Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Two for Joy

Written by Helen Chandler

Published by Hodder

All text is copyright © of the author

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

HELEN CHANDLER

Two for Joy



First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

First published in paperback in 2013

1

Copyright © Helen Chandler 2013

The right of Helen Chandler to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

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

Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 76929 6
Ebook ISBN 978 1 444 77578 5

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

To my mum and dad, the best parents ever,
thank you for everything.

1

As Julia raised her eyes to Toby's face she realised that he had been waiting for her response, probably for some minutes. The noise of the busy restaurant seemed to have receded, it was just the two of them, and she had to think of something to say. Her hand groped instinctively for the trusty goldfish bowl of Pinot Grigio on the table in front of her and she took a restorative gulp before attempting anything as complicated as the formulation of a sentence.

'Wow, Tobes, that's . . . that's amazing. Wow. It's . . . erm . . . incredible.'

Even to her own ears her voice sounded forced and unnatural.

'Incredibly good, or incredibly bad?' Toby raised his eyebrows quizzically and she could sense that he was a little hurt by her lack of enthusiasm.

She rallied, and willed herself to control the myriad complex emotions which were whirling around her head and concentrate on being a good friend to Toby. But what did 'good friend' mean in this context? Did it mean offering unconditional support? Was she being a good friend if she encouraged him in this insane plan to marry a woman he barely knew and had nothing in common

with? Or would a truly good friend try and talk him out of it, point out that marriages were likely enough to fail without the odds being stacked against them to the extent they would be here?

Maybe she could compromise. 'Well, incredibly good, of course. It's amazing that you feel so strongly for Ruby, that you're so happy together.' She paused, and frowned. 'The only thing is, I suppose, that you haven't been together that long. Wouldn't it be better to at least live together for a while first before getting engaged? It's such a big step.'

Toby gave Julia a funny little half-smile. 'That's why I love you, Julia. Your romantic impulsiveness. Listen, it *is* a big step, I am aware of that, but that's not automatically a bad thing, you know. Ruby is so beautiful, so exciting, she makes me feel so alive. I don't want to risk losing that now I've found it – now I've discovered the person I can be when I'm with her. Asking her to move in with me would feel routine and functional. Actually proposing won't leave her in any doubt about what I feel.'

Julia sighed. Surely by this time she was old enough to know that compromise rarely worked. She hadn't, in any way, achieved her objective of making Toby think twice about his rash decision. All she had succeeded in doing was to ensure that she herself appeared in the worst possible light as an unromantic killjoy. 'Well, proposing to her should certainly give her an indication of how you feel.'

Oh God. That sounded sarcastic and bitter as well. 'Sorry, Toby. I don't want to spoil things for you. I just

want you to be happy, and it's a bit of a shock, that's all. I had no idea things were so serious between you and Ruby.'

Toby's face lit up as he began to eulogise. 'Honestly, Ju, I've never felt like this before. She's literally all I can think about. She's so beautiful, so passionate. I can't concentrate when I'm not with her because I'm thinking about the next time I'll see her, and I can't concentrate when I *am* with her because I'm just mesmerised looking at her. Do you understand what I mean? All I want to do is look at her.'

Julia couldn't decide whether her feelings of slight nausea were caused by downing half a bottle of wine in five minutes flat, or by Toby's saccharine sincerity. She did understand, though. She herself had experienced very similar feelings in the past. The trouble was, she had been thirteen years old, and the object of her affections was the student teacher assigned to her French class. And while she would happily have proposed to him, always supposing she had been able to muster something more eloquent than a nervous giggle in his presence, with the benefit of seventeen years' hindsight she couldn't help but feel that the relationship might not have lasted. Luckily a spark of feminine intuition surfaced, somewhat later than it might have done, but nonetheless in time to prevent her sharing the comparison with Toby.

She looked at him affectionately. He had changed remarkably little in the time she had known him, and as he sat now, elbows on the table, leaning forward, eyes alight with eagerness, he could still have been the

passionate student activist she had first seen holding forth in the college bar, twelve years previously. 'Come on then, Romeo. Let's order some fizz to celebrate. And don't worry, I understand it's top secret until you actually ask her on Friday. My lips are sealed.'

The rest of the evening passed with their normal mix of banter, teasing, chatting and joking, and if Julia felt the need of a little more alcoholic lubrication than might otherwise have been the case, well, at least The Proposal wasn't referred to again.

