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**Opening Extract from...**

# Marrying Up

Written by Wendy Holden

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# Marrying Up

WENDY HOLDEN



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# Chapter 1

‘Miss! Miss!’ Squinting in the bright sunshine, the little boy with the trowel was waving at Polly. ‘I’ve found something, miss. It’s Roman. *Definitely* Roman.’

Polly grinned, got up from where she was crouched sieving soil and went over.

‘Let’s have a look, Kyle.’

The small, skinny boy with the buzz-cut hair proudly extended a filthy palm on which lay a small, dirty disc. He looked at her expectantly.

‘It’s a really interesting find, Kyle,’ Polly said. ‘But it’s not a denarius – a Roman coin – not *exactly*. It’s, um, actually a sixpenny piece dating from the nineteen fifties.’

Far from being disappointed, Kyle looked thrilled. ‘Nineteen fifties!’ he exclaimed excitedly. ‘That’s *centuries* ago! That’s, like, *ancient*, miss.’

Polly giggled. Probably she seemed ancient to eight-year-old Kyle, despite being only twenty-two. That time was relative was one thing you learnt as an archaeologist.

‘What’s it worth, miss?’ Kyle urged, his grubby face blazing with hope and bravado. ‘Millions?’

‘Not *quite* millions,’ Polly explained tactfully. ‘But it’s very pretty. And maybe it’s a good thing that it’s not Roman. Can anyone tell me why?’

The group of four children looked doubtful.

‘Well, what is it we’re digging up here?’ Polly waved a hand around the wide, shallow trench whose reddish earth they had been exploring.

‘Toilets!’ they roared in unison, smiling broadly.

Polly nodded, tucking a stray dark brown curl behind her ear. ‘Exactly. This section,’ she pointed at a low clump of narrow brown bricks, ‘used to be loos, and if it’s a Roman coin, someone must have lost it in the loo. And remember what I told you about Roman loos?’

‘Yes! Yes!’ Four hands pumped into the air. Polly looked along the row of eager faces before picking Hannah, whose cloud of dark hair hid a lazy eye. Polly, who’d had a squint herself as a child, knew what it was to be less confident than the rest.

‘They flushed,’ Hannah said shyly.

As everyone laughed derisively, Hannah went as red as her primary school sweatshirt. Polly leapt to her defence. ‘As a matter of fact, Hannah’s quite right,’ she said. ‘And well done for remembering, Hannah, because I did mention very briefly that some Roman lavatories, in the forts on Hadrian’s Wall for example, had a type of flushing system. But not this one here,’ she added. ‘So what else can you remember about Romans and toilets?’

The hands were pulsing in the air again. ‘Yes, Leo?’ Polly invited a chubby boy whose face shone with exertion and excitement.

‘You said,’ Leo took his customary deep breath before beginning a long speech, ‘that they used to go to the loo all at once, and sit in long rows and laugh and joke while they were . . . while they were . . .’ He tailed off, embarrassed.

‘Pooing!’ shouted Kyle irrepressibly.

‘Yuck!’ said Poppy, a forthright child with bright green eyes and a pixie face. ‘Fancy pooing with other people.’

‘Better than what usually happened,’ Polly riposted, going on to explain that for most Romans the communal loo was a large jar at the end of the street into which they tipped the contents of

their chamber pots. As the children howled in disgusted disbelief, she thought, not for the first time, how the history of lavatories was the history of civilisation. She had never intended to end up specialising in it, but her initial interest in tessellated flooring seemed to have drifted towards the privy and somehow never come back. There were good reasons for it to remain there too; Roman plumbing systems, being one of archaeology's less sexy areas, offered more opportunities for graduates.

How else, for example, would she have ended up here, in the gardens of the local stately home, after a pipe-laying project ended in historical discovery? Admittedly the dig had not unearthed the entire Roman palace foundations that Lord Shropshire, the landowner, had been hoping for. So far as he was concerned, a Roman villa, especially one this far north, would have been both a powerful tourist draw and a source of revenue, not to mention useful grants. Even a reality TV series had been mooted at one stage.

But once it became clear that nothing much beside the distinctly untelegenic lavatory foundations were to be found, interest, as it were, drained away. Even Polly herself, expert though she was, could not quite explain why the usually logical and practical Romans had apparently decided to build a loo block in the middle of nowhere, miles from the nearest road or settlement. But archaeology was full of mystery; you often unearthed more questions than answers.

She had been called in by the local council, who had been left with the necessity of recording the find and making sure there was nothing else of note on the site. The connection had come through a lecturer on her university course who also happened to be the county archaeologist. Aware that Polly would be spending the summer at home, he had landed her the gig. The money – small though it was – was one benefit; another, more unexpected, was the pupils from the local primary school, which had taken an interest in the excavation.

