THE DINNER PARTY

Also by Rebecca Heath

The Summer Party

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REBECCA HEATH



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Head of Zeus
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

To Dave, Amelie, James and Claire.
For everything. Always.

TRAILER: THE CALLAGHAN BABY

Music playing: 'Something's Missing In My Life' – Marcia Hines

The music fades to the familiar sounds of a summer night. A faint breeze. Crickets.

Woman speaks:
If you head out of the city and drive, the bustle of cars and scurrying workers will eventually give way to pockets of quiet. There, the houses are more sprawl than stacked. Streets are wide, and footpaths free for bikes and evening strolls.

It's a safe haven, a place made for families.

Or it should be.

But behind the lit-up picture windows and closed curtains secrets can hide. Lies. And it's in one such community that we start our investigation.

I'm Ruby Costa and this is 'The Callaghan Baby Podcast'. Along with my team, I've been investigating a forty-year-old cold case. In these episodes you'll hear the results of our work. We thank 'The Megan Callaghan Foundation' and the 'National Radio Grant' for the funding to create this podcast.

Let us begin.

***Male reporter**'s voice. The scratchy sound of the audio shows the age of the broadcast.*
Tonight, police are searching for missing baby, Megan Callaghan. Only four months old, she is reported to have vanished from her home in Ridgefield. She was last seen around ten p.m. on the evening of Sunday the 9th of December. If anyone has any information on the whereabouts of baby Megan, we urge you to come forward.

There is no obvious link between Megan's family and notorious child snatcher Dominic Snave, who was released from prison yesterday morning. Police say they are following a number of lines of inquiry; however, there's increasing public pressure to investigate whether Mr Snave is involved.

Ruby:
It's summer 1979. The Knack, KISS and Blondie are big on the charts and Ridgefield, half an hour from Adelaide in South Australia, is experiencing its first real heatwave of the season. Throughout the day, windows are thrown open seeking a breeze, and fans are dragged from cupboards and plugged in, immediately whining at the effort of stirring air heavy with heat. Children swarm to the sprinkler in a neighbour's front yard, while parents – grateful for the respite – hide inside in the shade before luring their sun-dazed offspring home with the promise of an ice-block after dinner.

Late at night in this nice suburban community, full of young families on their way up in life with promising futures, a four-month-old baby is reported missing.

According to police reports, the call came in at eleven minutes past eleven p.m. on Sunday the 9th of December.

Due to the late hour, Megan's disappearance shifted to the front of the public consciousness on Monday December 10th, on the evening news, then making headlines in the papers the following day. That's nearly two days after Megan went missing.

I have in front of me copies of the newspapers, their message stark despite the grainy, faded print.

'MISSING BABY,' one cries in two-inch font. Then slightly smaller: 'Have you seen Megan Callaghan?' Beneath is a photo of Megan. Back then, it was popular to have a professional photo session for a baby and this was from only days before she went missing. It's good quality for the time. There were no smartphones enabling a new mother to share pictures one hundred times a day to social media, but there isn't much detail. Wearing a white, smocked dress with a ruffled collar, Megan lies on a pink-edged rug. Her blue eyes are wide and a few dark wisps of hair curl on her head.

To be honest, it could be anyone. This picture wasn't ever going to allow the public to find the missing baby. If Megan was going to be reunited with her family, they'd need a witness to come forward or for police to find a lead.

Evening news intro.

Male anchor:
It's been three days and there are still no breaks in the case of missing baby Megan Callaghan. We'll speak to the police about their progress at five.

Carol:
Please, if you have her, whoever you are, please bring her home. We'll pay you whatever you want, do whatever you want. Leave her somewhere anonymously if you must. She needs her mother. Please, please, please bring my baby home.

Ruby:
That agonising plea you've just heard comes from Carol Callaghan, Megan's distraught mother, who fronted the media several times alongside her husband Frank. The tragic events would prove to take an enormous toll on Carol and the rest of her family over the following years.

Carol:
I just pray that whoever has her is looking after her. She deserves to grow up, to have birthdays and friends. It's been so long now since she went missing. This year she'd be starting school.

Reporter:
Do you think your daughter is still alive?

Carol:
I have to believe she is, and that one day she'll come home.

Ruby:
For this podcast, we've collected police reports, information from the 2005 inquest into the investigation and interviewed a number of persons of interest.

Let me set the scene.

December 9th 1979 was one of those long, hot, early summer Sundays. Perfect for a gathering of friends.

Ridgefield was a suburb for those on the rise. Young couples and families building their dream homes alongside others with similar aspirations in a good school district with neighbours who fast became friends.

Trish and Ken Williams at number five Wattlebury Court, the largest house in the neighbourhood, invited their neighbours – a group who'd all built or bought in the street at the same time – over for an impromptu dinner party.

