The Memorial

A Crime Thriller

by

Sarah Stuart

Jonathon Goodman downed a pint of bitter in the Pitmen's Arms, not that he'd been down a pit. The last of them in the UK had closed in December 2015, though there was talk of a new one being opened practically on his County Durham doorstep. He shuddered. The idea of toiling underground terrified him. They wouldn't get miners easily if the project did go ahead. Poor pay was in the past – nobody would be attracted by the minimum wage like he earned packaging goods for delivery.

He eyed his empty glass gloomily. When he was a lad, Bishop Breckenridge had been a thriving town with a market. Now, all that was left were charity outlets, casinos, the odd unisex hairdresser, and a small department store with "closing-down sale" posters plastered all over the windows. Every time he passed this way, he was grateful he'd bought a modern house on the outskirts of town, even though it was small.

Sid Smith, his next-door neighbour, tapped him on the shoulder. 'Not like you to come into town, Johnny. I'm off if you want a lift on the back of my motorbike.'

'I brought the car.' He forced a grin. 'Stuff to pick up on my way home.'

'Righto. See you Monday.'

It was Saturday now, and delay had eaten into his precious evening with Rose and the twins, never mind miserable thoughts engendered by visiting the town centre, but it was the shortest route to Margery's house, and she wouldn't be back from decorating the church for Sunday until seven o' clock at the earliest. He was lucky in his mother-in-law, and she'd been lonely since her husband, Will's, death. He didn't begrudge her a visit, though she wouldn't approve of him drinking and driving, even if it was only one pint. He fished in his pocket for chewing gum he kept handy to counteract the boredom of parcels, parcels, parcels, six days a week. The minty smell should disguise beery breath.

The man behind the bar eyed him. 'Another pint, sir?'

In other words, we don't provide stools for people to sit on chewing gum beside an empty glass.

'No, thanks. I should be on my way.' He was still too early – he could drive to the church and give Margery a lift home.

His Vauxhall Corsa parked outside St Peter's Church he rested his head briefly on the steering wheel. In another three years the car would be his and too old to be worth much as a trade-in. In the meantime, the monthly payments, even with nought-percent finance, were a

struggle to meet. He should have chosen a smaller model – at fourteen, the twins' legs would have been cramped sitting in the back. They were already taller than Rose.

His mother-in-law was on her knees in front of the altar gathering stalks and leaves onto an open newspaper. He whispered; speaking loudly in church felt wrong. 'I'll do that, Margery, and take them to the bin.'

Bright blue eyes under neatly permed hair scattered with grey smiled up at him. 'Thank you, Jonathon. I can give the floor a quick mop and be finished. We'll have time for a nice cup of tea.'

Jonathon grated; he'd been named for a rich great-uncle who'd left all his money to a distant cousin. Margery didn't know that, but he'd be late for dinner – he could text Rose while Margery was in the kitchen and ask her to keep his hot. 'I'd enjoy that, thanks.'

Margery's tea was weak and too milky for his taste, but it was drinkable with sugar. What Margery hadn't said was she'd yet to pack the homemade toys he was here to collect. Never mind. One dried-up dinner wasn't a disaster.

When he walked in his front door carrying a huge box with knitted arms and legs sticking out of the top, Rose leaned over it to kiss him.

'Mum said she'd finished a lot, but I wasn't expecting this many. They'll fill a whole shelf at the shop by the look of it. Now, your dinner is ruined. What would you like instead?'

'You promised to make my favourite steak and kidney pie, Rose. I'm not missing that.'

'If you're sure, Johnny.'

He nodded. He was very sure. They'd discovered when the twins were born that Rose had a heart problem. Surgeons had inserted a pacemaker. It kept his beautiful, loving, wife alive, but they'd relied heavily on Margery until Will became ill and, fortunately, by then the twins were in school.

Eating with a pretence of enjoyment, he watched Rose unpack the stuffed toys and listened to her muttering prices. She'd worked in a Durham store when they first met. If she'd been fit to do more than a few hours a week, unpaid, in a local charity shop, they'd have had a better house, and he wouldn't be working so much overtime and worrying about car payments. She was alive, and that was what mattered. Every visit to the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle terrified him. So far, the pacemaker was doing its job, thank God.

