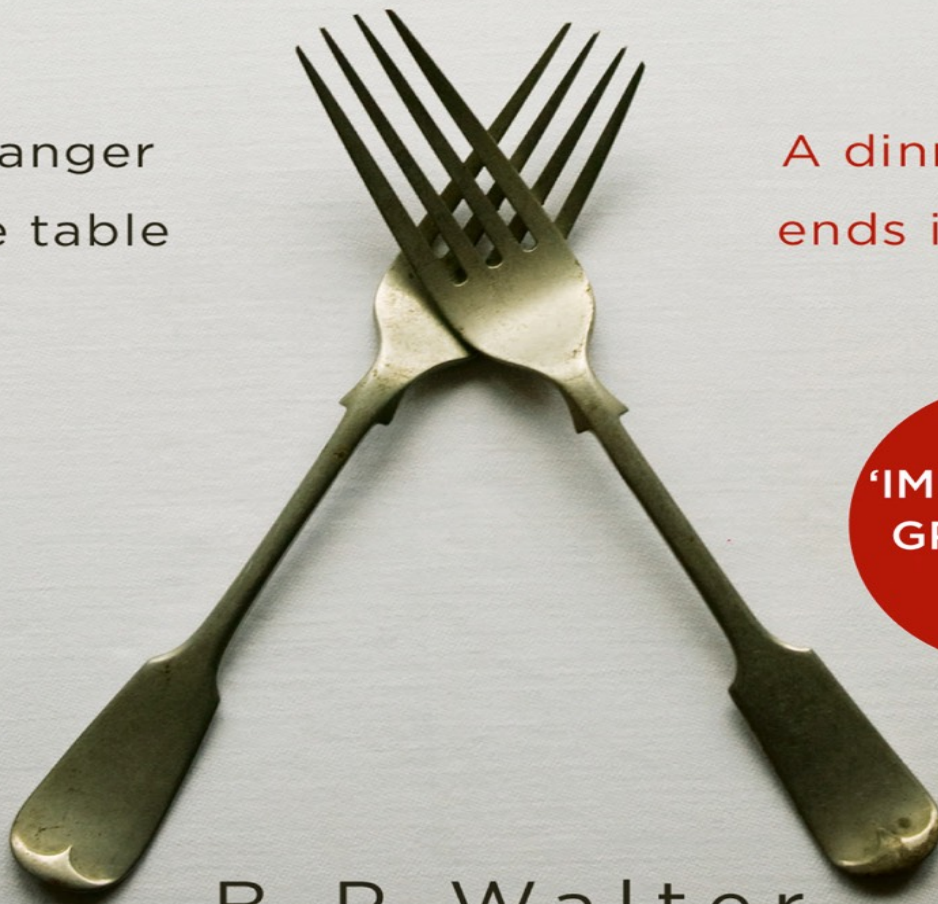


THE DINNER GUEST



A stranger
at the table

A dinner that
ends in death



**'IMMENSELY
GRIPPING'**
Sophie
Hannah

B P Walter

THE DINNER GUEST

B P WALTER



One More Chapter
a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.harpercollins.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2021

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Cover photograph © Robert Jones/Arcangel.com

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A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

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Source ISBN: 9780008446086
Ebook Edition © April 2021 ISBN: 9780008446079
Version: 2021-02-25

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For Rebecca and Tom

*Here on my knee I vow to God above,
I'll never pause again, never stand still,
Till either death hath closed these eyes of mine
Or fortune given me measure of revenge.*

– *Henry VI*, William Shakespeare

There's a storm coming, Mr Wayne. You and your friends better batten down the hatches, because when it hits, you're all going to wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us.

– Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), written by Christopher Nolan and Jonathan Nolan

Prologue

The day of the murder

My husband Matthew died on an unseasonably chilly August day at dinner time. We had been together for just over ten years, married for five, and yes, we did love each other. But love changes over time, and in those final moments when I knew he was dying, well, I must confess that through the horror and the blood and the shock, the love I felt for him wasn't quite as profound as I would have expected. Even after everything that had happened. Back when we married, the thought of losing him would have sent a wave of devastation through me. It would have been barely comprehensible. And I thought it would always be so. It took the worst to actually happen for me to realise that things don't always play out like you think.

The moment that most stuck in my mind wasn't the knife going in, nor was it the terrible sound Matthew made as he realised what had happened. It was him struggling to speak that lingered the most. He had tried to say something, something he clearly really wanted to say. And I couldn't make out the words. He couldn't form them enough to convey any meaning. I couldn't even hazard a guess. The word 'after' might have been in there, although I couldn't be sure. But it was that not knowing, that sense of

frustration, and ever since, the wondering and ruminating about what it was he wanted to tell me in his final moments.

Rachel was sitting calmly on one of the dining chairs, on the phone to 999, the knife in her hand. She wasn't even supposed to be there that evening. But I'd got used to Rachel's trademark: finding a way into places, situations, and events that would otherwise go on without her. Always the outsider. Not today, though. Today she was to take a starring role.

The police, when they arrived, placed her under arrest there and then. She confessed, after all. She sat there, holding the knife, the glint of a tear in her eye. 'I did it,' she said, in a small yet confident voice. 'I killed him.'

They were about to take her away, when one of the younger of the two officers asked her the question. The multimillion-dollar question, as they say. 'Why did you kill him, Rachel?' I suspect the older of the two would have wanted to keep this kind of thing for the interview room, but still turned to hear the answer. But Rachel kept her face almost impassive. Just a tiny tremor of emotion disturbed its calm surface for a fleeting second. Then she just shook her head, and lowered it to face the floor. 'I can't,' she said. Then she refused to say any more.

They took her away, into custody, and left another officer to take me and Titus to the station in a car with flashing lights. I had to coax Titus out of his room. He was on his bed, curled up amidst the blankets, headphones on, cancelling out the horror of the world around him. He had open in front of him an old scrapbook diary. He used to make one for every school holiday, back when he was a kid. It was something Matthew's sister had done, apparently. He'd told me that, once, when we'd watched the young Titus gluing in print-outs of holiday snaps. I couldn't quite work out if he was glad the boy was so involved in the activity or troubled by it. And the fact Titus had now reached for a volume filled with happy-family photos of us all just after the scene of violence in the kitchen was unnerving to me.

‘We need to go,’ I said to him gently. ‘The police are here. We need to go to the station now, so they can talk to us.’

The officer behind me told me that we both needed to go downstairs now. He came and stood close, making it clear we didn’t have a choice.

I saw the tears slip down Titus’s face, and I wanted to pull him close, tell him everything was OK. But he drew away from me.

‘Please, Titus. We need to go. They’ve already taken Rachel.’

He looked up at this, as I suspected he would.

‘Rachel confessed. She told them she did it.’

The fringe of his light-blond hair fell over his face as he straightened up, mingling with his tears.

‘But ... *why?*’

He mouthed this last word, silently. I stared back at him, the real question swimming in the air, unanswered, between us. *Why would Rachel confess to a murder she did not commit?*