Often, the dinner parties were an opportunity for the host to show off a curated version of their home and marriage, like one Carol put on three weeks earlier. She'd served an entrée of garlic prawns, chosen veal parmigiana for the main and whipped up a Black Forest torte for dessert. The latter a recipe from that week's *Women's Weekly* magazine, selected to outdo her friend's tiramisu from the party before.

This event was more of a potluck affair due to its hasty arrangement.

In total, four couples attended that evening, including the hosts.

From number three there were the Marshes and they brought a huge pot of stroganoff and rice. Gloria aged forty and Ray at forty-five, parents of an only child, were

the oldest of the group and were the first to arrive. They brought chips and dips for the table, and drinks of course. Gloria was famous for loving a port after dinner.

Barb and Larry Jones who had three children made their way from next door at number six with a decadent trifle for dessert, big enough to feed twice the expected number of guests. Larry had enough beer for all the men after having been ribbed mercilessly for forgetting to bring drinks last time.

And of course, from number eight on the corner, there was Carol and Frank Callaghan, parents of two, with Carol's trademark apricot chicken and a new fancy fondue pot. She couldn't wait to try it out.

So, we have it: four couples ready for a good time.

Something you might notice about the guest list is that I've only mentioned adults attending. The reason for this seems impossible to understand through the lens of today's thinking but didn't raise any questions at the time.

The children were not invited.

This was a common practice happening for as long as anyone could remember in the safe and friendly neighbourhood, where doors were left unlocked and every person knew their neighbour and would always stop to chat in the street. Parents dashed to the shops while their baby slept, and being young and happy made them invincible. This is Trish Williams, host of the dinner party, speaking at the 2005 inquest.

Trish Williams:

I know it seems strange now, but it was a different time. We lived in a safe neighbourhood on the edge of the world

and nothing and no one could touch us. At least that's how it felt.

It's not as though Ken and I forced them to keep their kids at home. You can't blame me for their decisions. Besides, it was common for us to get together at one of the neighbourhood houses once the kids were all in bed, and the dads would take turns going to check on them. That way they all got to sleep in their own beds.

Anyway, Ken and I didn't have children.

I think about it now, of course I do. I wish we'd done things differently, but we couldn't have known what would happen that night. No one could have. If you're asking whether I would have left my baby home alone to cross the road and have a party then the answer is no, but I never had that choice to make.

Ruby:

Over the years, all those who attended that night, at what came to be known as the 'dinner party from hell', have tried to explain leaving their children. They've described the sense of community, how they were all one big happy family. It's difficult to ascertain whether any of the parents had qualms about such a set-up and ultimately it doesn't matter. History shows the children were left behind.

At the Callaghans' home were baby Megan and ten-year-old Amanda. Next door to where they gathered at number six, Barb and Larry left nine-year-old Darren, three-year-old Vicki and their youngest, Rachael, who'd turned one a few weeks before. And sixteen-year-old Jennifer was home alone at number three. Larry Jones also spoke at the 2005 inquest.

Larry Jones:
I think the thing that affects Barb and I the most is knowing that there, but for the grace of God, go us. I can't judge Frank or Carol for their mistake. We, too, left our children alone that night. Our three precious children. And, honestly, part of me can't understand how we could have done it, raised as we both were in rougher parts of the city; but we couldn't imagine anything bad happening in this middle-class neighbourhood. Every day I live with the knowledge that it could have been our house broken into, our lives destroyed. If something had happened to Darren, Vicki or Rachael…

Ruby:
Larry sniffs and wipes at the end of his nose with a handkerchief.

Larry:
They were our world. It was for them I got up and went to work each day. Trust me, I didn't want to choke on a tie and banking wasn't my boyhood dream. It was for a better future for our children.

And I know that Frank and Carol felt the same for their kids.

Ruby:
It's been nearly four decades. Memories blur. Some of the most important players in the investigation have passed on, but we still don't know what happened that night.

When there is no official explanation, rumour and innuendo, whispers and accusations will linger. These

haunt the subjects. Shadowing their lives and those of their children.

The public might demand an answer but those who have been wrongly implicated *deserve* one.

The foundation were initially reluctant to support the podcast; however, recent cases where such investigations have broken open cold cases and put the perpetrators on trial convinced them. Using my contacts and resources as a journalist, I've made it my goal to bring together everything known about the events of that night.

This podcast will investigate and interrogate like no one has dared to before – with unprecedented access to all the major players and new revelations that promise to shock and change everything you think you know about this case.

We have a four-month-old missing and a panicked call to the police. In its wake, a desperate search kicks off involving members of the police, emergency services and volunteers. So begins a case that would mystify all those involved for decades with its web of secrets, lies and murder. There has been a reward offered, a large sum of money, but no one has come forward.

And still we're here asking the question: *What happened to Megan Callaghan?*

1

Monday December 9th, 40 years later

Bleariness from the battle of trying to get her baby, Lola, to settle meant Billie Callaghan-Jones was already several steps into her kitchen before she registered the sharp, sweet odour of burning apricot chicken. Closer inspection revealed tendrils of smoke seeping from her oven door.

