

USA Today Best-Selling Author

REBECCA
FORSTER



SECRET
RELATIONS

A Finn O'Brien Thriller

***LOVE LOOKS NOT WITH THE EYES, BUT WITH THE MIND,
AND THEREFORE IS WING'D CUPID PAINTED BLIND.***

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
A MIDSUMMER'S NIGHTSS DREAM

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reader.

SECRET RELATIONS

By

REBECCA FORSTER

CHAPTER 1

He was surprised to hear a bird singing because this place was better suited to lizards and snakes with its dry brush and tangled bushes and water starved trees. But there it was, a little bird's happy song floating across the air right to him. The sound of it made him want to smile, but he didn't. It hurt to smile, not to mention that this wasn't the time. It was a workday and he wanted to finish before dark because his sight wasn't so good, the one eye being pretty much blind and all. Still, he could see well enough to spy a bird if it moved but nothing did, so he looked up at the giant house sitting atop one of the hills like a castle. There was a lot of money in Los Angeles. Lot of money. Lot of freeloaders. Lot of scum, too. Lot of crazies. Sometimes the people with the money were freeloaders and scum and crazy, too, but most people only noticed the money. Not him. No, no, not him. He noticed the bottom feeders and the filth. He got people's numbers. He knew about people. Oh, yes he did.

The man looked away from the castle and ran the back of his arm across his forehead to wipe away the sweat. He listened to the bird sing and it reminded him of the way the girl had talked, chirping in a language he couldn't really understand. He thought she understood him, though, because he had the basics down pat when he was a good lookin' young buck. He figured that was all you needed. The basics.

Hola

Bonita.

Ven conmigo.

No llores.

No llores!

No! Don't cry!

He said that last part in English because it was clear she didn't understand, or he wasn't saying it right, or something. Maybe he had misunderstood what she wanted, but that was all it had been. A misunderstanding. If she had just friggin' spoken English things

would have gone better and turned out a whole lot different. All that was a long time ago and it wasn't the girl that weighed on his mind; it was what came after the girl. That was always in his head. Awake or asleep, it played out like a movie behind that damn bad eye of his.

The memories made him tired. He let his head fall back so that the sun could shine smack dab on his face. That felt good. The same way the air felt good and the smells smelled good: eucalyptus and wild honeysuckle and the scrub and the dust and the dirt. Most people never took the time to appreciate the outside, but he did because he knew what being inside too long could do to a man.

"Es esto suficiente?"

The man opened his eyes; he swung his head. The day was so pleasant, moving into evening as it was, that he had almost forgotten the boy who was doing the heavy lifting. It was dusty, mean work but it had to be done and he didn't really have the strength to do it himself anymore. Besides, it was more satisfying to watch.

He tried to look friendly even though he couldn't smile. He put on his hat. It was a floppy brimmed thing made for camping. It wasn't the most handsome hat but he wasn't the most handsome man, so it seemed that he and the hat were well suited. His companion, the one wielding the shovel was quite handsome. Then again, weren't they all at this age? He was *a border man*, just shy of a teenager but not quite the solid stock of real manhood. He stood so straight and looked at him expectantly: hopeful that the backbreaking work would please the man who employed him, hopeful that he had dug long enough and deep enough, hopeful that he might even go home with more money in his pocket than promised, hopeful that he would be paid at all.

The man took a short hop off the truck gate where he'd been sitting. The little truck bounced some as it let go of his weight but not much because he wasn't a heavy man. He wasn't a slight man either. He simply was a man who moved through the world easily because he was neither this nor that. There had been a time when it was different. He had been a good-looking cuss, full of himself, getting by, taking his pleasures. He could barely remember the pleasures of youth now. Pity. He might be a different sort if he could remember that.

Eyes hidden by the brim of the hat, he shuffled to the edge of the trench. Slowly he paced the length and breadth of it, surveying the project as if concerned that it was not exactly to his specifications, but it was perfect. He had to give the young man credit. Guys like this knew how to work hard. It was the only good thing he could say about people like him.

