

SAMUEL MARTIN

WHEN THE
DEAD ARE
RAZED

A Novel

“Deeply affecting, masterfully taut, and explosive.” —Lisa Moore



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For Liam, Micah, Charlotte, and Emberly.

There will be times when it feels like the world has turned on you
and all you will want to do is lock yourself away from it.

In those times, do everything you can to stay open.

Be brave. Love deeply.

ONE TEQUILA, TWO TEQUILA, three tequila, floor.
The dance floor.

More mosh pit, really. The Skuzzcuts thrashing their instruments on stage, ear-bleedingly loud and record-cut tight—beer splashing everywhere. Not a bad place to hide.

Teffy shoulders into the hair-tossing crowd, boyfriend Ger in tow. It's Ger she's trying to hide, though he doesn't know it yet. And what would he do if he did? Order another round and start trashing himself defiant? Say, "Give me the number, Tefs, and I'll tell the fucker where he can meet me!" Like this is the Old West or something.

She knows she can wear him down to halfway reasonable if she keeps him on the tequila and moshing all night. Hungover and wore out is the only way to approach this sort of conversation with him, really. Only way to tell him that Troy Hopper—his ex-boss and St. John's most notorious meth king—is out of Her Majesty's Penitentiary on early release and creep-texting her on her work phone.

Ger must know Troy is out. That shouldn't come as a shock.

No, it's Troy texting that'll tick him off.

Ger bumps up against her and she pulls him in with her hand in his back pocket. Wonders what exactly Hopper is trying to start now that he's out. The rank dealer just served six years for arson and possession-with-the-intent-to-distribute. Far cry from the murder charge Ger pressed for, but so things go. She's seen enough of the courts to know that.

Ger leans in—to kiss her, she thinks—but says he's going for more shots, and she yells, "Go on then!" and shoves him off, the double kick drums frothing the crowd wild as the Skuzzcuts break into the next song.

Ger disappears toward the bar and Teffy starts head-banging, whipping her red hair wet as she works up to the pace of her Wing Chun sessions.

Martial arts have made moshes strange comforts rather than panic-attacks-in-the-making. It's a relief to know she can separate a guy's shoulder if need be. Loosens the knots in her neck as she jumps against the floor's stick, shirt slick as she throws herself at the singer's spit:

Bring it on! come on come on!

Bring it on! come on come on!

Bring it on—you fuck—come on!

And she does, telling herself to channel it—channel the fear. Fight to make something of it. Like she used to when she'd wedge herself between the local gang of stump-faced homophobes and her best friend Fin. Him the chopping block for blunt jokes about his sexuality, being the only openly gay kid in Placentia at the time. And what did he get for being himself? Hatchet-jobbed by zit-lipped morons.

By his own dad.

The bruises on his throat why he started wearing those fancy neck scarves. "A bit of personal flourish," he said. "To keep people from asking the wrong questions." And to piss his dad off at the same time. Save some trouble, make some trouble, they'd say—and seeing those bruises, the way Fin winced when she touched his sides, made her want to make some trouble for his old man. "You know what your dad deserves?" she said.

She falters now, drops the beat. Lost a second in that recollection of Fin with blood on his hands. In his father's stage. He locks eyes with her. Wide eyes. Screaming eyes. And she stumbles in the crowded bar. The knife still buried in his dad's chest. Second degree murder charge. Steady *thud thud thud*. Three years in custody. For the blood on the floor. And the bruises? What about them? Deep-bass heartbeat—double kick drum—her pulse jacked and Fin's dad limp at their feet. Last kick of his leg. Sirens screaming like a soloed guitar.

"Go on!" Fin yells. "Go on!"

Strobing cherries. Dancefloor lights.

"Go on!" someone yells.

But it's not Fin. She's knocked some guy on the dance floor and he's telling her to get lost. "Go on!" he yells, thinking her a drunken mess, red hair pasted to her sweaty face.

