

**DO
NOT
GO
ON**

BRYAN FURUNESS



Black
Lawrence
Press

For Ana

From the written statement of D.W. Boxelder:

Advance Letter

Sometimes people ask me if I'm jaded, or if I've stopped caring about our witnesses, and I can honestly say no. Apathy is not an issue. After thirteen years with WITSEC, I actively hate the witnesses. They're hustlers and leeches, always looking for an angle on me and the Program and the American taxpayer. If you had this job, Madame Inspector, you'd hate these bastards, too.

Then along comes a case like the one in question, and everything feels different. Not only because this case would make or break my career, but because of the family involved. Because of Ana.

You already know the skeletal facts of the case, Madame. Which key players ended up dead or gone. How, as the Director-designate of WITSEC, I was responsible for the witness. And how, even though that witness flaked out of the Program, scuttling the case before it could come to trial, I was still confirmed as the permanent Director.

I can't blame you for ordering an investigation; I know how curious these facts must look out of context. But don't confuse facts with truth. Facts, alone, are lies of omission.

I'm not going to dispute your facts. I will put them in context to reveal the truth of the case. I will not, however, grant your request for an interview.

Before you take a notion that I'm not cooperating fully with your investigation, take a closer look at Department Administrative Order (DAO) 207-10, section 6, and Department Organization Order (DOO) 10-10, section 4, which you so thoroughly referenced in your summons. Note the provision for a target of an investigation to "furnish sworn oral or subscribed statements." This is my statement, so help me God. What's more, if the courier has done his job, this letter has reached you before our Friday appointment, which you may now consider canceled.

I understand you've already heard one version of the story from Deputy Marshal Peter Crews. Allow me to be blunt, Madame: Pete doesn't know shit. In the Program, information is distributed on a need-to-know basis, and a low-level operative like Pete didn't need to know much to do his job, which was to keep the Easterday family safe and on track for the trial. Basically, the job of a sheepdog. Which he failed to do.

Some might suggest that if the Department of Justice was truly interested in holding individuals accountable for blowing cases, Pete would be the one under investigation right now. I'm not naïve enough to make that suggestion. I understand this town, Madame. I understand you're hunting big game. You want the chief's head on your pike. And I suppose I can't blame you for working with Pete to make that happen. After all, that's my signature move: Flip an underling on his boss. Live by the sword, die by the sword, right?

Only I'm not going to fall on this particular sword.

If you've done your homework, Madame, you'll know that I spent a couple years at seminary before defecting to law school. But do you know my favorite Proverb? *Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.* That's the advice I give witnesses when I tell them to spill it all, confess everything, even the stories that incriminate them—these are precisely the stories that make a witness credible, judges and juries tell us—and now I'm going to follow my own counsel, trusting it will deliver me through this investigation.

Unlike Pete, I know all, and I'll tell all. In the spirit of full disclosure, all documents related to the case will be delivered to your office on Friday afternoon, along with the rest of my statement. After you read my entire statement, you can decide whether to unseal the criminal Complaint against me and send out the requisite news release. Though I don't think you'll do that.

The investigation is yours, but the apologia is mine. You keep your facts; I'll give you the story. As you'll see, I always keep my word.

PART 1

DEADFALL

Chapter 1

Liar's Poker

Morocco, Indiana | October 1995

Start with Ana, before her father fell out of the tree.

It stormed through the evening, rain lashing the clapboard of the farmhouse. In the yard, the big oak groaned. Wind rattled the doors of the storm cellar, but Ana didn't notice.

She should have been sleeping, or catching up on Econ homework, or doing laundry, but instead she was in the basement, huddled in a nest of dirty clothes, poring over college packets with a flashlight. Heavy stock, high gloss, filled with images of fresh-faced students, sunny stadiums, and clock towers dripping with ivy.

All you had to do was ask, and colleges would send you a fat packet. For free. Express mail. Her habit had started small back in Baltimore. Just a few at first, all close to home: Towson, UMB, and, to toss a bone to her more-Catholic-every-day mother, Mount St. Mary's.

Ana's addiction didn't really bloom until the summer, when she fled with her father to Indiana. Now it was fall and the packets were a soft dune by the laundry tub, and Ana had become a leading expert on the form. Big schools, she'd noticed, featured labs and tailgating. Small colleges, like the one from rural North Carolina in her lap, trafficked in bucolic porn.