The worker stepped back as best he could considering the trench was narrow. He raised his hand, inviting scrutiny, proud of what he had accomplished. The little wooden stakes with the yellow flags fluttered in the now-and-again breeze, but the twine strung between the wooden stakes to mark out the work site were still taut. There was even a little pyramid of pipe laid out just so. He had a drawing that he had shown to his helper.

The young man pretended to be interested in what looked like the sketch of a house. A forest house. A canyon house. A house far away from the hectic city traffic. It would be hidden from the main road and so deep in the canyon that the king in the castle on the hill would not be able to see it even if he deigned to look down.

"*Bueno*," the man said with a nod. The worker grinned, showing his perfect white teeth.

The man hated those teeth. Such a poor person should not have perfect teeth. Why was God so generous when he made these people with their thick black hair and beautiful brown skin? And then to bless them with goddamn pearly whites to boot? The man shook his head in disgust. Yep, they were good-looking people. Hardworking if you got the right ones, but in the long run all that virtue and all those good looks meant nothing because these people could turn on a dime. They were wily, that way. They were the lowest of the low hiding behind those pretty smiles and shining eyes. Barbaric. Cruel. Even while the man thought this, he smiled without showing his own teeth, without hurting his scared face and said:

"*Muy bueno*."

He reached for the shovel. The young man gave it to him and then the man in the hat dug into his pocket. He took out money, counted it off and gave the young man thirty dollars.

"*Gracias*," the young man said.

The man peeled off another twenty just to watch the kid's reaction. Gratitude spilled out of him like candy out of a piñata. The man waved away the worker's effusive thanks as if it were a little thing he had done, as if he deserved the tip.

While the young man put on his shirt, the older man took up the little stakes with the yellow plastic flags attached. He gathered them together, wrapped the twine around them and put the bundle in the back of the truck. He put the shovel in, too. He looked back at his helper. The young man was tucking in his shirt so the older man went back for the pipe. He picked up two and into the truck they went. He had just retrieved the last pipe when the young man pushed out of the trench and started for the truck. He was a quick one and the man in the hat was disappointed that his timing was off. Still, all was not lost. It wasn't as if this hadn't happened before. He followed after, knowing there would be one more chance. It came quickly.

He saw it.

He took it.

The boy put a knee up on the tailgate and grasped the side of the truck to haul himself in when the older man gripped the pipe and swung, splitting the boy's head clean open. The crack of his skull disturbed the canyon peace. That little singing bird, startled by the sound, flew out of the brush. That bird had been closer than the man imagined, but he was not distracted by its flight; he only had eyes for the work. The boy had been thrown forward so that his chin hit the truck bed and his arms were flung out. For a moment he

was suspended like he was crucified. As the man watched, the boy slid slowly, quite gracefully, off the bed and crumpled on the ground with barely a sound.

There was a lot of blood but that didn't surprise the older man. The young man's head, after all, was almost cracked in two and the side that had taken the brunt of the blow was quite a mess. The cheekbone was crushed, the eye nearest the split was knocked out and the young man's handsome nose was pushed sideways. The good thing was that most of the blood fell on the ground and not in the truck. That's what made the older man so good at his work. He planned everything, including the optimum time to swing, striking just as the young man started to lift himself into the truck bed. If he had a knee up at the time of impact then he would have fallen further in and the blood would have flooded the truck bed. Or, worse case scenario, the man wouldn't have had the right leverage and would have only wounded the worker. That wouldn't be good, but all was well. He had hit the young man correctly and the splatter of blood in the truck could be easily cleaned. The man preferred things as neat as possible because extra work really didn't set well with him. That was really the bottom line; he wasn't the man he used to be.

He stood for a moment just looking at his handiwork before bending over and touching the boy's neck. Yep, he was a goner. The man went to the cab and fetched a water bottle. He drank half of it and when he was done he took the rest of the water and washed the blood off the truck. Some of the bloody water fell on the man with the split skull. When the man with the hat finished cleaning, he put the water bottle on the tailgate, took off his hat, rolled up his sleeves and considered how to handle the next part so that he did not hurt himself. There was no telling when this appendage or that might go out on him so he had to be careful.