She elbows past him and presses deeper into the throng, away from the angry prick—the memory of Fin dragging after her like a net. They trucked

him off to Her Majesty's here in *Sin John's*. And she followed him. Studied journalism at the university so she could visit him every week. But she never managed to make a single visit. And why was that? Not one visit in his three years before being paroled. And now he's out in Corner Brook. Eight hours away and on the other side of the island—the other side of the goddamned world, for all she's seen him.

To start over, he wrote in a parting email.

Bouncing, she sees Ger through the pasty-faced crowd, down by the bar and chatting it up—six shots by his splayed hands. He tosses one back, then another. Tattooed arms gesturing. Inked sleeves she's come to love. Like she used to love getting drunk with Fin by the old military base in Argentina, spread-eagled on a cracked runway leading nowhere. Heads together and sharing an iPod. Listening to grunge-hop. Like the band harshing the crowd now. Fin's face tequila-hot and happy, the familiar bottle rolling empty between them.

To curb her drinking since, she's turned to martial arts as a kind of therapy. Calculated power shots against everyone that would ever make a sacred heart like Fin feel small. *Never again*, she thinks, thrashing herself livid on the dance floor—slamming the door shut on that bloody night. “Never again!” she screams into the music, the whole time running—running in her mind—running like her whole world is on fire.

Bring it on! come on come on!

Bring it on! come on come on!

Bring it on—

An arm tightens around her, rough hand squeezing her chest and a hot body presses into her, belt buckle thrust into her backside. She stomps down on the foot behind her, hears a sharp “Fuck!” in her ear, and the arm around her chest loosens enough for her to elbow-crack the jaw of the guy holding her. He staggers back a step, grabs her shirt's neckline, and yanks—and she hacks down on his arm as she pivots and punches his throat with her other hand.

She's loose of him now, tight space between them. Chest-punches him twice and sees his winded shock. Then his fist hammers down and she blocks the clumsy blow. Grabs his shirt, yanks sharply, and kicks sideways through his bent kneecap.

He drops. Eyes empty shot glasses.

She steps back.

The music scratches out and every eye turns on her. Including the two bouncers she knows—Tim and Kevin—who are dragging the guy to his feet now and asking her what the hell happened. Then Ger is back from the bar and in six snapped seconds they're outside, Kevin phoning an ambulance while Tim holds the groper upright. Tim nods them on down the street—"Better get going," he says—and the guy in his arms starts yelling: "That's her! That's the bitch that broke my fuckin knee!"

And she hears Tim tell the guy to shut-up.

"You fuckin slipped, man."

The rest of the night is dance after dance, bar after bar—hip-hop to Irish rock to pop chart country line dancing with a Bud Light in each hand for balance. Yee-haw! Either go full on or go home, Ger says on nights like these. So they go for it, as you would, thumping through to the wee hours in the back room of a closed-down bar owned by somebody Ger knows—Ger leaning into those gathered around the table, telling the story of her kicking that guy's ass. Telling it over and over again. His thin face more beautiful the more he talks—the more she drinks.

There's something special between them.

Fucked-up, sure, but . . . special, right?

They're finally turned out of the bar at 5 a.m.—a new day cracking—and they begin the long climb to their place on Merrymeeting, over the hill in Rabbittown.

"Could call Vinney," Ger says as they cross Duckworth.

"You gotta walk it off, Stuckless. Come on."

She slings her arm into Ger's, preferring the wind-sucking climb ahead to the manky back of Vinnie Coles's cab. The cab is bad enough but it's more Vinnie himself. Vinnie has been Ger's buddy since childhood, but as far as Teffy is concerned he's a shit dad to his kid, and his business isn't one she wants to support. Hence the call to Gulliver's at the start of the night.

The two of them press on and climb steep streets and staircases, staggering against each other until they're about ready to collapse on Carter's Hill. Sucking wind, Ger nods to the alley they often use as a breath-catcher. An alley he's shown her before, with a dumpster they hop to springboard onto a low roof.

"Steady on," she says and grabs his hand and pulls him up onto a higher roof from which they can see all of St. John's and straight through the Narrows to the Atlantic beyond.