It was only when they said goodbye in the tube station at Oxford Circus that things felt any different. They stood together for a moment in the crowded-even-on-a-Sunday-evening ticket hall, and Julia was suddenly aware of how tall he was. At five foot eight herself, Julia liked tall men and the way they always made her feel so deliciously feminine and protected, but she had never really considered Toby in that category and he had certainly never had that effect on her. She knew he was well over six foot, of course, and she was in flat ballet pumps that night, which emphasised the difference, but suddenly there seemed to be something else as well. Some awareness of him as a man, of her as a woman. Some slight frisson when he bent to kiss her cheek and his stubble grazed her slightly.

'Well, bye then,' she said awkwardly as they stepped away from each other. 'Maybe see you next weekend, to celebrate?'

Toby appeared faintly embarrassed, but pleased. 'Yeah, that'd be great. I'll talk to Ruby, see what her plans are, and give you a call.'

There was another moment of slightly strained silence and then he was off, loping towards the escalators without a backward glance.

Julia stood for a minute, fancying she could still feel the pressure of his hands on her upper arms. She gave herself a mental shake. Bit of a coincidence that the first time she found herself going all Mills and Boon about Toby's height and the set of his shoulders was the evening he told her he was proposing to someone else. Talk about the unobtainable being more attractive . . .

Back in her own little house later that night, Julia threw herself luxuriantly full length onto her purple needlecord sofa and began drinking the pint glass of water which would hopefully stave off hangover hell in the morning, wincing at the thought of the budget meeting starting less than nine hours later. She knew, though, that there was no point going to bed just yet. Her mind was still buzzing from the champagne and from Toby's news.

Now she was alone in her sanctuary and didn't have to pretend anything for Toby's sake, she tried to analyse honestly how she felt. Not good, she decided. She curled up and cradled a patchwork cushion on her lap. Why was this so hard?

Was it turning thirty that had made the difference? Julia didn't think she was an inherently selfish person. She had willingly, even enthusiastically, submitted to having her hair contorted into unnatural curls and squeezing her curves into unflattering pastel satin at both her younger brother's and best friend's weddings, and was just delighted that people she loved were so happy.

She had been equally enthusiastic a year or two later to return to the scene of the fashion crime, this time hoping that a hasty lunchtime purchase of the best Debenhams had to offer in the way of linen jackets and big hats would say 'responsible, caring yet independent-minded godmother and aunt' rather than 'desperate broody singleton'. She wasn't at all sure that she had succeeded in the latter; there had been, at least to her paranoid gaze, far too many sympathetic glances, although it was only her teenage cousin who had actually voiced what she suspected the rest of the family were thinking: 'Doesn't it make you feel weird, Ju, that your little brother's married with a baby and you haven't even got a boyfriend at the moment?'

Julia was determined not to fulfil the Bridget Jones stereotype (although if it could involve Colin Firth and Hugh Grant fighting over her in a fountain she would be prepared to reconsider), but she was uncomfortably aware that circumstances, not to mention her own unspoken but compelling longing for a baby, were conspiring against her.

Newspapers and magazines were constantly full of articles about the growing number of single households, of women reaching the peak of their careers and then turning forty and producing strings of beautiful babies, and rationally Julia knew that the world had moved on from the days when you married the boy next door aged twenty, popped out a baby every two years until you had your perfect little family, and then got your hair cut and permed, bought a mid-calf-length floral skirt from Marks and Spencer and settled back to wait for grandchildren.

It was just that no one appeared to have shared the news of this demographic shift with her closest and oldest friend Rose – married at twenty-seven, mother to the divine Sebastian at twenty-eight, and be-Bodened stay-at-home mum in her comfortable four-bedroom detached house in an affluent Berkshire commuter village. Or with her younger brother Harry – married at twenty-two to his childhood sweetheart Angela (Julia strongly suspected that Angela's adherence to a branch of Christianity which forcefully advocated no sex before marriage had more than a little to do with that) and now father to adorable Sarah and Ruth.

Or with her mother and father. Eddie and Pat Upton had been happily married and contentedly installed in their suburban Manchester three-bedroom semi for thirty-two years. They were at a loss to understand why their only daughter had moved to London, paid six times the national average wage for a Victorian terrace that only the very kind-hearted (or the polar opposite, an estate agent) could describe as two-bedroomed, and didn't even have a boyfriend.

None of that had really bothered her before, though, and she had been quite content with her little house, her demanding but satisfying job and her role as group mother to a wide circle of friends.