He did thank God, every Sunday, and he'd taught the twins to do the same. Liam and Ava were good children, but they were growing up. How long before they wanted to put going out with friends before attending church? Liam had already grumbled more than once about wasted time. He'd put his foot down, but the boy had another point. It wasn't only outings with his mates he'd talked about; it was schoolwork. Unless the twins studied hard and made it into the sixth form college to take Advanced Levels, they might end like him, working in a warehouse, and he wouldn't wish that on anybody.

A week later, with Rose's dreaded annual check-up safely over, he drove her home. She was tired after three days of tests, but she wanted to see Liam and Ava.

'You put your feet up, pet, and I'll fetch them.'

Rose settled on the sofa and reached for phone that was always plugged in where it was handy for her. 'I'd better make sure they're ready, or even around. You know what Mum's like for outings to keep their minds off me, and it is half term.'

‘I’ll put the kettle on while you do that, and would you like dark or milk chocolate biscuits.’

She giggled. ‘Both before the twins get home to pinch them.’

He piled the plate, knowing she’d munch at least four. Oddly, though she had to rest so much, she was underweight. Walking back into the tiny front room, he looked at Rose with horror. She’d dropped the phone receiver on the floor, the healthy pink had faded from her cheeks, and she was shaking. Dial 999 –

‘It’s Mum, Johnny. Ava says she didn’t get up to make breakfast, and you know how hungry Liam gets. She cooked for all three of them and – and…’

‘Steady, pet. Deep breaths.’

Rose gulped air and went on. ‘Ava found Mum unconscious. She only knew she wasn’t dead because they’ve both done first-aid courses just in case – for me.’

He picked up the phone, slimy from her sweating hand. ‘Dad here, Ava. What’s happening now, pet?’

‘Grandma’s been taken to hospital, but they’d only let one person go with her, so Liam went. I want to come home and be with Mum.’

How could one man be in three places at once? Rose, shocked, shouldn’t be alone. Ava must be fetched, and Liam was too young to do anything but answer basic questions hospital staff might ask, or they’d dismiss the lad as too young. The twins had lived with illness all their lives. Taxis cost money, and he was even more skint than usual; he’d had to pay for lodgings in Newcastle; Rose wasn’t given an inpatient bed.

Sid Smith – would be at work. Gwen Smith wasn’t. Her Mini was on the drive. In fact, she was on her way through their gate carrying a casserole dish with a lid. Gwen knew Rose was due home today, and she was a genuinely good neighbour. He ran to open the door.

‘I’ll just put this in the kitchen, Johnny. Pop it in the microwave when you want it. I won’t stop now. Rose is always tired after Newcastle.’

‘Gwen, Margery’s in hospital, and the only person with her is Liam. Could you fetch Ava from her Grandma’s house for me?’

‘Of course, I will. Give me the post code. I’ve got one of those old satnavs that plug in the cigarette lighter, and it does work. You get off to the hospital.’

Rose wouldn’t be alone for long. He left Gwen to explain what they were doing and drove to the local hospital. Its accident and emergency department was due to close, but not for three more months. He dreaded it; if Rose needed urgent help, he’d have to drive fifteen miles to the nearest or depend on an ambulance arriving quickly, and they were being centralised too.

Liam looked up from playing a game on his phone when he heard his voice. ‘Hi, Dad. They haven’t told me much, but Grandma’s had a stroke.’

‘I’ll ask and see if she needs anything fetching.’

‘Ava packed stuff. The usual Mum takes.’

‘Bless her.’

He'd say the same to Liam if the lad wouldn't be embarrassed. Both the twins knew more about illness and hospitals than fourteen-year-olds should. The sooner they were all home and tucking into Gwen's casserole, the better.

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Margery, it turned out, wouldn't be able to cope with living alone, and their house only had three bedrooms. A woman from the Social Services produced a list of local care homes.