Picture yourself against this backdrop of soft-shouldered mountains, this one seemed to say. Imagine yourself in mossy silence. You'd be Zen as hell. By the way, doesn't our library look like a ski lodge?

A ringing noise interrupted her daydream. Ana lifted the packet to see the cordless phone in her lap. Why had she bothered to bring it down here? An old habit, held over from the days when she was tethered to the phone, when she had people to talk to, people who wanted to talk to her.

She picked up, but didn't say anything, in case it was her mother, in which case she would—

“Ana? Ana, listen—”

—hang up. She opened the Warren Wilson packet again, but the mountains no longer seemed inviting. They looked like stupid clumps of broccoli and Ana could only imagine herself bored and isolated on that hilljack campus, and she got plenty of that around here, thank you very much. She winged the packet into the darkness by the laundry tub and picked up the old reliable, Pepperdine.

Blue, blue, drenched in blue: the sky, endless waves, a boy with blue eyes and a teal Billabong shirt raising his hand in class. Ana could practically hear the hush of the Pacific. Pepperdine seemed like the farthest point from her shit life. If she was going to have to start over yet again, why not in Malibu?

Overhead, a joist creaked. For a second she thought her father was patrolling the halls, checking and re-checking locks on doors and windows. But no, the house was just moving in the wind. Not even a storm could bring him inside anymore.

Ana pulled on her headphones. She pushed play on a bulky tape player, and a vaguely Spanish baritone filled her ears, blocking out distractions.

Suppress, said a poor man's Ricardo Montalbán. *To put an end to, or to prevent the dissemination of information.*

She'd checked the tape out of the library in Baltimore because the promise on its cover seemed like good SAT prep. “Increase your vocab acumen exponentially!” When she had to leave town, Ana jammed the tape into her pocket before walking away from her home, her mother, her

friends, her life she'd built with all her days. But, hey, at least she wouldn't have any library fines.

Convergence, said the voice. *The state of separate elements coming together.*

The phone was ringing again. Ana turned up the volume on the tape player. She'd listened to the tape so many times the words had stopped making sense, though once in a while they made a new kind of sense. Just now, they were background noise, soothing as surf. Her eyelids flickered and she pictured herself on the cliffs of Malibu, enjoying the salt breeze, listening to a courtly Spaniard introduce characters from an old Greek tragedy. It was the tale of Perfidious and Lachrymose. Those two kids might have been happy if not for that old devil, Deleterious.



There are things the Program can change, and things that can't be changed.

The Program couldn't do anything, for example, about the fact that Ana was seventeen, a junior in high school. Or that she was tall enough to look most men in the eye, and not too shy to do so. She was narrow but solid, like a Doric column.

The Program has sent a few witnesses in for plastic surgery, but it wasn't warranted in this case. A few easy alterations were enough to make the Easterdays unrecognizable. For Ana, it was a matter of subtraction. They bobbed her hair and stripped out the highlights, and the end result was a drab shade she thought of as *Mouse Poop*.

No tanning beds in Morocco, Indiana, and the only sun she saw came through the plate-glass window of Karen's Kitchen where she waited tables, so by the end of the summer her complexion had faded beyond peaches and cream and was now more like milk flecked with dirt. She felt as plain and worn as an old undershirt. Her disguise, in short, was her natural state.

Then there are things that can be changed, but the Program elects not to change. A piece or two of their old lives for witnesses to cling to.

Ana was always her name.

It wasn't a kindness, letting her keep her first name. Merely a practicality. Hesitate when someone calls your name, and that invites questions. Questions breed suspicion; suspicion leads to exposure.

The real trick of reinvention is to change a person enough to make her new, but not so much she becomes unrecognizable to herself.



Ana awoke in the laundry nest to the sound of her alarm blaring upstairs. The storm was muttering in the distance. Wrapping an old beach towel around her shoulders for warmth, she made her way up to the kitchen, where she peered through a ragged peephole her father had cut in a roller shade. Sunrise was an hour away, but the yard was lit up by the twin halogens of a security light. Through the peephole she could see the shingle tab driveway winding down to the road like a black river of forgetting. The rustbucket Fairlane her father hadn't driven in a month. The thistle and volunteer sunflowers in the yard her father had mowed once, just after moving in, then never again. Out there in this new meadow, at the edge of the light, was the tall red oak.

And something else, too. Something new. Midway between the farmhouse and the oak, standing in the rain-bent grass, was an armoire.