Polly had never previously spent much time with children.

She had been doubtful at first, imagining them rampaging on the ruins and throwing dirt at each other. In the event it was themselves they had thrown, into the project with gusto, listening to Polly carefully and treating the excavations with respect. They had quickly mastered the various skills, such as making drawings of any finds and plotting their position carefully on a chart before removing them.

And while they were only allowed to poke and dig in a safe area removed from the Roman brickwork, their small, strong fingers had nonetheless managed to unearth all manner of treasures. Kyle had spent the best part of one afternoon painstakingly drawing his find of a broken Matchbox car, while Hannah had sieved up a contact lens.

‘A bone, miss!’ Leo called now. ‘I’ve found a yuman bone!’

He was waving something large and pale in the air. The other children were crowding round, shouting in excitement. Polly hurried over. A burial site? Unlikely, but you never knew.

‘Miss? *Miss?*’ Leo gasped, his dirt-smearred face red with agitation as he handed the object over to her.

‘Maybe he got murdered in the loo,’ Kyle was theorising.

‘P’raps he’d been in too long,’ Poppy added. ‘People got fed up of waiting.’

Polly looked up from the bone, hating to disappoint them. ‘It’s a cow bone, I’m afraid. Probably from a beef joint. Not that old, either.’

There was a howl of disappointment.

A little later, Polly stood up and stretched in the hot afternoon sunshine. Archaeologist’s back was a professional hazard, and as courses of physio were expensive, prevention was definitely better than cure. She was in no position to run up unnecessary bills at the moment.

A couple were passing, some of the many elderly shufflers who descended on the gardens in the afternoon. The old man stopped. ‘Digging for gold, are you?’

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The old lady whooped with laughter and dug her husband in his pastel nylon V-necked ribs. 'He's awful, he is. Always has to have his joke. Take no notice of him, love.'

Polly smiled tolerantly, resisting the observation that this was not his joke, it was everyone's. At least ten people a day, all labouring under the delusion that it was wit of the highest order, asked if she was digging for gold. Others would enquire how long her university course was and then exclaim in rude amazement, 'Four *years*? To learn to dig *holes*?'

'Found anything good yet?' was another sally.

'Yes,' Polly would reply. 'Everything we dig up is good. Bits of rock, shards of pottery, it's all good.'

'Can I have a go?' some people asked, their joviality masking their obvious real hope. These were the ones Polly liked best. Her own passion for her subject had been sparked by seeing archaeologists uncovering a stretch of Roman road. It had been raining, and she had watched, fascinated, as mud-spattered people dressed like builders combed cheerfully through sludgy trenches. It had been love at first sight.

As it had been with Jake. But at that happy, head-spinning stage, she had not known that rats of the worst kind lurked in archaeologists' muddy pits. Love rats. She tightened her lips and rubbed her back harder.

As the old people moved off towards the garden café, she gazed across the lawns at the great pale stone mansion of Oakeshott House. The front unfolded in a succession of columns and windows, a carved baroque palace whose roof line bristled with muscular gods and horns of plenty. Beyond the house and gardens stretched the softly curving park, an enchanted valley whose grassy slopes rolled gently down to a broad silver river sliding slowly between banks of red earth topped with a rich fringe of green.

Perfectly positioned groups of mature trees stood about like guests at a garden party. Beneath them stood the deer; cinnamon, cream and ginger in the sunlight. A magnificently macho stag



was standing in the middle of his women and showing himself off, antlers branching proudly from his head like a crown. Now who, Polly thought sardonically, did *he* remind her of?

'Miss! Miss!' Poppy was jabbing her hand wildly in the air. 'Piece of Roman glass!'

Polly examined it. Roman it wasn't; in fact it was an early twentieth-century medicine bottle. She laid it beside her own growing pile of excavated alcohol bottles. That the Oakeshott gardeners of the Edwardian period were prone to heavy drinking on duty was the picture she was starting to build up. The Oakeshott of the past, it seemed, was not today's businesslike working estate cum tourist honeypot bristling with shops and cafés and run by its ducal owner with military zeal.

Polly had met the Duke of Shropshire for the first time yesterday; he had stopped by the dig and revealed nothing of his reported disappointment with the excavation. On the contrary, he had been charm itself. A tall, handsome man with grey hair and pronounced aquiline features, he had positively blazed with self-confidence yet treated the children with no hint of condescension. He had not missed a beat when Kyle had asked if he had a dungeon he tortured prisoners in. And when he had turned to Polly, His Grace had a definite twinkle in his eye.