'You might be lucky and find a vacancy before your mother-in-law is fit to be discharged, Mr Goodman, but I should warn you the council will take her assets into account when they decide how much she should pay.'

Jonathon knew. He'd investigated when it looked like Rose might never be able to live at home again, and discovered his house was safe. He was living in it, and they had underage children. Neither of those facts applied to Margery. Hope that, someday, Rose might inherit her mother's house and ease his financial burden, faded. Parcels, parcels, parcels, forever, or until he could afford to retire, and the higher his debts rose, the more distant that day looked. Rose had spells when she was well and in four years the twins would be independent, even if they still lived at home. He and Rose had talked about trips out and holidays in the UK where they didn't need travel insurance and looked forward to them – it wasn't going to happen. One more restriction on Rose's already boring life, though she never grumbled.

If only they had a spare room. They didn't even have a garage they could convert. *Margery's* house had five bedrooms. If they moved in with her, she'd have care, and nobody need lose out. The downside was living close to the town centre – he fussed too much about it, letting the sight depress him. He'd talk to Rose and, if she approved, put the idea to Margery. She'd never walk again, but there was nothing wrong with her brain.

Margery agreed to the idea eagerly, and they moved into the beautiful old house that was so big one of the living rooms had been hastily converted into a downstairs bedroom. Margery was independent in her wheelchair and that was vital. Pushing it could kill Rose, and the two women were often alone between school and his work, with no friendly neighbours to help – no close neighbours at all.

He was incredibly lucky their house was already sold subject to contract, and the money would cover the remaining loan. There'd be nothing left over; property prices had sunk, but it did mean he could now afford the Corsa, which had five seats and space to carry a folding wheelchair, so family outings would be possible.

The first was to the river. The Wear wound its way down from the Pennines to the sea at the Port of Sunderland, coiled like a boa constrictor preparing to kill its prey, and as dangerous, but it was beautiful. He firmly buried memories of Rose's twenty-week ultra-sound scan that had revealed one of the twins was a boy. He'd planned fishing trips with his son and been forced, desperate for money, to sell his tackle.

Rose, resting on a log, interrupted yet more gloomily ungrateful thoughts. 'Johnny, let's come here again and bring a picnic.'

She must be feeling well to suggest that after walking almost half a mile from the nearest car-parking spot. 'Next Sunday, Rose, after church, if it's sunny like this.'

'Why wouldn't it be sunny? It's summer, and we escape most of the rain this side of the Pennines.'

He grinned at her. 'Now who's a cock-eyed optimist? Yesterday, it was bucketing down as if there was a hole in the sky.'
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Margery glared at him. ‘Which is why the grass is saturated, Jonathon, and so must that log be Rose is sitting on, and William and Ava are far too close to the water.’

He bit back the retort that he’d found a plastic supermarket bag in the Corsa and brought it for Rose in case she wanted to sit and rest, and all the twins were doing was attempting to skim stones on the water. Leaving Rose to change the subject, he went to show Liam and Ava how to stop pebbles washed up when the river flooded sinking to the bottom; he’d been good at it as a boy.

Ava copied and soon had him struggling to do as well. Liam enjoyed the giant splash when he threw rocks more than skimming pebbles. Did he dislike Margery using his full name, William, as much as he disliked hearing Jonathon? If he did, he should blame his grandmother, who’d persuaded Rose to call him after his grandfather, who she’d addressed as Will in her old-fashioned way. Liam sounded right, and boy needed to fit in at school.

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Early summer passed slowly, with Margery keeping remarkably well, and Liam and Ava working harder, encouraged by good school reports at Easter. If Rose grew bored with the same picnic spot every other Sunday, she kept quiet, boasting about her ability to walk a mile if she had a good rest. Summer, after school closed, was the time for holidays. Even Jonathon Goodman was entitled to a fortnight off work, but going away like other families did, was too expensive, unless Margery agreed to spend a little of the money that they were saving her in care home fees.

He broached the subject one evening while Rose was busy in the kitchen and the twins watching television in the other room.

‘Margery, what would you say to us having a family holiday?’