The young man was not too tall nor was he fat, but he was muscular in that sinewy way people like him could be. He would be heavy to move. The man paused and looked over his shoulder at the trench. Perhaps the job wasn't as good as he had initially thought. From this angle the trench looked a bit too long. They could have cut off about a half hour if he had been paying more attention. No matter now. It was time to finish up.

He took the body by the feet to keep the blood off his clothes. It was very hard to get blood out of fabric. He'd washed enough of his own blood out of shirts and pants and underwear to know that. Even though there was no one to hear him, the man was careful not to make any sound as he dragged the body to the hole and dumped it in. When that was done he recovered his breath, rubbed his shoulders and quieted his mind.

The body had fallen into the trench face down and that was not the way it should be. He had been so sure that the slope at the lip would allow for a slide and not a tumble, but there it was. The body had tumbled. The man climbed in and turned the boy so he was face up. He squared the corpse's shoulders, leaned back and checked his work. He bent down again and this time he straightened the broken nose as best he could, wiped the blood from beneath it and then cleaned the blood on his hand in the dirt. There was nothing he could

do about the cheek but from where he stood it was hardly noticeable. He stepped back again.

He continued to be amazed at how a dead person could look like nothing happened to them when something truly bad had happened. In the dappled sunlight, the boy looked like he was asleep which, of course, he wasn't. Any fool would know that if they looked close. Any fool would see the dry dirt under his head was now dark with blood. And if they walked to the other side of the trench they would see the crushed cheek and the dangling eyeball. But a fool just glancing at him might mistake him for napping. In a hole. In the ground.

Well and good.

Almost done.

He had done a fine job.

Now he would finish it all off with the observance. He was not, after all, a monster. He had known monsters and he was not one. The man took the corpse's hands and folded them over the chest. He leaned back again. The edge of the trench hit his calves. Deep breath. He was tired. He doubled over and dug in the young man's pockets. He came up with a cell phone.

The man snorted. The boy probably lived like a peasant but he had a fancy phone. It would be of no use to him now but the man could get a hundred easy for it. He dug in again and soon he had checked each pocket. He found no ID, but that was no surprise. He took the fifty bucks he'd given the young man out of his shirt pocket. He buttoned the top button of the boy's shirt and patted the collar into place before sidestepping to the end of the trench. He fixed the feet so the toes pointed up. He thought to take the shoes but he didn't need them and it was hard to get boots off a corpse, even a fresh one.

Once everything was as it should be, he went back to the cab and took a box of cards out of the glove box. Only two left. He chose one, got back into the hole and tucked the card under the boy's hands. They were already starting to cool. He patted those brown hands, looked into his face and said the Act of Contrition. He did not hurry. He gave God his due. He said every word for the boy who could not say the words himself.

The man got himself out of the trench, swiped at his knees because he disliked dirt on his knees. He went to the truck and got the shovel. When he returned, he filled in the trench. He covered the feet first, filled in around the body and then tamped some dirt down over the torso. He was careful around the young man's head, adding the dirt slowly until the boy looked like he was lying on a pillow and all the blood was covered. When that was done he held the last shovelful of dirt, stared down at that face and said:

"You're on the ledger, my friend."

With that, he tipped the shovel. At the precise moment, when the last bit of soil and twigs and stone covered the young man's face, a breeze kicked up and the bird chirped once more. The man planted the shovel, leaned on the handle, lifted his face and listened.

The world could be so beautiful, so peaceful. He appreciated it all so much, and he knew the beauty and the peace was the good lord blessing the work he had done that day.

Then he looked at the spot where the young man lay. He looked for a long while and thought, as he often did, that he should leave a marker but then he heard a rustle and he saw a blur as the bird flying off again to another bush. He took that as a sign, too. He would leave no marker. He never had. It was just his age and emotion making him second guess his work. The bird knew it was time to go and so it was.

