and lets life happen to her.

'I get you. You're banking on a twenty-five-stone fishwife.'

'With halitosis, yes.'

'And Manny'll be begging you to come back within hours.'

'Let's hope so.' She pulled a comic-distressed face.

The front door banged and I jumped, even though I was expecting it.

'Ben? Ben!' I heard the sports bag drop on the floor and the sound of feet thumping up the stairs. 'Had a good day?' I called after him, uselessly. He never likes to talk when he first gets in; I know this, but it still makes me sad.

'I should go,' said Juno, rising from the sofa and pulling her camel sweater down over her neat cream

cords. 'Pascale and Soph'll be next door, and I've got to get the sauce made for the chicken. We're eating early tonight because Manny's booked tickets for *The Birds*.'

'The Hitchcock film?'

'The play. Aristophanes. You know.' She saw I didn't. 'Greek guy. I'd never heard of him either, Manny's the culture vulture. It's an updated production, supposed to be really funny. We're taking the girls along so I hope it's not too blue. Can I scrounge some sage as I go past? I think the cat's been lying on mine, it's gone all ropy.'

I saw her out, back to her happy house, and it was as if she'd taken a little of the light with her. I imagined her next door, dancing around the kitchen to Charles Trenet or Manny's Breton folk CDs, the girls floating in and chatting about how school had gone.

I dragged myself up off the sofa and went to look in the freezer.

*

***Title sequence to* Queen Mum**

Music: brass over techno; funky electro-beat incorporating the initial six-note riff of 'God Save the Queen'.

Visuals: deep blue background, cartoon head and shoulders of a black woman wearing police uniform. The camera pulls out to show she's holding a baby in one hand and typing on a laptop with the other. The baby reaches up and grabs her hat so it tumbles off, to be replaced by a crown dropping down

from somewhere above. The words 'Queen Mum' in a scintillating pink font scroll into the top half of the screen from the left. A cartoon hand from the right appears and snatches the crown from the policewoman; the camera follows to show a white brunette in a teacher's gown holding in the same free fist a dog's lead and a set of toddler reins. The teacher puts the crown on her head, only for it to be whisked away immediately by the figure on her right, this time an Asian woman wearing a suit and holding a GameBoy, with a thermometer poking out of her top pocket. The letters 'Queen Mum' evaporate in a pink mist, and the presenter's name now runs along the top of the screen, while below the crown is taken once more from the right, by a white, blonde woman in overalls holding a diploma bound with a red ribbon, while a pair of grey underpants dangles from her middle finger. Suddenly a magpie swoops down and catches the crown up in its beak, flying to the left and over the heads of the dismayed women. The last scene is the magpie sitting on a tree branch and winking at the camera, the crown still dangling from its beak. The camera moves in closer and closer until the edge of the crown forms a circular frame, through which we pass, into the opening shot of the actual programme.

*

In the dentist's waiting room I ended up mentally filling in a magazine quiz. What Kind of a Pal was I? As if I didn't know.

When I was at school I had three best friends. The teachers used to joke about us going everywhere together. It was our big fear that we'd be put in separ-

ate classes. Then, when we were in the third year, my best-best friend Gilly moved to Oxfordshire because her parents were separating and her mum needed to be near Gilly's grandma. After that the group weren't so close and Amy, who was always more advanced than us, got involved with a boy and drifted away. I didn't understand why she preferred him to us, I wrote long letters to Gilly about it, and about Dad going. So I went around with Sarah and that was all right, but by the fifth year it had become clear she had ambitions I didn't have; she was going to university and then to live in London and have a riverside apartment with iron girders in the roof. Some dawn she wanted to hang her fur coat on spiky railings and drop her pearls down a grid. That was being Metropolitan. All I wanted was to get married and have a family.

Conclusion: 30–45 points – *You might find it difficult making friends initially, but once you have decided you like someone you are very loyal.* That was normal. No worries there, then.

'I came out as Alice Average,' I told Tom over the evening meal. Ben was on the phone, letting his chops go cold.

'There's a surprise,' Tom said. 'Have you heard any more details about this malarkey next door? Is it one of those shows where they come in and lecture you, or the sort where they just give you the rope to hang yourself and let you get on with it?'

'Don't be so bloody pompous,' I said, getting up and swiping him on the back of the head as I went past. 'Juno printed out the Web page for me. Here. It's the

show presented by Abby Cavanagh. Don't pretend you haven't watched it.'

'I've seen it. Not the same thing.'

I leant my head on one side trying to read the text upside down. 'Funny, it sounds like an African TV company, Umanzu. I wonder if the producer's got African connections or something.'

Tom scanned the page, then looked up, half-smiling. 'Not U-*man*-zu, silly. *Yoo*-man-*zoo*. Human Zoo, get it?'

'Oh.'

Ben walked in, yawning. When he stretched I could see the tendons in his neck and the blue veins under his skin. He was as tall as me now. 'I know it's a stupid idea,' he said, 'but is there any chance I could go diving with Felix in the summer? No? Didn't think so.'

'Just eat your chops,' I told him.

*

Juno [Voiceover] – I think I've got a lot to give to another family. Fresh ideas, lots of energy. As, obviously, another woman coming into the house would inject into mine.

How do I spend my days? I get the breakfast ready for everyone, because Manny has to be out of the house early, and we, the girls and I, have a look at the papers if they're there on time, otherwise we listen to the *Today* programme, because it's important for them to be informed, I don't want them growing up in some middle-class bubble. And sometimes they do a bit of violin before we leave the house, if they've got a lesson that day. Next it's the school run, that's nearly an hour by the time

you've parked up, and probably someone'll want to discuss the PTA with me or something, a cake sale or second-hand uniform. Two mornings a week I do a stint at the hospice shop and the days I'm not doing that, I'm either being a taxi for Age Concern or catching up on housework. In the afternoons I'll often have a drive out to the farm shop to pick up supplies. A lot of people don't realize how much time it takes to source and prepare good-quality food. I'm not fanatical about it but I do try to see that we eat organic where we can.

The girls come home and I give them a little *goûter* to see them through till dinner. It's what they do in France, my husband's half French. And the girls go and get their homework out of the way and I write any letters I need to. We all gather round the big table together, it's very Jane Austen. When Manny comes in we sit down to eat and have a lovely chat about the sort of days we've all had. The girls always clear away and load the dishwasher, they're very good. Then it's TV time, and we all slob on the sofa together and the girls get to choose a programme they want to watch, even if it's tosh. We chase them off to bed about ten, and Manny and I have some catch-up time on our own.

I think Manny and I work because we've got the same world view. The same interests, the same aspirations, more or less.

I see *Queen Mum* as an opportunity to explore my marriage, my family, to understand the balance of power, the way different components, people, work together. It'll also give me an insight into myself as an individual. Which can only be a good thing, no?