She patted her hair, which had turned iron-grey, and she paid a hairdresser to come to the house and set for her. ‘How am I supposed to manage, alone?’

‘You wouldn’t be alone. We’re restricted to the UK because I can’t get travel insurance for Rose, but I meant the five of us together.’

‘If you can afford it, I suppose I have no choice, though William and Ava should spend the summer holidays keeping on top of their schoolwork.’ She sniffed. ‘They’re wasting time watching some stupid programme on television now.’

When he’d peeped in, the news had been on and the twins had been arguing, sensibly, about politics – *Margery* had the wrong idea if she thought he could afford a holiday for five, or four and a carer for her. And did she realise Rose spent more time in the kitchen than she used to, pandering to her mother’s picky appetite?

‘I’ve surfed the Internet.’ He’d visited the library specially; he couldn’t afford broadband. ‘There are hotels with disabled rooms, but we wouldn’t be much better off than at home, having to travel everywhere by car. What we could do is hire a chalet in one of the parks.’

Margery raised a disparaging eyebrow. ‘A *chalet*. Really, Jonathan. What am I supposed to do all day? I can’t knit for long. My hands get tired.’

Not so tired she couldn’t hold a pen. She did half a dozen newspaper competitions daily – sudoku – crosswords – word search – and left out the envelopes, often without stamps – for him to post. He gritted his teeth and forced a smile. ‘You and I could explore whichever park we chose. I don’t mind pushing your wheelchair.’

‘And what would Rose, William, and Ava, be doing?’
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‘In Rose’s case, resting on a sunbed –’

‘English summers –’

He interrupted. ‘Not outside. They have covered pools with amusements for youngsters, and sunbeds, heated to tropical temperatures. It must be like going to Spain without the flying.’

‘Hum. Can Ava cope with cooking while Rose is lazing about?’

‘*Lazing about*. Margery, she’s doing more than she should feeding us all and keeping that huge kitchen clean. Why else would she have given up helping in the charity shop?’ He took a calming breath. ‘I can make breakfast. We’d eat main meals in one of the restaurants.’

‘Very well. If you can afford it, I’ll come with you.’

None of the parks he’d found were cheap, and prices rocketed in the summer holidays. About seven hundred pounds times five, plus buying meals rather than self-catering, and travelling – he didn’t have five thousand pounds. ‘I can’t, but you could, Margery.’

‘You get enough out of me, living here without paying rent.’

He opened his mouth, and Rose stopped his angry words unsaid, appearing with a tray she shouldn’t be carrying.

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Determined to make the best of it while Rose had his and Ava’s help in the kitchen, Jonathon drove the five of them to the carpark nearest their usual spot by the river. He pushed Margery’s wheelchair, though she was perfectly capable of turning the wheels herself, and the twins carried the picnic basket. Rose walked ahead, setting the pace so she didn’t tire herself trying to keep up.

When they arrived, Rose sat on the log to rest, and he unpacked the picnic. Not going on holiday wasn’t a complete disaster. Hot sun shone down from a cloudless sky, and he’d found a café still open in the town centre prepared to provide food and drink. Liam and Ava had games on their phones, and he and Rose had books. Margery’s bag, attached to the back of her wheelchair, was packed with newspapers with puzzles waiting to be done. Who needed a pool heated like the tropics? The only flaw was he and the twins couldn’t swim in the river. They’d had good weather in Bishop’s Breckenridge, but rain had fallen over the Pennines and the water was running dangerously fast.

Lunch eaten, and food reserved for tea later, they all relaxed with their various amusements. Liam and Ava playing games kept them happier than trying to skim stones, Margery was intent on her first puzzle, with the pile of newspapers within reach balanced on a stubby gorse bush. Rose slithered onto the dry grass and used his legs as a backrest, so she could rest her book on her knee. He opened his own book, borrowed free from the library, and began reading.

A shriek cut the clear air, and he dropped his book in Rose’s lap. Margery’s wheelchair, which he’d left at the top of the slope from the path, was trundling towards the river. He leapt to his feet and tripped over Rose’s legs. By the time he reached the bank, the wheelchair had vanished. Without stopping to kick off his shoes, he dived. The water was deep and almost opaque the current had carried so much soil with it. He kicked for the surface – no sign of Margery, but the wheelchair must have been swept downstream.

