



KILLER: Wallner in 2007, the year he met Rebecca

Four lovers and

by **Antonia Hoyle**

It is the simple things about motherhood that Rebecca Jackson finds most rewarding. There is the way her daughter Emma giggles at her bedtime story, her fascination with the sheep on their local farm and her new-found appetite for strawberries.

With every new development, Rebecca tries to remember that Emma's happiness is a reflection of the skills she has shown as a parent and that nothing else that has happened in her young life matters.

Yet it is still something she struggles to accept. When Emma was just six weeks old, her father, Peter Wallner, told Rebecca that he wanted nothing to do with either her or their baby. The betrayal plunged Rebecca into a depression in which her baby's every move reminded her of the man she had loved and lost. But it was nothing compared to what was to come.

Last year, she learned that Wallner, a Michelin-starred chef who had told Rebecca his wife Melanie had died of a blood clot in her brain, had actually bludgeoned her to death.

A serial womaniser, whose marriage was getting in the way of his many affairs, he hid her corpse in a freezer in his garden for three years. It was only after dumping Melanie's body in his wheelie bin last June that he was finally arrested.

Last month, he was convicted of murder at the Old Bailey. The jury heard not only of the brutal way he disposed of his wife, but the quite extraordinary life he conducted in the aftermath of her death.

A calculating Walter Mitty-type character, he conned Rebecca and three other women into believing that Melanie had died of natural causes, presenting himself as a grief-stricken widower to win their sympathy and affection. None of the women had any idea as to the others' existence.

It was an audacious web of deceit that Rebecca is still coming to terms with. 'I can't believe I slept in the bed where he killed his wife,' she says. 'I'm horrified and hope he rots in prison. I question everything Peter did and said while we were together and I feel naive that I believed his lies. But he was so convincing that I had no reason to suspect he was telling me anything other than the truth.'

'I feel both guilty and blessed, because I have come out of this better than anyone. I have Emma. At first, every time I looked at her I saw Peter and thought of the plans we'd made to raise our child together. It has made bringing her up incredibly difficult, but I have learned to love her and now she is my life.'

A business studies graduate from Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, Rebecca, 35, juggles her job as a health-and-safety manager in the hospitality industry with bringing up 22-month-old Emma (whose name has been changed to protect her identity).

Both a devoted mother and successful career woman, she is the last person you would expect to have been duped into a tawdry affair.

Her father, Walton, was a chef, who died of cancer when she was just 18. Her mother, Natalie, was a nursery nurse who died suddenly of a blood clot in November 2006.

It was while she was still grieving for her mother that she met Wallner, in March 2007. 'I wanted to do something different to distract myself from my grief. The most drastic thing I could think of was buying a motorbike and joining a biking group,' says Rebecca.

She must have seemed somewhat out of place. But it was among the bearded, leather-clad men that she met Wallner. 'It's a cliché, but he was tall, dark and handsome. He had a gentle, self-deprecating humour and I immediately felt at ease with him,' she says.

The two, who were the same age, became friends. She learned that Wallner had been born in a small town on the German-Austrian border. The son of a businessman, he had moved to Britain in his 20s.

He had trained as a chef and had two Michelin stars. He worked in Apsleys restaurant at London's exclusive Lanesborough Hotel – whose head chef is internationally acclaimed Heinz Beck – before joining the Woodlands Park Hotel in Cobham, Surrey, near his three-bedroom semi-detached house.

He told Rebecca his upbringing had been reserved and introverted, that his parents were now in their 80s and that, tragically, he had an elder sister who had killed herself when he was

Chef Peter Wallner killed his wife with a cast-iron pan – then embarked on a spree of deceit with a string of vulnerable women. How could they fall for him? Here one explains...

15. He also said his wife had died the previous August from a blood clot in her brain. She was just 30 and the pair had been married for six years.

'My heart immediately went out to him,' Rebecca says. 'I knew what it was like to lose someone so suddenly. He said he still found it difficult to talk about her; that he had cried in private but couldn't show his grief in public.'

A month later, he asked her on a date. That evening, they kissed for the first time. 'He asked if we could take things slowly and said he was still cut up about Melanie. I completely understood.' They became closer, and as the weeks passed they spent evenings watching *The Sopranos* on television, and at weekends took long walks along riverbanks near Wallner's home.

He cooked Rebecca steak and pancakes and told her she was helping to ease the pain of his grief. 'We would see each other about three times a week, but I was careful not to push him into anything serious,' she says. 'He still had photographs of Melanie in his home and her cashmere sweaters were in the wardrobe.'

'Their bedroom was decorated with the pale pink walls and carpet she chose. He said he was on medication and having counselling.'

Wallner had told Rebecca he had had a vasectomy because he and Melanie, who had also worked at Woodlands Park Hotel, hadn't wanted children. So it came as something of a shock when Rebecca discovered she was pregnant in January 2008.

'I couldn't believe it,' she says. 'Neither of us felt ready to be parents, but after a couple of weeks we came round to the idea. Peter cooked me omelettes to ease my morning sickness. We agreed to split the childcare and that I would move in with him. He seemed as excited as me.'