He swung the shovel over his shoulder and walked away from the grave. For that's what it was; that's what it had always been. As he walked, he heard a cheery little tune whistling in his head. It was still there when he put the shovel in the bed next to the pipes and the little bundle of wooden stakes. He closed the tailgate and went around to the driver side. He hadn't noticed that the breeze had blown the cheap plastic water bottle off the truck bed. Had he noticed, he would have picked it up because he liked a job site to be tidy. The man got into the truck and when he closed the door the little tune stopped.

The man started his truck but before he drove back down the fire road he paused, hooked his elbow on the window and looked at the place where the young man had worked so hard to dig that hole exactly the way the man wanted it. Well, the kid had done a good job; then again so had he.

He stepped on the gas and put both hands on the wheel and drove down the narrow, pitted road. The old truck shuddered and shook and by the time he reached the main road that cut through the canyon and connected the city with the valley, he was ready to go back to where he lived. He was tired and he needed his strength if he was to finish the season. Sometimes, though, it seemed an impossible task.

These people were like cockroaches.

They were everywhere.

CHAPTER 2

May 1, 8:40 a.m. Wilshire Division **Captain's Briefing**

Captain Fowler: The mayor has asked that all personnel make themselves available for the Cinco de Mayo celebrations at Grand Avenue Park and Olivera Street. That means seventy-two hours, round the clock, not just day of.

Detective Pauly: Uniforms only, right?

Officer Shay: Screw you, Pauly.

Captain Fowler: Detective Pauly, if you do not understand the word 'all', I will refer you to Officer Shay for a remedial vocabulary lesson since it appears she has a fine command of the English language.

(groans, laughs)

Captain Fowler: Seriously, ladies and gentlemen, we have to be in top form. We have intel that at least three major migrant rights groups are planning protests and those are only the ones with permits. Gangs are overly active of late, and the new federal 'surge initiative' to arrest parents who pay smugglers to bring in their children is putting a strain on everyone.

Detective Durant: 'Bout time.

(mutters of agreement and disagreement)

Captain Fowler: You are a servant of the people, Durant. Politics on your own time. If I hear that you aren't serving and protecting every single person on May five, you will be put on leave without pay. Is that understood? **(pause)** By all?

(nods)

Where's O'Brien?

Cori Anderson: In court on a personal matter, Captain. Then on call tonight.

Captain Fowler: You'll advise him, Anderson.

Cori Anderson: No problemo, Captain.

Detective Smithson: Didn't know you spoke Spanish, Anderson.

(Snickers. Cori flipping him off. Laughter. Captain Fowler stacking papers ignoring them all.)

Captain Fowler: Be safe. Any problems or concerns, my door is open.

* * *

Finn and Beverly O'Brien arrived punctually in Department 5, the courtroom of Judge Charlene Dubois, at eleven a.m.

For ten minutes they sat across the aisle from one another. Waiting. Silent. Finn found it curious that they had walked down an aisle together on their wedding day, happy,

looking forward to the future; today they would once again walk down an aisle but this time only one of them would be happy and there would be no future. Finn was not exactly sad about the event - he had long since resigned himself to the fact that his marriage was over - but he was disappointed, melancholy, low as only an Irishman can be. That, he supposed, was a step in the right direction, being as he had passed on to the other side of pain and guilt.

At eleven fifteen, the judge's clerk having called the court to order and the judge herself having taken the bench, the marriage of Finn and Beverly O'Brien was put asunder by man.

At noon, Finn was in Mick's Irish Pub, enduring Geoffrey's teasing about his suit and tie and fancy shoes. Finn ordered Guinness as he explained that he was in mourning. This was not exactly a lie for that's what it felt like when Finn left the courthouse, holding the door for Beverly, standing atop the stairs to watch her put on the big sunglasses that made her look like a movie star. He watched her run across Grand Avenue, away from him to something wonderful and new. She disappeared into the parking garage without a backward glance. He succeeded in silencing Geoffrey, whose long face grew longer with sympathy. The Guinness was on the house, Geoffrey said, for which Finn thanked him.

