

What Women Want

Fanny Blake was a publisher for many years, editing both fiction and non-fiction before becoming a freelance journalist and writer. She has written various non-fiction titles, acted as ghost writer for a number of celebrities, and is also Books Editor of *Woman & Home* magazine. *What Women Want* is her first novel.

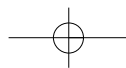
‘Full of insight with a sharp wit, this is about real women in realistic situations, entertaining and thought provoking. Kept me reading far too late.’
Katie Fforde

‘*What Women Want* is like having a long, funny and fascinating conversation with your very best friends and becoming deeply involved in their lives, families and love affairs.’
Penny Vincenzi

‘Women take heart. Here is a novelist who understands exactly the comedy, absurdities and frustrations of your lives. A delicious read.’
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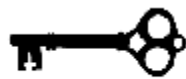
‘Wise, warm, funny and wonderfully observant.’ Cathy Kelly

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FANNY BLAKE

What Women Want



blue door

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the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
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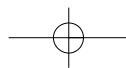
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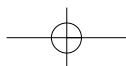
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To Robin, Matt, Nick and Spike



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'I'll get out here, thanks.'

Bea cursed as she stepped out of the taxi into the sweltering chaos of Shaftesbury Avenue. July was always hell in central London. She could feel her trousers sticking to the back of her legs. She was already five minutes late and the traffic had slowed to a virtual standstill. If only her meeting had finished on time, she would have reached the restaurant first, just as she'd planned. She wanted to be sitting calmly, waiting, so that she could size up her lunch date as he crossed the restaurant to join her. But Jade, one of the editorial directors, had made such a fuss about which photograph was used on the jacket of an autobiography by another twenty-something D-list loser of whom Bea had never heard that the meeting had overrun by nearly half an hour.

The summer heat was draped over the London streets like a thick blanket. The slight but insistent throb of a headache was an unpleasant reminder that she had drunk too much the night before. Had she? She tested herself by running through the exact route the taxi had taken home from the party. Mmm. Slightly hazy. As she picked her way

through the pedestrians, walking as fast as she could without actually running, she could feel a familiar prickling warmth rising from somewhere in her chest and spreading up into her face, around the back of her neck and down into her arms. Not now, please. She had at least to arrive looking like a woman in control. Like a woman who was desirable. Not like a menopausal wreck.

She slowed down, trying to restore her cool. He – she'd been told his name was Mark Carpenter – must have paid £125 for this date too. That was the deal when you signed up to Let's Have Lunch, a discreet dating agency for the over-forties. Having been interviewed by a woman in her twenties who, given her immaculate streaked blonde hair, flawless skin and dazzling if vacuous smile, couldn't have any idea what it was like for someone her mother's age to be looking for love – or even just sex, Bea wasn't choosy – you parted with £750 in return for a pitying glance of appraisal and the guarantee of being 'matched' with six possible partners. Six! Any of us should be so lucky, thought Bea. Yes, he'd wait. Dwelling on the fact that she was about to rendezvous with a man about whom she knew nothing apart from his name, she almost tripped over a knot of American tourists turning their A—Zs upside down as they tried to match the streets of Soho with the map.

Cantina Italia was just up Frith Street, past all the cafés overflowing into the street with tables occupied by countless young men in white sleeveless T-shirts and girls wearing spaghetti-strap tops. If only she still had the body to carry off so few clothes with such aplomb. That was the trouble with being a few (OK, more than a few) pounds overweight.

She still cared about what she looked like so wore clothes to cover up and ended up too hot, unwilling to rid herself of the layers that should be so easy to strip off and reveal all. Oh, where was the 'longer, leaner, looser' her that she'd been promised would begin to emerge after only ten Pilates sessions? So far all she'd managed to do was rick her back when attempting a new exercise on the reformer.

She was aware that the cream linen suit, which had started the day so well, had lost its original snap. As the morning had gone on, her look had deteriorated from the fashionably creased to the unfashionably unironed. But short of taking a forty-five-minute detour up to Oxford Street to buy something new, there was nothing she could do about that now. Remembering all she'd been taught, she pulled in her stomach – skirt would hang better – and held herself upright. 'Imagine a string pulling you up from the top of your head,' echoed the voice of her Pilates teacher, as Bea pushed open the restaurant door, aware that the imaginary string must have melted in the heat.