'You're a very gorgeous archaeologist,' he had said, rather suggestively, which had made her blush and the children nudge each other.

Polly had returned determinedly to brushing soil off bricks with a toothbrush and ignoring the occasional giggles from the small helpers in the corner. She could not quite shake off the feeling that the Duke had been laughing at her. Glamorous? Her? The squint had been corrected now, but the feeling of having had it could never quite be removed, nor the memories of being teased at school entirely eradicated. Every time she looked in the mirror, whatever she was wearing, however elegant her hair, it was Boz Eyes who looked back. And probably always would.

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Archaeology was not glamorous either. It meant being out in all weathers, either broiled like a lobster in sunshine, as now, or fending off the lashing wind and rain in voluminous nylon boiler suits, your hair flattened by a hard hat and your face as raw as an Arctic fisherman's. You got covered in mud, even in your ears and up your nose, your nails became split and your hands became roughened, hard and even bleeding. You ached constantly. Archaeology and drop-dead gorgeousness were, in Polly's experience, mutually exclusive. Apart from in Jake's case, of course . . .

'Have the children behaved?'

Polly was glad of the interruption. An assertive-looking woman in a red dress had materialised at the side of the pit. It was the primary school headmistress, Mrs Butcher, come to reclaim her charges. Polly clambered to her feet, smiling. She liked Mrs Butcher and her obvious ambition for her pupils. She alone among the heads of local schools had spotted the potential a real live Roman dig offered the children and had moved like the wind to secure permission to visit.

Mrs Butcher's state primary was obviously very short of money; the small numbers who visited Polly were governed by how many could fit into the headmistress's car. Polly had once asked whether a school minibus would be a good idea, and Mrs Butcher had given a short laugh and said it would indeed, as would the equally likely prospect of a school opera house.

'They've been great,' Polly said, straightening up.

'We've been learning all about . . . *toilets!*' Kyle put in, to hysterical squeals from the others. He was silenced by one look from Mrs Butcher.

'Sorry, Mrs B,' he muttered, reddening as he tried to dust the mud from his knees.

'Say thank you to Miss Stevenson,' Mrs Butcher instructed in her firm, friendly voice.

'Polly, please,' Polly insisted. 'They're a very bright bunch,' she added.

‘They are when you can engage them,’ the headmistress agreed. ‘When you can get them off the subject of their Xboxes and Nintendos.’ Her red breast heaved in a sigh.

Polly grinned. ‘The Romans can hold their own, though. Kyle couldn’t believe it when I explained that they had an empire and a republic, not to mention a senate. He thought all that came from *Star Wars*.’

Mrs Butcher’s warm brown eyes were rueful. ‘I wish we could do more about the Romans at school,’ she confessed. ‘But I have some very forceful governors – *very* forceful – and the curriculum committee insisted there was no point studying classical civilisations as they have no relevance to modern life.’

‘But,’ Polly began, as amazed as she was outraged, ‘they’ve *every* relevance. They’re the foundation of *everything*. They’re—’

Mrs Butcher held up one small, capable hand. ‘I know! And I agree. But there’s nothing much I can do – apart from bring the children here, of course. Even if it’s only a few of them.’

Polly’s burning indignation switched to a burning generosity. ‘Well I could always come to the school and give a talk or something,’ she offered. ‘Roman loos seem to go down well. As it were. Perhaps.’

‘That would be brilliant,’ Mrs Butcher agreed enthusiastically. ‘You’re a wonderful role model. It would be a real eye-opener for them to see someone young, fun and attractive who’s making a career out of an academic discipline. Most of the girls want to be Cheryl Cole.’

‘I’m not sure how much of a career it is,’ Polly said ruefully. ‘I’ve got to finish my degree, then somehow finance three more years of postgrad study with no definite job at the end of it. The only example I might be setting them is of a lifetime of debt and unemployment.’

‘No worse than they get at home, then,’ Mrs Butcher said robustly. ‘Some of our kids come from families who think it’s normal to be on benefits for your whole working life. I’ll find you an assembly slot. I’d better go,’ she added, with a

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mock-exasperated glance at the children, now skidding up and down the gravelled path bordering the lawn and sending arcs of tiny pebbles sailing through the sunny air. 'Thank you again, Polly, if I may. I'm Aurelia, by the way.'

*Aurelia*, Polly thought, as she watched the headmistress steer her charges decisively down the path. Latin for gold. She wouldn't have expected the forthright Mrs B to have so elaborate a name. Another example of the surprises archaeology revealed.