At one thirty Finn tired of throwing darts. He was scoring no bull's eyes and the hollow sound of the metal hitting cork gave him no satisfaction. Knowing one brew was all he could afford to drink given that he was on call that night, Finn left Mick's Irish Pub and went home.

At two o'clock he went for a run. He had no idea how far he ran but when he finished every muscle in his body ached, and he was sure he had sweated off every last ounce of the one draft he had drunk.

It was five o'clock when he walked past Kimiko's house. He thought to stop and ask his landlady if she would grant him a bath in her *sentō*, but he decided against it. Instead, Finn kept walking across the yard and through the garden to the building at the back of the property that he called home. The *sentō* was a place to relax and reflect and Finn wanted none of that. He wanted to simply get through the day and then forget it altogether.

Taking the stairs lightly, not wanting to disturb the downstairs neighbor who he had never seen but knew to be in residence, Finn let himself into his apartment, took a shower and planted himself in front of the television. On the couch beside him sat the 'big black dog' of depression though Finn O'Brien would never admit it. Even after his little brother, Alexander, was murdered, the 'big black dog' was not allowed in the O'Brien household. It was banished to the porch and chained up on the rail. No matter how it howled, his mother and father would not let it in. Finn, though, had brought him into his room many a time back then. He imagined every one in his family had, but it was something that was never spoken of. Finn had thought that dog had run away years ago and now here he was again, a brute of a thing.

By eight o'clock Finn had enough of television and the insipid shows about housewives who were no housewives at all. They were old, shrewish women who had not a happy man between them, having run off all the husbands and lovers with their bickering and greed. At least Bev had been honest when she left him, unable to live in exile, ostracized by everyone they knew because of what her husband had done. It was an honest difference of opinion and one Finn would have changed if he could. Had he not drawn his gun, the young officer would still be alive and Finn would be dead. Beverly would have made a lovely widow.

It was ten o'clock when Finn went to bed. He was tired, truth be known. When he lay down, he closed his eyes and found that the 'big, black dog' had settled on the mattress beside him. It took all his concentration to put the ugly thing out on the porch of his mind and chain him up. By the time he did, Finn was asleep so he did not see the text messages on his phone: urgent and pleading. Even if he had, he probably wouldn't have done anything about it. He and the black dog were in no mood. He would sleep it off - all of it - and tomorrow all would be well.

But he did not sleep until the morrow.

At three o'clock in the morning there was an urgent call that he could not ignore. Finn dressed, he strapped on his weapon, and put his badge on his belt. He was headed out the front door only to realize that he had forgotten his phone. He backtracked and in a moment had it in hand. He pressed the button to check for updates but there were none, not even the step down order he had hoped for. But he did see a text message, and read it as he went down the stairs.

I have to talk to you. I'm at work until eleven. Don't tell mom.

Finn turned off the phone and opened the door of his unmarked car. He peeled away from the curb estimating his time of arrival at the crime scene to be four minutes.

Amber Anderson, his partner Cori's daughter, would have to wait.

DISPATCH

417 - Person with a gun

246 - Shooting at inhabited dwelling

10-00 - Officer down, proceed with caution

FINN O'BRIEN

10 - understood

CHAPTER 3

Finn was on scene in four minutes, thirty-eight seconds. Four black and whites were parked in a semi circle, headlights illuminating a two-story house that looked as though it had been built at the turn of the century and then abandoned. But it was not abandoned and whoever was in there had the attention of L.A.'s finest. Finn parked between one of the patrol vehicles and one of the ambulances on scene. The paramedics were out of their vehicles, waiting until they were needed, smart enough to keep out of the line of any fire.

Finn killed his lights, called dispatch to confirm his arrival and got out of his car. He checked out the house as he moved through the team that had cordoned off the street, set up their posts and were protecting themselves behind their vehicles.