The restaurant wasn't wide but it stretched back beyond a central table carrying a large arrangement of twirling bamboo, brilliant orange birds-of-paradise and scarlet ginger blossoms. She couldn't see a man sitting alone. Maybe she'd got there first after all. Good. That meant she had time to go to the Ladies and check the make-up she'd jerkily repaired in the back of the cab on the way there (almost stabbing herself in the eye with her mascara) as well as compose herself. There was no point in being nervous, she reassured herself. It was only lunch, not . . .

'Let's have lunch?' The voice came from behind her.

Bea turned to see an effete young man in a loose white shirt of the finest linen, the sleeves rolled up, well-cut dark trousers and expensive shoes. Surely this wasn't him – a more perfect 'match' than she could ever have hoped for. Or was a younger man picking her up before she and Mark Carpenter had even had a chance to sit down?

'I'm sorry?' Say it again, please.

'Let's have lunch?' he repeated, with the slightest of smiles, encouraging her to agree.

She hadn't misheard. Unsure what to say, she tried a rusty attempt at a flirtatious smile. 'Normally I'd love to, but unfortunately I'm meeting someone. Another time, perhaps.'

'No, no, no.' His face spoke volumes. Of course he wouldn't make such an obvious pass at her. She was old enough to be his mother, for God's sake. 'I meant the table booking,' he explained, a little too patiently. 'Is it under Let's Have Lunch?'

She had forgotten that the girl who had rung her about the date had explained that she would book the table for them under the company's name. The entire restaurant staff must know why she was here. Were they all looking at her and whispering, laughing at her mistake? Flushed with embarrassment, but stifling a laugh, she murmured an apology. Hardly hearing his reply, she followed him between the tables of chattering lunchers to the dimmest reaches of the room where her eyes fell on Mark Carpenter for the first time.

He sat with his back to the wall, his head bent as he concentrated on cleaning his fingernails with a toothpick so she had a clear view of the top of his scalp through his

thinning dark hair. The maître d' pulled back her chair and her lunch-date looked up. A pleasant face – a little on the baggy side, if she had to be critical. She didn't, of course, but she couldn't help herself. As she sat down, still mortified by her initial mistake, Mark attempted to stand although there wasn't enough room to do so without tipping the table towards her. She snatched at a wobbling glass.

'Hallo. I'm Bea,' she said, wondering what on earth had possessed her to sign up for all this. That stripy City shirt with the white collar and the navy pin-striped trousers immediately told her that this was not going to be a match made in heaven. She had been quite specific about her taste in men when filling in the questionnaire – no City types – but the agency had ignored her.

'I know.' He gave a nervous laugh but Bea was concentrating on the sweat beading on his upper lip, telling herself not to be so bloody judgemental. She knew sweat was beading on her forehead too, as another flush swept over her. She could feel the dampness at the nape of her neck and running down the small of her back. She tried willing herself to cool down. No dice.

As Mark sat down again, he reached behind him, whipped out a single red rose and put it in front of her. His smile revealed a mouthful of slightly overlapping teeth that Bea stared at as she tried to take in the significance of his gesture. How ridiculously over-the-top. This is just lunch, she reminded herself, not some full-blown long-term romance. You can leave whenever you want to. But, of course, she couldn't. That would be too rude. Imagine if her date took one look at her and announced he wasn't

hungry after all. It would take weeks to recover from the blow to her self-confidence. She couldn't do that. First impressions weren't always everything so she must make the effort.

'Thank you. That's so sweet.' She put the rose deep into her capacious bag where no one could see it, at the same time imagining what her close friends, Ellen and Kate, would say when she told them.

The waiter was standing over them, asking if he could bring drinks. Bea's resolve to stay strictly sober flew out of the window. 'A glass of Pinot Grigio would be lovely. Yes, a large one.' And make it quick, she prayed silently.