They settle down. Second time up here in less than a month. But it's warmer this time: both of them beat-out. Ger lays back on the shingles, his

boots crossed just shy of the eave, and Teffy fixes on the rising sun. Tequila makes her mildly apocalyptic on the best of days. But this morning—her tipsy on the edge of this rooftop—it’s all blood and fire, the whole sky smoldering. Sun rising in deep, wet fog like God’s own burning face—a mammoth sea urchin’s writhing underbelly, bright rays spiking a bloody crown of thorns. Blindingly bright and rising now. Up . . . up out of the deep—and it’s humid out.

Jesus, it’s hot already. “Gonna be a rare choker today,” Ger mutters. And she takes in their hilltop view of the port town crowded around the harbor’s tabletop, rowhouses leaning into each other like friends in love after a dumpster-night’s binge.

“Never seen steam rise off roofs like that,” she says.

“Like what?” he says, his eyes still closed.

“Like the whole shabby city is on fire.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time, would it?”

“Or the last,” she says. “Wrath of God when the whole place goes up again.”

“Poof,” he says. “Like that fister you dropped on the dance floor, hey?”

“He shouldn’t have groped me,” she says.

“Sure he realizes that now.”

“Do you think I actually broke his knee?”

He whistles off a long belch. “Looked broke.”

She nudges his knee with her red shoe, and he takes a hand from behind his head and fumbles for one of her belt loops. Tries to pull her down but finds it easier to pull himself into a sitting position. *Eyes like piss holes in a snowbank*, she thinks as he squints against the early morning light. He closes his eyes and wobbles close to the edge and she catches him. Says, “Sit back a bit, will you?” And he lies back down on the damp shingles.

“You any further on that artist story?” he says.

“Her name is Ellie Strickland.”

“So the story’s done?”

She sighs. “For a story like this, it takes time. To build trust.”

“Thought this Ellie Strickland was building the trust and you were just getting a scoop on her.” He hiccups and flutters his eyes. “Is your artist missus not shackled up with Markus O’Shea?” He winces and swallows heartburn. “Big enviro-tourist guy?”

“I knows who Markus O’Shea is,” she says.

“So what’s the story?”

“There is no story.”

“There’s always a story,” he says. “If you dig for it.”

She eyeballs Ger, flat-out on his back, and remembers shagging him a few weeks ago. Up here on this very roof. A joyful, slow, sunrise fuck and naught but frostbit knees for regret. That and Ger’s shingle-scraped ass.

Poor boy.

“What’ll happen,” Ger mutters, “if the glammy literals—”

“Liberals you mean?”

He burps. “What if Markus O’Shea turns out to be none better than that orange jizztrumpet south of the border?”

“A world on fire,” she says—and it feels it today.

A taxi climbs Carter’s Hill next to them and she sees the car’s rust-rimmed pink and wonders if it’s Vinney’s ride. It’s a Skimpy cab at any rate, Troy Hopper’s old company. Unless he kept control of it when they shut him away in Her Majesty’s by the lake.

Ger makes a snoring sound and she says, “You awake?” nudging his boot.

“Only if you wants to climb aboard, missus.”

“Should be gettin down, shouldn’t we?”

He peers beyond his boots and sniffs at the glaring sun. Closes his eyes against it. Five more minutes, that means. She hugs her knees, hoping the heat today will burn off the chill she’s been feeling since that text from her friend at the courthouse.

She looks at Ger, sprawled out like he hasn’t a care in the world. Like the world for him will go on regardless. “Did you ever bring Teresa up here?” she asks. Ger’s dead girlfriend, for some reason, has been crowding her thoughts since breaking that guy’s knee. By all accounts Teresa was as feisty as Teffy—and more, Teffy thinks, *if Ger’s stories are halfway true.*

He says, “Are you thinking about her ‘cause Troy’s out?”

So he knows. “Well?”

He crosses his arms, eyes still closed—thinking what, she can’t tell. Teresa is Ger’s lockbox, though. Whenever she comes up, he clamps down.

Latch and click—and we’re done now.