But one evening that March, Wallner

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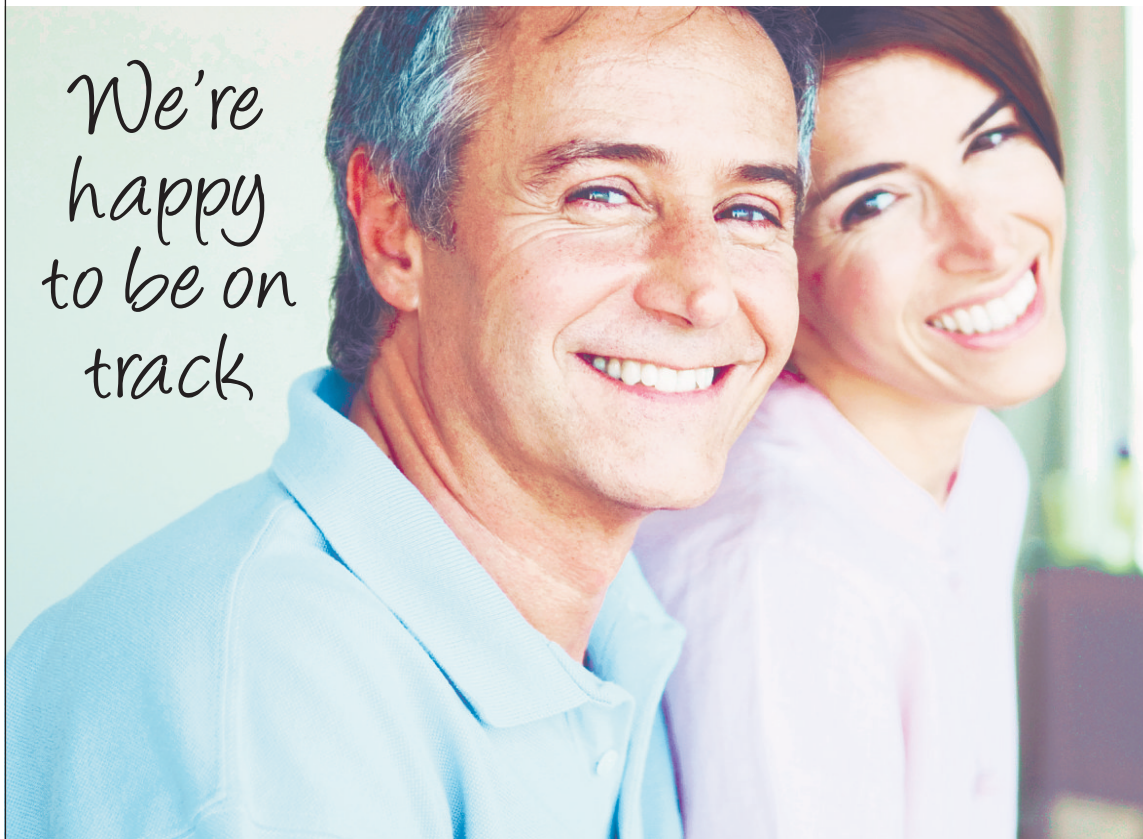
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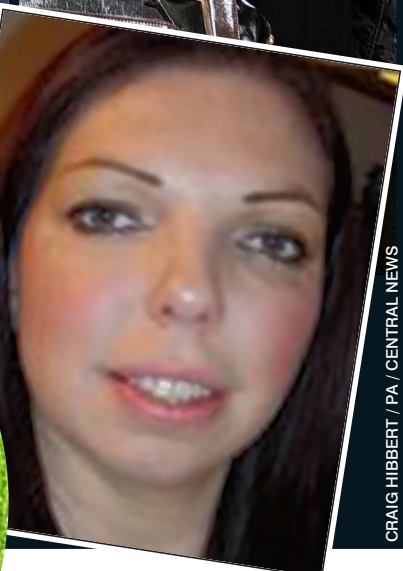
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a wife in the freezer



CAUGHT IN A WEB OF LIES: Rebecca, left, with the daughter she had with Wallner. 'She's too young to remember what an evil coward he was,' she says. Below: Wallner's murdered wife Melanie and, clockwise from above, his lovers Lilia Fenech, Emma Harrison and Claire Trickett



CRAIG HIBBERT / PA / CENTRAL NEWS

failed to return from work. 'He called to say that his father, Max, had died of a heart attack and that he'd flown to Germany,' says Rebecca. 'I felt so desperately sorry for him. I asked him if he wanted me to fly out, but he said I shouldn't in my condition.'

As her pregnancy progressed, he spent more time travelling to and from Germany, saying he needed to look after his mother, Helga. In July, he called to say she too had died, of a stroke. 'Again, I felt incredibly sorry for him,' Rebecca says.

Perhaps at this point her suspicions should have been raised. After all, she had never been introduced to Wallner's parents and had seen little of Wallner for more than four months. But she says he stopped at nothing to make his story convincing. 'He even gave me the locations and times of their funerals,' she says. 'Besides, who would lie about their parents dying?'