An obituary for her old life: Ana grew up in Fells Point and went to Mount Carmel and worked as a hostess in her father's restaurant in the evenings. She loved jangly bracelets, five or six on each wrist. "What's up, slut?" was the way she greeted her friend Danielle. She considered canned mandarin oranges the perfect food, practiced dance moves in her bedroom mirror, and consistently tied up the phone until her mother surrendered and gave Ana her own line. Ana was personally responsible for the school-wide ban on hairbrushes because she'd popped Bobby Swenson in the lips with the back of a fat wooden brush after he cheated on Danielle.

Like a lot of teenagers, she had the feeling this wasn't her real life; this was some kind of pre-life, a training module. When did she think real life would start? After high school, of course. After she moved out of her parents' house. When she went to college. The old world had to die for a new one to be born.

And it did. Just not the way she thought it would.

Her old life ended the night someone pried open a window in her home and rolled a bomb into her parents' bedroom. Her father was rushed to the ER, where he was inducted into the Witness Protection Program as a nurse picked shrapnel from his face and right arm. The marshals wanted to get him out of town before someone came to finish the job, so before the sun rose they drove him and Ana to their home in a cargo van and gave them each a Hefty bag and fifteen minutes to pack.

One marshal stayed in the van with the engine running and a gun in his hand while another marshal escorted Ana to her bedroom, telling her not to pack anything with her old name on it. No pictures, no awards. Nothing that could be traced back to her old life. She kept stuffing year-books and ticket stubs and concert tees into the bag and the marshal kept pulling them out, saying, No, no, it's for your own good, oh hell no.

She stopped packing. She sat on her bed and looked at the cordless phone on her nightstand. She wanted to call her mother, but what could she say? Come with us? Sorry for what I said in the ER? Goodbye, maybe forever? Ana thought the marshal would stop her from picking up the phone, but he didn't. This was a surprise until she clicked *talk*. No dial tone.

"You never know who might be listening in," said the marshal. "The wrong guy hears you're leaving town, all of a sudden we got a goddamn scene."

Like this wasn't one already.

Ana pulled a pillow to her chest and began rocking in place. The marshal softened. "Look," he said. "In a couple of weeks, we'll send along your furniture. That's something, isn't it?"

When she buried her face in the pillow, the marshal probably thought she was crying, but she wasn't. Not just then. She was breathing in her

home, breathing herself. Then the marshal in the van blew the horn and time ran out on this goddamn scene, the last one in her old world.



Like most of their outsized furniture, the armoire wouldn't fit in the cramped rooms of the farmhouse. Her father couldn't bring himself to let it go, though, so he'd stowed it in the outbuilding. After months of sheltering mice from the leaky roof, it was no surprise that the armoire was warped and gray. But why was it standing in the middle of the yard like a cheap magician's prop? Or like something from a bizarre horror story: *But an armoire, once loved, can never truly be cast off. It will find its way back to its owner. And when it gets there...*

Ana stepped onto the swaybacked porch. Fat drops of water trembled from the overhang. "Dad?" she called out to the yard. "This shit is not funny."

Back home, her father had been a tender wiseass, a charm monster. He couldn't pass her hostess stand at the Tip Top Lounge without delivering a wry joke or a cup of coffee, or pulling a stack of singles from the register to play Liar's Poker. Ana never beat him, but sometimes she found a roll of bills stuffed into her coat pocket at the end of her shift anyway.

Pulling the beach towel tight around her shoulders, she stepped into the yard and sucked in her breath when her feet touched the wet grass. "Dad?" she called again, hoping against hope to see him come around the outbuilding with some explanation about a yard sale or a bonfire and ask her why the heck she was traipsing around the yard in her bare feet. Didn't she know she could step on a rusty nail and get tetanus? Risk versus reward, Bug. Then he'd tip his head to the side and say, Though if you got lockjaw, it would be kind of peaceful around here.

That fantasy flickered out like the tail end of a filmstrip. He wasn't that guy anymore. And whatever was happening with this armoire, it wasn't a joke. As she waded through the long grass, the image that came to mind was her father inside the armoire, small and naked and curled up like a bean.

She was reaching for the knob when she saw a smear of dirt on the double doors. A rough circle with two dots. Was it . . . a face?

A door flew open with a loud crack. The world seemed to tilt, but no, it was just the armoire tipping over. When it hit the ground, Ana saw a ragged black hole smoldering in the side.