It was quiet in the gardens, almost deafeningly so now the children had gone. Together with their forceful headmistress, they seemed to have taken the energy with them. Polly felt suddenly listless, and thinking of the long cycle ride home only made her feel worse. She had only herself to blame; Dad had offered to drop her off on his way to work and pick her up on his return. But she had insisted on making the daily journey to Oakeshott and back on Mrs Pankhurst, her ancient, doughy university bike. Mrs Pankhurst had no gears, weighed a ton and bore the relationship to a normal bicycle that a medicine ball does to a football. She was, however, the best possible defence against Mum's irresistible syrup puddings.

Polly closed her eyes and breathed in the perfumed air from the flowers around her. Dozy bees, their back legs thick with pollen, buzzed in heavy, desultory fashion. Even now, at the end of the afternoon, the sun still blazed from a cloudless blue sky. It was hot. Too hot to be thinking of cycling off just yet.

Now the little ones were gone, she could remove the white shirt she wore over her vest top. As the cotton peeled away, she felt the warm air settle deliciously on her exposed skin.

Slowly she began to gather together the tools the children had used. Occasionally she glanced up. Afternoon was the most beautiful time of day at Oakeshott, and today was lovelier even than usual. On the lawns behind Polly, dazzling stripes of sunlight and the long shadows of trees stretched across shimmering grass. Before her, the afternoon sunshine blazed on to the front of the

magnificent house, picking out the ripe fruit in the horns of plenty, the heaving breasts of the goddesses and the muscled thighs of the gods. From the centre of the private knot garden to the side of the house rose a great fountain, its spume sparkling in the light.

What was that? A scrabbling noise. A panting. Something big. Something behind her.

Polly twisted round. To her horror, a large brown Labrador dog, apparently materialising from nowhere, had jumped down over the edge of the lawn into her pit, and was frantically digging with big, swift paws right in the middle of her neat excavation. Soil flew over its heaving shoulders; the stakes and string, uprooted, lay tangled in the dirt.

‘Stop it, you beast!’ Polly stumbled towards the animal. ‘Stop it!’ She tugged with all her strength on the dog’s collar, but he proved immovable as a block of stone. He was a big creature to start with; the muscles moved smoothly under his shiny chocolate coat, and to his size and weight was added the extra force of sheer determination. ‘Stop it, you *horrid* dog!’ Polly yelled, further enraged by the sun in her eyes, feeling the sweat bead her brow as she continued yanking to no effect.

The strong light was suddenly blocked; Polly heard a thud and the crunch of heels on soil. Someone else was in the pit.

Looking up, she was fixed by a gaze from two deep-set dark eyes, and felt a searing sensation through her lower insides like the passage of a bullet. She had a strange feeling of things slowing down. Realising that her mouth was slightly open, she shut it. She felt winded somehow.

‘Sorry about the dog,’ he said. He was, she estimated, a good foot and a half taller than her and about the same age. He wore an ancient check shirt and torn jeans, and his dark hair had a wild and undisciplined look, as if he often raked it deep in thought, or clutched it in despair or excitement. Polly was suddenly, hideously aware of her tiny vest top, exposing cleavage and midriff, and the fact that she wore no bra.

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‘Your dog has made a complete mess of this site,’ she snapped. In her agony of self-consciousness, attack was the only defence.

‘I know. Sorry.’

He had thick lashes, she noticed, irrationally. His nose was long and straight and his mouth was wide and curved upwards at the ends, as if it smiled a lot.

The dog had not stopped for a moment. His nose remained on the ground and his paws continued as a scrabbling blur. Polly glared at him, exasperated.

‘He must have buried a bone there,’ the stranger suggested. His words sent a blinding flash of light through Polly. She dived for her rubbish bag and dragged out the bone, to which a banana skin from Poppy’s lunch adhered.

‘This one?’ She chucked it at the dog, who fell on it with a growl of delight.

‘Looks like it.’ The stranger was smiling. ‘Unless it’s someone you dug up earlier?’

‘It’s a cow bone. The children found it.’ Polly seized her rake and scraped agitatedly at the ground. What was the matter with her? She frowned and stared at the earth, unable quite to pinpoint why, suddenly, she felt as churned up as it looked.

‘Let me help tidy up,’ he was offering.

Polly shook her head. ‘I’m fine on my own.’

‘But . . .’

She looked him in the eye, finally. ‘Just take your dog away,’ she said in a low, steady voice. ‘*Please.*’

He shrugged shoulders that were wide but not bulky. His build was tall, rangy, slim-hipped. ‘OK. If that’s what you want.’

Was it what she wanted? She tore her glance away, feeling a churning in her breast. A warmth that had nothing to do with the sunshine burned in her cheeks. What she definitely didn’t want, under any circumstances, was another good-looking, arrogant, brilliant, self-confident bastard like Jake.