All the same, she grew frustrated. 'My patience was running out,' she says. 'He was away so often, I still hadn't been able to move in with him.'

Yet when he was back in Cobham, he became increasingly elusive. 'There was always an excuse,' she says. 'He'd booked a biking holiday before we knew I was pregnant. Or was working erratic shifts. Or he needed space to grieve.'

Grudgingly, she accepted his behaviour. But when she went into labour that September, she couldn't

contact him at all. 'By the time Emma was born, I was furious,' she says. When Wallner finally answered his phone, a week later, he told Rebecca that he had been ill in hospital with kidney disease, and that he would need to return for dialysis before he could see her or their daughter.

'Alarm bells started ringing,' she says. 'Afterwards, I rang every hospital in his area and none of them had a record of him being there. But I couldn't understand why he would lie about something like this.'

Days later, as she was driving to a post-natal class where she was registered in Cobham, she spotted Wallner at a local petrol station.

'I jumped out of the car and screamed at him for lying to me that he was in hospital,' she says. 'I demanded he see our daughter and yelled at him for neglecting her. He seemed utterly taken aback to see me. He said he had discharged himself from hospital. He even had hospital wrist bands on to prove it. We agreed to meet at his house later that afternoon.'

But he wasn't there when Rebecca arrived. Seeing her waiting outside with Emma, a neighbour invited her in. 'She hadn't realised Peter and I were still together and said she'd seen him a lot with his new girlfriend,' she says. 'I felt utterly sick and confused.'

When she finally got hold of Wallner, a fortnight later, he admit-

ted he had fallen in love with a new girlfriend, Claire Trickett, a dog-trainer for the police.

'He wouldn't say how long their relationship had been going on for. He admitted he had lied about being in hospital - he said he hadn't wanted to hurt me,' Rebecca says.

When she was six weeks old, Emma was rushed to hospital with suspected meningitis. 'I knew I had to tell Peter, but he said he wanted nothing to do with Emma or me. I felt so betrayed.'

Luckily, the meningitis turned out to be a viral infection which was treatable, but as the autumn passed, Rebecca fell into depression. 'Everything, from Emma's pout to her square jaw, reminded me of him,' she says. 'I knew I would never hurt my daughter but I couldn't summon any great interest in her either.'

It wasn't until Emma was 15 weeks old that Rebecca finally felt a maternal bond. 'I watched her roll over on to her left shoulder for the first time and felt so incredibly proud,' she says. 'I realised Emma was mine, and nothing to do with Peter.'

'With time, she looked less like him and I began to get over her father's betrayal.'

Emma was ten months old when Rebecca received a call from a police detective who said he needed to talk to her about Wallner. He told

her that he was wanted in connection with his wife's murder. Melanie's body had been discovered in his wheelie bin by refuse collectors who refused to carry away the heavy load.

By then, Peter had fled to Malta with a Maltese hotel worker called Lilia Fenech in an apparent bid to start afresh. He was brought back to Britain and arrested. 'I'd realised he was a coward, a liar and a womaniser, but I never thought he was a killer,' Rebecca says.

'My skin crawled as I remembered all his so-called grief when, all along, his wife's body was at the bottom of his garden. I was consumed with shock.'

'It was so difficult to believe that I went to court to see him charged last year so it would sink in.'

'He refused to look me in the eye. I realised that everything he told me had probably been a lie; his sister's death, the hospital visits, his vasectomy. I didn't know what was real and what wasn't any more.'

She realised, too, that Wallner's parents had not died and was given their address by Lilia, who claimed to have been seeing Wallner when Melanie was still alive but knew nothing about the murder.

'Last Christmas, I sent them a card with pictures of their granddaughter,' says Rebecca. 'They replied to say thank you. I felt terrible for them and for Melanie's parents who'd had no idea she had had such

a violent death. I was depressed and had counselling, but I knew I had to stay strong for Emma.'

At Wallner's trial, the jury heard that he had battered Melanie over the head three times with a cast-iron kitchen pan after she had discovered a text message from Lilia. He bought a freezer to store Melanie's body in his garden shed.

Unbeknown to Melanie or Lilia, Wallner had also been dating wedding planner Emma Harrison, who also worked at Woodlands Park. He had told her he was separated.

Utterly unrepentant, he slept with Emma on his marital bed the night after Melanie died.

Wallner had told Melanie's family how devastated he was by their loss - even planning her funeral and filling an urn with barbecue ashes and pretending they were her remains.

Prosecutor Bobbie Cheema said: 'It was a heartless and sustained effort to stop them discovering the truth, and how it added to their sorrow one can only imagine.'

Wallner was given a minimum sentence of 20 years. 'I haven't spoken to any of the other women except Lilia, but I suspect they were all fooled as much as we were,' says Rebecca. 'He definitely has a type. We all seem to be brunettes with a similar body shape.'

She feels no sense of closure following the court case. 'If anything, the hardest part is still to come,' she says. 'Emma has already started pointing at other children with their fathers and saying, "Daddy".'

'I am grateful that she is too young to remember what an evil coward he was, but I will have to tell her what her father has done before she is old enough to find out for herself. And that will break my heart.'