“Goddammit!” she screamed at the tree. “You almost shot me!”

A rifle dropped to the ground. A few seconds later, a man followed. Her father, Ben Easterday. He wore a brown dress shirt and tan slacks, the closest thing he had to camo, though he looked mostly like a wet paper bag. He had to be cold, he had to be hungry, but he didn’t seem to mind any of that as he walked toward Ana. “I needed to see if I could protect you when he comes,” he said, like it was the most reasonable thing in the world. Like he was a little hurt, frankly, by her ingratitude.

Ana pressed the heel of her hand against her eyelid, which wouldn’t stop trembling. “Do me a favor,” she said. “Protect me less.”

“If you left, I wouldn’t have to protect you at all.”

Five months. That’s how long they had been in Morocco. Enough time to settle in, settle down, and reasonably conclude they were hidden and safe. Her father had gone the other direction. It started with patrolling the house at night, checking locks, peering out into the yard. He stashed guns in dark pockets of the house, taped to the back of cabinet doors, under floorboards, inside light fixtures, where they cast weird shadows. A few weeks ago her father announced it was only a matter of time before Zeeshan found him, and when he did, no one could help. That’s when he told Ana to leave, save herself, go back home to her mother.

She refused. He moved into the tree.

His logic—if you could call it that—was to draw the gunfire away from her, and to give himself a good watchtower besides.

Honestly, she hadn’t expected him to last a single night up there. Her father was the consummate indoorsman. Italian loafers and silk pocket squares, not hiking boots and bandannas. But in the last couple of weeks, he’d managed to construct a makeshift tree stand out of broken-up furniture, arrange coffee cups to catch rainwater, and, most stunningly, endure.

Ana pressed harder against her eyelid. “Dad,” she said. “No one knows where we are. No one is coming.”

“You don’t know Zeeshan,” he said. “He does not give up. And when he comes, you do not want to be here.”

She could not have this argument again. Not in bare feet on wet grass. Not after a guerilla production of *William Tell*. Not with a nut who lived in a tree, who would surely perish if left alone. “Do you think I want to be here?” she said through clenched teeth. “I would love to leave. I would leave your ass in a hot second if Mom hadn’t beat me to it.”

He looked at the tree. Ana could see his throat working. Ah, shit.

“Dad—”

He gave a little shake of his head.

This was her real talent, the skill that never showed up on an aptitude test. Her tongue was a slicing black claw. She could say the worst things; she didn’t even have to try. More like the opposite: she had to keep her mouth in check every waking minute, like the eyes of Medusa.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I truly am. But if you ask me to leave one more time, I will take your gun and shoot off your goddamn face.”

He studied the tree. She couldn’t tell if he was thinking or ignoring her. “I mean it,” she said. “I’m not fucking around.”

He winced. “Language.”

Her old father, the gentleman. He was still in there somewhere. “Sorry,” she said again. “But you need to understand that I’m not leaving you. I won’t.”

He nodded and started back to the tree, picking up the barrel of the rifle and dragging the butt through the wet grass.

Ana went inside the farmhouse and found her shoes. By the time she came back out, he was already up in the tree, hidden in the canopy. As she walked down the driveway, he chambered another round. She shuddered and walked faster.

At the road she looked both ways. Except for the gray hem of dawn, there was little to see. No traffic, no sign of intelligent life anywhere.

Goddammit, she was right. No one was coming.



Ana was a runner. Not for sport, or health, but as a way to get herself to work by six in the morning. This made her an oddity in a town where fourteen-year-olds drove with farm permits, twelve-year-olds tooted around on motorbikes, and little kids knew how to bum a ride. Even Govert, a regular at Karen's Kitchen who had lost his license after his fourth DUI, did not resort to self-locomotion. He souped up his John Deere, bungee-corded a boom box behind the seat, and continued to menace the streets and lawns of Morocco.

Ana wasn't anti-driving; she just hadn't learned how to do it. Back home she'd enrolled in Driver's Ed, but the first time she got behind the wheel, she put the car into reverse and promptly flattened a mailbox. The cheerleader in the back seat cried out and grabbed her neck like she'd been whiplashed. Ana rolled her eyes to the instructor. "Old blowjob injury," she muttered.