Probably still has a thing for her, she thinks. And why not? They grew up together. Teresa: the childhood friend-turned-girlfriend. Taught Ger how to siphon gas into tin cans they’d blow up on empty streets. Like this one. He’s told her how Teresa used to bum smokes from old fellas at the corner store with this wink and nod. Fourteen years old and she could make you cough up what you didn’t have. Caught Troy Hopper’s eye, anyhow, and the old sleeveen offered her a job. Her and Ger both. Weed and pills at first,

then E. Then heavier shit. Her sampling, then snatching and short-changing. “Strung-out stupidity,” Ger said.

And it was Ger that found her overdosed in an alley. With belt-burns around her neck. Seven years ago that was. And that’s when he flipped.

Sold Troy out for a plea bargain and a chance to jump free of the drag-net lifestyle drowning him.

Teffy job-shadowed the reporter who covered the trial—her first post-college gig—and after Troy’s sentencing, Ger asked her out. Out of the gray and with this swagger she liked. Confident—God, he was cocky—but quiet too, and brooding. Like Fin.

“Is it another bottle of wine, you want?” Ger asks.

“Don’t be a dick,” she says.

Three years into their relationship, she’d put it to him: asked if she was the rebound girl after Teresa. But Ger didn’t say, did he? Only bought her a top shelf bottle of wine with a note taped to the label. *To another 3 years*, it said.

“Cause I can get you another bottle,” he says.

“Are you not worried?”

He squints at her. “Troy’s not stupid.”

“But he *is* out.”

“And?”

“You testified against him.”

He shrugs. “Didn’t get nearly what he deserved.”

She looks away from him, from the thought of his head smashed-in and blood trickling down the shingles here. *Drip, drip, drip*. “But does he think you deserve something in kind?”

“I’m in the public eye now,” Ger says. “And so is Troy. If he wants to get back to business, he’ll keep a low profile. It’s all about the payoff for him. He’ll keep to himself.”

Will he though? She wants to say this, but doesn’t. Squeezes her phone instead, and thinks of the texts she got yesterday.

You must be Ger’s new thing. Tell him I said hi.

Who is this? she shot back.

But all she got was a winky face.

So when the Skimpy cab ghosted slowly past their house last night, she figured it was Hopper and pulled Ger out from under his laptop, nudged her knee between his legs and said coyly, “Take me dancing, will you?” The downtown like a table to hide under. He’d have jumped her then, she could

tell. But she piled him into a Gulliver's Cab and they headed out to hear the Skuzzcuts—the new local grunge-hop group Ger's into.

Out all night, as they do from time to time, and this their sober-up stop before the last hill home. And what'll she find at home? A note in the mail slot? A smashed window maybe? Troy Hopper at their kitchen table?

Hopper never struck her as subtle. More an old school fuck-you kind of dealer. Run straight at you till you swerved or hit him head on. Then what? What would it look like to run headlong at Troy Hopper? Call him out and see if he. . . .

What? See if he what?

She hasn't mentioned the texts to Ger, but thinks Troy likely got her number off *The Miscreant* website—the online news rag she and Ger started after he'd served his brief sentence. But why her? Both their numbers are posted to the site, so why her number and not Ger's? Especially if Troy is after some kind of revenge. It's the fear of revenge that's got her on edge. But what can he really do? *Couldn't you just corner him?* she thinks. *Ask some hard questions. Take a proper run at him: a little fuck-you-too-buddy.* It's not hope exactly, but next door to it. A slight lift. Buzzing in her gut. Daring. Maybe there'll be something more besides.

Won't know if she doesn't get close.

She can do that, she tells herself. Dropped that fucker last night and him twice her size. What's he to an old rustfart like Troy? No, Hopper should be easy enough to handle. Especially if he's as toothless now as Ger claims. Only one way to get that story, though. Run straight at him. Don't back down. Don't blink—*come on, you fuck, come on.*

She finds the winky face and sends a message back:

Ger wants to talk. Tonight.

She looks straight at the blazing sun then—long enough she can still see its burning orb when she shuts her eyes. Sees that same sunspot all the way home, slugging against the tequila she threw back before leaving the bar—sun shocking now and hot enough to split the rocks.