'And a sparkling water for me.' A nice voice with the trace of an accent she couldn't place. 'I don't drink,' he added, by way of explanation.

'Oh. Why not?' Bea was wishing she had stuck with her resolve. He'd probably think she was a lush, drinking at lunchtime. Oh, to hell with it. Either he'd like what he'd paid for or he wouldn't. There were always the other five.

'Not during the working week. Need to keep a clear head for the job. You can't play around with other people's money without one.'

'But it's Friday. Surely you can have one to keep me company.'

'No, I don't think so. The markets don't stop trading when I have a drink. I wouldn't risk it.'

'But you drink in the evenings?' Bea was hoping for the reassurance that he was one of her sort, racing to open a bottle of wine as soon as he'd taken the key out of the front door at the end of a hard day.

‘Only at weekends. It’s a slippery slope otherwise.’

‘Oh.’ Bea was silenced. Studying the menu, she wondered what was the least she could eat without seeming rude. The sooner she could extricate herself from this disaster, the better. Could she get away with only one course? Just a starter, perhaps? No, she was firm with herself, she couldn’t. Come on, Bea, play the game.

‘What will you have?’ He broke the silence as the waiter returned, pad at the ready.

‘I think I’ll go for the goat’s cheese salad and then the grilled Dover sole.’ There. Simple, not too much and lowish on the calorie front.

‘I’ll have the scallops and pea mash. Thank you.’ He sat back, looking, Bea thought, a touch on the smug side.

‘But that’s just a starter.’ Bea couldn’t stop herself. ‘Won’t you have something else?’

‘No. That’s plenty for me. Got to watch the weight, you know.’ He patted his no doubt lean and muscled stomach. She looked at his thick chest hair growing out of the neck of his shirt. What would he be like in bed? she wondered. After all, that was one of the reasons they were meeting – there was no getting away from it. If things went well . . . He looked like one of those men who brought his own tissues and thanked you afterwards. Stopping herself going further, Bea took a swig of wine.

The lunch seemed interminable. Conversation dragged and every time Mark asked her a question, Bea seemed to have a mouthful. She ate her salad, then he picked his way through his four tastefully arranged scallops floating on a pea-green island as Bea filleted her sole with the cack-handedness of a

ten-year-old, despite a lifetime of having done it without any difficulty. What was wrong with her? In desperation, she ordered another glass of wine, choosing to ignore Mark's raised eyebrow. They trailed across all the obvious topics, never stopping on one long enough to become too confidential – where they came from (she from London and him from Northumbria); where they lived now (Islington and Clapham); their marital status (both awaiting divorce); children (one to her – Ben, now sixteen; two to him – Bella, thirteen and Stevie, fifteen); where they were going on holiday (hadn't decided because always left it to the last minute; golf and fishing on the Spey with two friends), favourite books (anything by Anne Tyler; *Fever Pitch*) and films (*When Harry Met Sally* – sad but true; anything starring Jackie Chan – even sadder).

The only time Mark became really animated was when he talked about his job as an investment banker. But he did so in such detail, bringing in all his colleagues and the negotiations they'd recently completed, that she soon lost the thread and began to think about the drive she was going to have to make the next morning to see her mother in Kent. What time should she leave to avoid the worst of the traffic out of London? Everybody leaped into their cars the moment the sun came out and drove towards the coast like lemmings. And she was going to join them. Was it all right to leave Ben on his own since he had refused point blank to go with her? Or did that mean she was an irresponsible mother?

Then she drifted on to her own work as publishing director of Coldharbour Press, an imprint of the giant

publishing conglomeration Rockfast. Perhaps she should tell Mark more about that, but it would be hard to match his work-related animation. She'd lost her hunger for the business a couple of years ago – although she was anxious to get back to the office after this was over. Something was obviously happening: too many shut doors with senior execs in secret conferences. Someone had started the rumour that an announcement was going to be made this afternoon. That would be typical. Get the announcement off management's chests so they could have a conscience-free weekend while all the workforce would spend theirs worrying about their future with the company.

'Shall we?' His voice suddenly interrupted her train of thought. Oh, God, what on earth had he just said? To ask would only show she hadn't been listening at all.