No, not today.

As she hurried to grab a potholder from the hook, a piece of paper dropped from inside it to the floor. On the bright yellow Post-it, in Nathan's familiar block scrawl, it said, '*You got this.*'

She blinked back the prickle in her eyes so she could see to remove the smoking dish from the oven. The pregnancy books all said her hormones should be getting back to normal now Lola was five months old but then the books were failing her on everything else, why not this too? Her husband had surprised her with a note on the bathroom mirror on the first day he'd had to return to work after their daughter's birth. In the months since, he'd left a message to brighten her day a couple of times a week. Each time she found one, she felt a little less alone.

Cradling the casserole dish full of charred remains, she went to step around Plank, her sleeping staffy boxer cross mutt, who'd helpfully positioned himself right in the middle

of the kitchen. Smelling the food, he jumped up in front of her to investigate, his blunt black and white nose in the air.

Somehow, she didn't hit him or fall, but the potholder slipped. An explosion of heat lanced into her left palm.

'Holy fu-fire truck!'

Eyes streaming, she slammed the dish down and flicked the tap to cold. Grizzles echoed from the baby monitor and for a moment she didn't dare to breathe. They quieted, and she shoved her already reddening palm beneath the flow as Plank apologetically leaned his square head against her leg, assuredly getting white hairs over her black culottes.

The cool running water had begun to work its soothing magic when Plank trotted to the door to the garage, his stumpy tail wagging. Nathan entered a moment later, his tie adorably askew, reaching down to pat the dog as he took in the scene. He abandoned his bag and phone on the bench and approached her, concern in his eyes, eyes the green of a lucky clover.

'Let me see.' He took her hand in his. 'That looks sore.'

The skin had already begun to blister. 'It's agony,' she admitted. 'But at least I managed not to disturb Lola.'

As though she'd heard her name, the whimpers from the nursery became a wail, amplified to a screech by the baby monitor.

Billie's chest constricted. 'I was sure she'd sleep until we had to leave for Mum's. Is half an hour of peace to make the stupid chicken too much to ask?'

'Wait,' Nathan whispered. 'Maybe she'll settle.'

The cry continued. 'Not settling,' Billie moaned.

His mouth quirked up at the corner. 'Did you use fire truck again?' he teased. 'If you'd sworn properly, she'd have slept through the whole thing.'

She managed to muster a smile.

'Long day, huh? I'll get her,' he said pressing a quick kiss to her forehead before striding from the kitchen.

He'd made it clear he thought it silly not to swear in front of a five-month-old, but she'd read that babies could already understand some things by this age, and she wanted to get in good practice for the future.

Her younger sister, Eve, never swore. A fact Billie added to the long list of ways she was failing as a mum already. But Eve hadn't been the one entrusted to make the apricot chicken for the memorial for Mum's sister, Billie's aunt Megan, who'd disappeared on this day forty years ago. Her shoulders slumped. The chicken that had been charred black when she'd dragged it out the oven.

With Plank waiting hopefully at her feet for crumbs to fall, she'd managed to pick off the worst of the burned bits by the time Nathan returned, a freshly changed and happy Lola in his arms.

Billie had to ignore the stab of envy that even Nathan handled this parenting thing better than she did. It was all she could do not to flee. Run from the homely cottage, all the way back to her office at family business Callaghan Constructions, where she knew what she was doing. Although, given everything that had happened there since the podcast, maybe it was a good thing she was on maternity leave right now.

Instead, she exhaled hard and kissed the top of her beloved baby's head.

'Hey, Lola-love,' she cooed before turning to Nathan. 'I think your phone buzzed while I was trying to salvage the chicken.'

Something she couldn't decipher flashed across his face but

then it was gone and he was over by the counter, still holding Lola, checking the screen.

'Something important?' she asked.

'Nah, it's just Tim.'

She frowned at the mention of Eve's hubby. The once-famous footballer got along well enough with Nathan but didn't do casual chit-chat. 'What does he want?'

Nathan shrugged. 'Just wanting to know when we'd be there.'

'Are they there already? Mum said she wouldn't be home until six.' Then again, her sister had always operated on her own time and might have headed there early just to try to work out what appointment Mum had had that afternoon that she'd been so secretive about.

'Don't ask me.' Nathan bounced Lola up and down, getting a gummy smile that even distracted as she was, made Billie's heart go all gooey.

Billie sighed. 'We'd better go.'

After loading Nathan up with all they'd need for Lola, and checking Plank had water, Billie covered the now-cooler casserole dish and carried it out to the car. She replied to his raised eyebrows with a '*do not say one word about the chicken*' look.

He blew a raspberry on Lola's cheek and remained silent, but his eyes crinkled in that way she knew meant he was laughing on the inside.

And, suddenly, Billie was laughing too. The apricot chicken was just a symbol of that night long ago. Her mum wouldn't mind about a few brown patches as long as she had her family around her to remember Megan.