The place was a rambling old thing, its once stately windows were now covered with fixed bars in violation of city code and common sense. The wood was so dry the house would go up like a straw man should a stray spark from a fireplace or a forgotten cigarette take hold on any part of it. Anyone inside would be bar-b-qued, unable to get out. The wood siding had once been white and now was of no identifiable color. Some of the slats had fallen away. Towels, not curtains, partially covered two of the downstairs windows. There were four upstairs windows, three of which were dark. The fourth window was brightly lit. None of the upstairs windows had curtains. One was broken. Above those was a third floor dormer. It, too, was dark.

Even from where Finn O'Brien stood, he could see that the porch steps were rotted. He imagined the wrap-around porch was, too. There was a chair sitting beside the barred front door. By the way it listed, one could safely assume it was missing two legs.

A matte black low rider was parked in the driveway. A pit bull was chained to a metal post near the front steps and on the patchy, weed-choked lawn a cop was sprawled face down, unmoving, just inches away from the snarling animal.

"Officer in charge?" Finn asked a young officer. The man didn't bother to look over his shoulder to see who was asking. He pointed east and said:

"Sergeant Van, officer in charge."

Finn went on his way. Finn found Van on the phone, pulled aside his jacket and showed his badge. Van acknowledged him with no more than a flick of his eyes. The Sergeant was upset, pacing as he talked into his phone. The man was barely able to control his frustration, so Finn gave him his space.

"Not five minutes from now. Now, dammit." He cut the conversation off and took a second to shake his head and draw a hand over his face. Then he offered Finn his hand.

"O'Brien," Finn said.

"Van," came back at him and then both men looked at the house. Finn asked: "Do you know who's in there?"

"Fidel Andre Hernandez. He runs with the Hard Times Locos and goes by the name Marbles."

Finn raised a brow, "Not exactly a handle that would put the fear of God into a body."

"You wouldn't say that if you saw him," the sergeant answered. "He tattooed his eyes black. Both eyes. The entire eyeball. They look like marbles."

"Charming," Finn muttered.

"And the word is he's off his rocker," Van went on. "You know, lost his marbles? He spent six years in juvenile detention for assault with a deadly weapon and robbery. He could have been tried as an adult but the prosecutors balked since he was twelve. He's been front and center with the Locos since he got out. Some say he's the one who hit Manny Gomez."

Finn nodded, listening, but his eyes on the officer down.

"Who's taken the bullet?"

"Officer Shay," the cop answered. "Carol Shay."

Though Finn didn't show it and the man he was speaking to made no mention of it, the mere fact that the cop who took the hit was a woman made them both wince.

"Has there been any movement from her?" Finn asked.

"Not for a while."

"How did it happen?"

"Shay and her partner were called out on a domestic disturbance. One of the neighbors heard screaming and gunshots. She saw at least three people run out of the house."

"Are those people here?"

He shook his head, "Gone."

"Where's the partner?" Finn inquired.

The cop pointed to the closest ambulance. "He fell back when shots fired but he got winged."

"His name?"

"Toronto. Jim," Van said.

"S.W.A.T. not here?" Finn asked as he began to move.

"Not yet. Don't know what the hold up is."

"Many thanks." Finn left him.

Ninety seconds was gone.

There were two ambulances on scene and Toronto was inside one. The sleeve of his uniform was ripped and his upper arm was neatly bandaged. He had a few years on him so what was going down didn't rattle him as much as wound him. His partner was down and he was thinking it should have been him or that he should have done more so it wasn't her. Finn understood that better than anyone given what had happened to his own partner, Cori, but he offered no condolences as he sat on the bench opposite him.

"Officer Toronto. Detective O'Brien. On call this evening," Finn said. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit. Have they got her yet?"

Finn shook his head, liking that this man took Finn's question to reference more than his personal pain. Partners were like that; when one bled, so did the other.

"Not yet, but we'll be taking care of that soon. Can you give me the rundown?"