Was Toby just the final straw? He was the last of her closest friends to meet his other half. He was also an ex-boyfriend, if you counted a few half-hearted snogs and gropes at the university bops which sometimes seemed another lifetime ago. Maybe it was that despite making different decisions from her parents, she came

from a warm, close, loving family and had enjoyed an idyllic childhood; watching her brother recreate that with his girls sometimes made her feel that she had somehow managed to miss the boat, and Toby's forthcoming engagement just underlined the point further.

One thing which really did bother her was how little she had seen of Toby during the last few months since he had been dating Ruby. Perhaps a key reason why she had never particularly minded being single was that the traditional 'couple times' – Sunday nights, holidays, work Christmas parties – had never held any terrors for her because there had always been Toby, and she had more fun with him than she had ever had with any of the blokes she had been in so-called relationships with. Presumably Ruby wouldn't be too keen, though, on her husband spending his weekends and holidays with another woman, which meant that singledom was going to mean something very different in future.

And then there was Ruby herself. There were no two ways about it: Julia just didn't *like* Ruby, and at the thought of Ruby as Toby's wife this dislike seemed to swell to the point where Julia thought she might burst with angry outrage. Ruby seemed to be Julia's complete opposite – dark where Julia was fair, size 8 to Julia's size 14, petite where Julia was tall. Julia was a hospital manager, Deputy Director of Operations at St Benedict's NHS Trust, one of London's most prestigious teaching hospitals, a relatively well-paid job high on responsibility but low on glamour. Ruby was a ballet dancer, currently performing in what she described as a 'retro yet avant-garde interpretation of *Swan Lake*', working

for almost nothing but funding her stylish existence through a generous allowance from her parents. Julia's parents worked in middle-management roles in local government; Ruby's father was a baronet and had the country estate to go with it. The only thing the two women had in common was Toby, and that didn't provide them with much in the way of conversation at dinner parties. At first Julia had been paranoid about referring too much to her and Toby's shared past, and she was scrupulous in avoiding the 'do you remember' anecdotes that she worried could lead to Ruby feeling insecure or excluded. She quickly realised, however, that there was no need to worry at all. Ruby was supremely self-confident. Self-absorbed, even, thought Julia bitchily, and it was only too clear that it had never entered Ruby's head to consider Julia as either threat or competition.

Rose, in a fit of G&T-induced honesty, had once said that Julia was jealous of Ruby; jealous that she was the only one of Toby's girlfriends who had ever seriously threatened her position as number one woman in Toby's life. She had also said that Julia was in danger of being a dog in the manger – not wanting Toby for herself, but not wanting anyone else to have him either. Julia's response back then had been dismissive. 'I've got no reason to be jealous. Just because Toby happens to be shagging some nubile bimbo, it doesn't change our friendship. After all, he's not about to marry the woman.'

Now, facing the prospect of an engagement she had not even allowed herself to consider as a possibility, and filled with something which did feel horribly like

jealousy, Julia considered whether there was any truth in what Rose had said. She supposed, uncomfortably, that she *had* always considered Toby to be hers, and had always felt that given any encouragement he would be more than happy to make the transition from best friend to boyfriend. They had made the obligatory agreement at university – 'if we're not married by the time we're thirty-five, we'll marry each other' – and while Julia had never really considered that there was any spark of sexual attraction between them, on her part at least she loved him very much as a friend, and her thirty-fifth birthday no longer felt the impossibly distant event it had at nineteen. Maybe she *had* felt subconsciously that Toby was her back-up option.

Julia cringed at her own arrogance. Why had she imagined that Toby – tall, dark, handsome, successful – was going to be left on the shelf, willing to be her reserve choice should Mr Darcy/Rochester/de Winter not make an appearance in time? After all, no one ever bemoaned the plight of single thirty-something men – if men were single in their thirties, she thought cynically, it was only because they were trying to decide which twenty-something babe to shag next.

Maybe this was just the wake-up call she needed. Looking round her kitchen as she went to get yet another glass of water before heading off to bed, Julia concluded that with her well-stocked spice cupboard, her full range of Nigella cookbooks and her small but perfectly formed herb garden, she was living the Smug Married life, but had somehow neglected to provide herself with that ultimate Smug Married accessory: a husband. She needed

to stop spending all her free time having cosy dinners with either Toby or her coupled-up friends, and start getting out and meeting people. As of tomorrow, Things Must Change.