'Er, yes,' she agreed uncertainly.

'That's wonderful. I'll be in touch then.' He reached across the table and took her hand, oblivious to the alarm that was registering on her face. What on earth had she agreed to? 'I'm so glad we've met. To be honest, I was worried that you might be a proper ball-breaker but I've really enjoyed myself.'

'Gee, thanks. I do my best.' How condescending she sounded. 'No, seriously. I've enjoyed meeting you too. Would you mind if I skipped coffee?' Once she'd got out of here, she need never see him again – whatever it was she'd agreed to.

'Not at all. I have to get back too. I'll just be one moment.' He extricated himself from behind the table and, after pulling a black bag from under his seat, headed for the

Gents. At least they didn't have the awkwardness of establishing who was going to foot the bill. Let's Have Lunch settled up for them. So they damn well should, given the little they had to do for their money, mused Bea. Perhaps Mark wasn't so awful, really. She must try to be less demanding. He wasn't bad-looking, just a bit humourless. She imagined he might be quite a considerate lover, if not very inventive. She was a fine one to talk. What would she bring to that particular party? She was much more out of practice than she cared to remember.

'Are you ready?' At the sound of Mark's voice she looked up to find herself eyeballing a Lycra-covered crotch that revealed much more than she wanted to know about any man outside the privacy of the bedroom.

'I should have warned you,' said Mark, looking understandably sheepish. 'I must apologise for what isn't the most attractive look. But cycling is much the easiest way to get around London.'

'Mmm. Breathing in those traffic fumes must be so good for you.' Her mother's words rushed into her head: 'Sarcasm is not the finest form of wit, especially from you, Bea.'

Bea assumed his trousers had been in the bicycle pannier bag that had been hidden under his seat throughout lunch. His shirt must be in there now having been replaced by an old white T-shirt that had long ago lost its shape. On its front was a washed-out photograph. Bea peered more closely. Yes, below the words 'The World's Best Dad' was the near invisible image of Mark with his arms round two indistinct young children. Bea swallowed. 'Yours?' she asked unnecessarily.

But Mark didn't hear her. He was already striding out into the street where she could see what must be his bicycle, chained to a lamppost. By the time she had caught up with him, he was ready to go. Bea yanked her eyes from his pale over-muscled and extremely hairy calves to his face, now crowned by a royal blue crash helmet – never the ideal fashion accessory. Mark removed the impenetrably black goggles over his eyes and leaned forward to kiss her cheek, catching the side of her head with the helmet. 'So sorry, Bea. Stupid not to wear it, though.'

'Yes, yes, it would be. Of course it would.' For once in her life Bea was lost for words, torn between hysterical laughter and tears. How could the agency have made such a mismatched pairing? You couldn't have invented it. But wait. Perhaps she should consider, just for a moment, the impression she had given the agency. Perhaps she actually looked like someone who would find this sort of person attractive. Impossible. Much more likely was the dearth of right-aged men on the market. There can't be many who specified they wanted to meet a woman when the shine had rubbed off a bit. Most of them found themselves a younger model within weeks of ending a relationship – or before. She knew that from bitter experience. What was it they said? When a relationship comes to an end, the man finds another woman while the woman finds herself. She wasn't in a position to be picky.

'So, do you have a card? Then I can email you with a when and where.' Suddenly he looked so vulnerable, the hope in his face contrasting with the faded vision of youthful certainty on his chest. She knew then that she couldn't

disappoint him. What had she got to lose anyway? Whatever she had agreed to do, it couldn't be that bad. She delved into her bag, scratching her hand on a thorn of the rose, whose existence she'd forgotten, and failed to find her cards in the jumble at the bottom.

'I'll have to scribble my details on this.' She knew she was probably committing herself to more than she wanted. But what the hell? He took the slip of paper then, to her surprise, offered his hand and gave her a vigorous handshake and replaced the goggles. Bea prayed that no one from the office had seen them together. In some disbelief she watched the back of what, if Let's Have Lunch had their way, might be her future cycling off towards the City, then turned to look for a cab back to the fray.