"It had been a quiet night. We respond to this call at two forty-eight. Shay says she's going in and I'm staying back to cover her." Toronto shook his head. He put his fingers to his eyes and rubbed them. "I swear, I was on the mark. I wasn't distracted." He lifted his head. "I've been over it a million times to see if I made one small mistake, if I just, you know, moved my eyes away for a minute. I swear, I didn't." He sighed. "She's got a kid graduating from high school in a few weeks."

"Then let's make sure she gets to the ceremony," Finn answered.

Forty seconds more gone.

"Yeah. Okay." Officer Toronto took a breath through his nose but his chest heaved with it. "The door opened just as Shay took the last step up onto the porch and he shot. No warning. She returned fire but I think it was just reflex. Anyway, she fired one round and then came down the steps. She collapsed where you see her. I fell back to the car and called it in. I tried to get to her but there was fire from upstairs and I didn't know how far that dog could get. I thought it was best to get back, stay alive and wait for backup."

"Did you hear anything from inside the house other than the shot?"

"He fired two more times upstairs," Toronto said.

"And you're sure it's the man they call Marbles?"

"I saw him at the window. Funny how clear that was, seeing him I mean. Then again, once you've seen this guy you don't forget him."

"But did you see him with the gun?"

Toronto shook his head. "No, the door didn't open far enough, but it had to be him."

"Anyone else inside?" Finn asked.

Toronto shook his head. "Not that I could tell, but if it was a domestic violence call that kind of assumes someone else is in there."

"But you heard no one screaming or calling out to you?"

"No." Toronto raised his head and looked at Finn. "I didn't hear anything. Oh God, you think this was a set up?"

"Do you have reason to think it could be?" Finn asked.

Another sixty seconds gone.

He glanced through the open doors of the ambulance, listening to Toronto all the while.

"I don't know. I don't think so. We've been on this beat for a while. Shay is pretty tough. Doesn't take any guff. She ran in a couple of the Hard Times Locos in last week but they seemed cool with it. We took them out of a house over on 215th street. . ."

Before Toronto could finish, the night erupted with the sound of gunfire. Finn was out of the ambulance and back on the line. Every officer was positioned safely and well. Their guns were trained on the house. Radios squawked and crackled and Steve Van was screaming into his.

"Where in the hell is S.W.A.T.?" When Finn came to his side he held the receiver against his chest and said: "We tried to get to Shay but he doesn't want us anywhere near her."

"Sure, 't isn't this feeling as if he has a beef with the boys in blue," Finn said as he took off his jacket. "I'll be needing a vest."

Sergeant Van ducked into his car and tossed one Finn's way. "You should wait for S.W.A.T."

"If that was you lying there, would you want to be waiting on them?" Finn asked. Van shook his head. Finn had another question. "Any other movement from the house?"

"We've only seen Marbles," Van said. "The idiot's shooting from the center window, second floor, the one lit up like a Christmas tree. Other than that, we have no idea who else might be in there."

Thirty more seconds down.

"It's about time we found out," Finn said and then added. "And do what you must with the dog."

* * *

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SEVERED RELATIONS

Two children and their nanny are slaughtered.

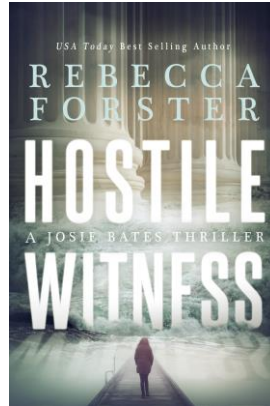
Finn O'Brien, a shunned cop catches the call.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

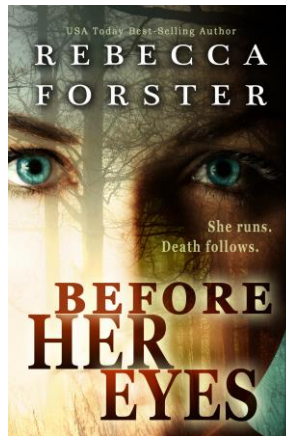
A foreign woman is dead; two countries want the truth buried along with the body. Not on Finn O'Brien's watch.

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