He struggled on until a stranger threw him a lifebuoy. ‘Grab it, man, before you drown too.’
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Ashore, he gasped his question. ‘Margery?’

‘Is that the old girl’s name? Somebody called the police. I passed them lifting out a body.’

Ava or Liam – they both had their mobile phones, and they knew the drill. Illness – 999, only this time the treacherous river had taken another victim.

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Jonathon worried; Rose was still inconsolable. She blamed herself for tripping him. But for that, she said over and over, he’d have been in time to stop the wheelchair reaching the river. The doctor sent her for a check-up at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, and she was kept in for further tests. When she was discharged, she needed full-time care for weeks, and he lost his job. It wouldn’t have mattered, given the fortune nobody guessed Margery had to leave, besides the house, if Rose were likely to get better. The doctors weren’t hopeful – she’d run too far beside the river, frantic to spot her mother. He was back to pushing a wheelchair when he could persuade Rose to leave the house. If he argued too much, she stopped calling him Johnny in her old, affectionate, way, and *Jonathon* made her sound like her mother reincarnated.

Gwen, back to being “a good neighbour”, was looking after Rose, freeing him a walk along a different stretch of river. He came to an abrupt halt. A circle of paving that hadn’t been there before had a seat placed on it, and a brass plaque showed it was a memorial to a boy who’d fallen in and drowned when a tree branch snapped under him. He remembered the search for the body. The tree was still alive and hung with tributes. Some old and battered, and some he guessed dated from the weekend just past.

He turned for home and called in at the council offices. There was paperwork, of course. Permission must be granted, but the man he met was sympathetic, and encouraging enough for him to order a seat. Soon, he was able to have it installed at the exact spot where they’d had their fateful picnic. Looking at his photographs, Rose showed her first spark of interest in anything and chose flowers from a florist’s website – broadband was now taken for granted, though Rose had ignored the laptop he’d bought for her, and he had to help her with it.

“White lilies represent the restored innocence of the soul of the departed.”

It was cold but sunny when he pushed Rose the half mile to the seat. ‘What do you think, Rose? Is it a fitting memorial?’

‘It’s beautiful, Jonathon. Where shall we put the lilies?’

‘I’ll fix a hook to the tree near the bank.’ Rose had the bouquet cradled in her lap. ‘I’ll push you closer and you can hang them yourself.’

It was so easy to interfere with wheelchair brakes – the coroner had recorded Margery’s demise as Death by Misadventure. The memorial would be a tribute to both women, and he was free of pushing wheelchairs, visiting hospitals, richer than in his wildest dreams, and nobody would call him *Jonathan* ever again.
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DCI Gerald Croft Crime Thrillers – Police Procedural with wicked, shocking, twists.

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DCI Croft returns from a family holiday to find his house has been burgled. An armed raid at a jeweller has ended in tragedy, with the owner shot dead. Kidnap, suicide pacts, murder, and theft – can DCI Croft stop the crime wave before he finds himself in the chief superintendent's firing line, literally!

Coming in 2024 – Broken Promises

Royal Command Family Saga

Steamy romance: please avoid if you are easily offended.

Dangerous Liaisons: The Backstreet Boy and the Royal Heiress

Michael's road from poverty to riches is rough: charisma and talent versus pride. Elspeth, daughter of a wealthy Scottish laird, inherits Margaret Tudor's diary. It contains the commands to "find love where ye may", and that she must pass the book to a daughter conceived in love. Elspeth is determined to see Michael succeed but is the promise she makes to him too high a price to pay?

Later, the relationship is challenged by their adult daughter. Lisette adores "The Diamond Superstar" and sees the royal command as permission to set a trap for Michael and indulge her forbidden love. One night of passion results in pregnancy, and the paparazzi are already suspicious of the father and daughter who play lovers onstage. Margaret Tudor succeeded in hiding the birth of an illegitimate baby from a sixteenth-century king, but can Elspeth hide the next royal heiress from modern bureaucracy? Does she love Michael enough to forgive him and try?