The instructor didn't even smirk. (How was Ana supposed to know the cheerleader was his niece?) As punishment, he made Ana walk up to the house by herself, where a skinny lady with wormy lips leaned against the porch rail, saying, "Bravo. What are you going to do for an encore—plow over my fence?"

Ana asked the lady if she could use her phone to call her father, and the lady fished a cordless out of her housedress and invited Ana to fling it through the bay window. If Ana was lucky, she might knock some figurines off a shelf. Go ahead, treat her whole house like a carnival game.

"What are your prizes?" Ana said before she could stop herself. "I mean, besides a lifetime supply of bitching."

The woman gave her a look of disgust tinged with respect, then handed over the cordless.

Ben showed up twenty minutes later with a joke for Ana—"I guess we can cross Postal Worker off your list of career options, huh?"—and a soft touch for everyone else. He told the Driver's Ed instructor to replace the bumper and send him the bill, yes, even if the bumper was just scuffed, go

ahead and get a new one. Leave things better than how you found them, that was his motto. After giving the instructor and the cheerleader a handwritten note for a free dinner at the Tip Top Lounge, Ben went up to the house. He talked to the lady on the porch for a long time, and from the end of the driveway Ana watched the lady's face soften until she was reflecting his smile and absently fiddling with a string of pearls she hadn't been wearing earlier. When he called in a crew to plant a new mailbox, he told them to ring it with zinnias, the lady's favorite flower.

That's who they were back then: Ana was the one who made a mess, and Ben was the one who smoothed it over.

"Don't make me go back to Driver's Ed," she told him as they walked to his car, a white Triumph blushing in the sunset. "I can't face those people."

"Bug, you have to learn to drive."

She caught his elbow. "You can teach me."

He gave her a look like that was the finest idea he'd heard in months. Ana burst into tears.

The next week, Ben walked into his boss's warehouse at the wrong time, and saw something he wasn't supposed to see. Now Ana still hasn't learned to drive, and Ben has forgotten how to make anything better.



Breakfast, Karen's Kitchen. A laminated sign that read OLD LIARS dangled from the ceiling over a long table of regulars.

"You can't have half. Either you get it or you don't. There is no half-order."

"I'm trying to lose a few pounds."

"So get the diet plate."

The diet plate was a stack of pineapple rings mortared with cottage cheese, served atop a wilted leaf of unknown origin. In the history of Karen's Kitchen, no one had ever ordered the diet plate.

"I don't want the diet plate. I want the biscuits and gravy. Just . . . not so much. Half would be perfect."

“The deal is All-You-Can-Eat, jagoff. What are you trying to order, Half-of-What-You-Can-Eat?”

“He’s trying to order Half-of-What-it-Costs.”

Ana etched a star into her scratchpad, waiting for these guys to order. She didn’t mind their bickering. This show was mostly for her benefit, she knew, and besides, they were great tippers. Plus, she’d gotten higher than usual before her shift, and morning weed made her ruminative. Or was it remunerative. Ruinative? Oh Spanish baritone, where were you when she needed you?

Her body was at the table, but her mind drifted back to the farmhouse. That shit her father had pulled—a new low. Rock bottom? She didn’t dare hope, not again. Because what if there was no bottom? What if it was just sink and sink and sink? At what point was it not safe for him to be alone? At what point was it not safe for her to be around him?

The crude face smeared on the doors of the armoire. The crack of the rifle shot. Were they already at that point?

“IU’s a good school,” said someone at the long table. “Nice town, good basketball team. Cheap tuition.”

“You’ve got a funny definition of cheap.”

“Relatively speaking! It’s—”

“Relative, my ass,” interrupted Vernon, the oldest of the Liars. Over eighty, took no meds, wore no glasses or hearing aids. He credited his robust health to a daily regimen of cod liver oil, lemon juice, and unwashed greens from his garden, which combined to produce massive amounts of bile that incinerated hostile microbes. “Lava is cool compared to the sun,” he said, “but it’ll still burn your ass up.”

Ana doodled an alligator on her pad. Maybe her father wasn’t as bad as he seemed. What if he was faking? He did think Zeeshan was coming, but could he be playing up his paranoia to scare her away? Back when they played Liar’s Poker, she could never tell when he was bluffing.

“IU’s too big.” This from Little Mike, a lanky man with an Adam’s Apple that stuck out like he’d swallowed a baby hatchet. His name wasn’t meant to be ironic, though; he was little compared to Big Mike, who filled