Illicit Passion: The Consequences of Seduction

Broadway singer and actress, Lisette Marsh, flees to Paris and joins her father, The Diamond Superstar, for a European concert tour. Michael discovers she is being blackmailed into

perverted sex with threats to reveal that she had his baby. He gambles his career, his marriage, and his liberty, to discredit paparazzi-fuelled scandal.

Their lovechild, Harriet, discovers the truth about her parentage and vanishes. The man behind the extortion sends ransom demands, so did Harriet leave her London home of her own freewill or was she kidnapped? Can Michael's audacious plan to defeat the blackmailer work, or must Lisette return to the man she fears to save the whole family from imprisonment and financial ruin?

Dynasty of Deceit: Margaret Tudor's Legacy of Forbidden Love

The Diamond Superstar, Michael Marsh, turns from signing autographs to see his beloved wife, Elspeth, lying dead on the snow. Their daughter, Lisette, leaves her husband, Brian, and rushes to her grieving father's side, rekindling media suspicions of an incestuous relationship. Jealous, and driven by guilty secrets of his own, Brian abandons Lisette, who is pregnant with his son. For the sake of Elspeth's youngest daughter, Greta, he is determined to find the killer and mete out justice. Who stabbed the woman everybody loved, and why? How can twins, secret lovers Harriet and Kit, help Greta, and will the way they choose bring the showbiz family empire crashing to the ground? Can rejected, deserted, Lisette keep her solemn promise to Elspeth to pass on Margaret Tudor's Book of Hours with its Royal Command, "find love where ye may" to a daughter conceived in love?

Sweet Temptation: The Agony and the Ecstasy of Passion

Evie, a career detective, deals with the seedy side of life – kidnap, murder, and infiltrating sex-trafficking rings. Can she resist an enticing billionaire superstar thirty-one years older? Michael's proposal – "I'm no innocent, no stranger to sin. Take me as I am or not at all." Stepmother of Greta, Michael's jealous, rebellious, teenage daughter, Evie reckons without her own mother being conspiring with The Spy. He, or she, is a journalist prepared to tell lies, bribe "witnesses", and stalk members of her new family to reveal their scandalous secrets.

Sizzling Sunset: Second Chances for Star-Crossed Lovers

Michael Marsh escaped backstreet poverty and has enjoyed over forty years of showbiz success, but still his life is dogged by The Spy, a faceless journalist intent on bringing down the Diamond Superstar and seeing him jailed. Michael has been accused of incest with his eldest daughter, Lisette, and murdering his first wife, Elspeth. Now, his youngest daughter, Greta, is in trouble, again, and Michael's second wife, Evie, begins to doubt him.

Royal Command Family Saga is also available as a boxed set.

Follow Michael's journey from the backstreets of an English city to starring in London's West End and on Broadway. Meet the women he loves, and the one he shouldn't love but cannot resist. The effect of fame, wealth, and scandal on his growing dynasty. Kidnap, abuse, rape, murder, and a man's journey across America to extract justice and win back the woman he loves. Sex-trafficking – a lad with an underage sister on the run from the Feds – a daughter who becomes a prostitute – twins who are lovers – the younger woman who fears love is a mocking trick to defeat the paparazzi. There is plenty for The Spy, a journalist who would see Michael jailed if he could, to use if scurrilous secrets surface.

Richard and Maria Trilogy – Christian Romantic Suspense with fast-paced action!

Three Against The World

Richard finds teenage Maria on his doorstep, as unwanted by her mother as he is by his fiancée, dumped, like the stray dog, Ben, he adopted. Richard didn't expect to fall in love.

Two Face The World

Richard and Maria's marriage attracts enemies from the past prepared to risk killing innocent people to split them apart. Can they find out who and stop them or must Maria leave Richard before someone dies?

One Alone in the World

Financial disaster threatens. When Richard and Maria’s daughter, Eleanor, tries to help, she renews ancient jealousies. Will the music they share keep them together, or must Eleanor remain one alone in the world?