



The
Notorious Life
of a Front-Page
Bail Bondsman

THE
FIXER

ANY JAIL, ANY COURT, ANYTIME

IRA JUDELSON
WITH DANIEL PAISNER

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THE FIXER

The Notorious Life of a
Front-Page Bail Bondsman

IRA JUDELSON

with Daniel Paisner

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK

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To my wife, Blake, who believed in me and stood by me when nobody else did

*A man of courage never needs weapons,
but he may need bail.*

—LEWIS MUMFORD

CONTENTS

EPIGRAPH

INTRODUCTION

Who I Am

1

The Fixer

2

Story of My Life

3

No Bail Too Big or Too Small

4

Early Days

5

Babies and Bonds

6

What to Do When the Shit Goes Down

7

Dilemmas

8

Family

9

The Paps

10

Paying for College

11

Joey Cupcake

12

Power

EPILOGUE

The Perfect Day

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Introduction

Who I Am

In Yiddish, a person who makes things happen is called a *macher*.

I grew up hearing that word, usually to describe a friend of the family who was a big shot, a fixer. Someone who could rattle a couple cages, bail you out of a jam. It's a term of respect, but it's almost like a grudging respect—like, if you don't blow a little smoke and show a little admiration, you'll never get the juice.

It helps to say the word out loud. You have to hear it to get its full meaning. You've got to go heavy on that *ch* sound in the middle—not like the *ch* at either end of *church*, but like the *ch* in *Chanukah*.

Macher. Like you've got something stuck in your throat.

It has no real equivalent in the English language, but it gets pretty damn close to what I do—what I do for a living and how I live my life, both. Guess you could say I make things happen. I know who to call, what buttons to push to open the right doors.

This doesn't begin to cover it, but it's a place to start.

So what do I do? I'm a bail bondsman—although this, too, only gets close to it. A lot of people, they hear that I'm a bail bondsman, their ears pick up. They don't have a clue what a bail bondsman is, what a bail bondsman does, but they think they have some idea from the movies, from television, from the nightly news. They think they know, but they don't really know.

I can't always explain it. The nuts and bolts—that's easy enough. But the day-to-day, the *essence*—that's tough to get across. So I tell them stories instead. For years, I've been telling stories. Every case comes with a story. Good guys. Bad guys. Mob guys. White-collar guys caught with their hands where their hands aren't supposed to be—I'd call it a cookie jar, but that makes it sound all sugar and spice, when in reality some of my clients are caught reaching into some dark, dark places. The stories I tell are not just about the transaction, the piece of business. They're not just about how I got this or that drug dealer out of jail. That's only part of it. The rest of it, the *meat* of it, comes in how the characters around the courthouse g

home with me at the end of each day. They're in my head, in my heart, to where I can't shake them.

Don't even bother to try.

My wife and kids, I can't shake them, either. They're tied into everything I do, every bond I write. It's like a package deal. I bring my work home with me, my cell's always within reach but the calls cut both ways. It could be a defense attorney calling, middle of the night, asking me to bail out some superstar rapper or athlete before news of his arrest hits the papers. Or it could be one of my kids, pulling me from some judge's bench to tell me the dog shit on the rug.

Lately, I meet people, they want to know if I'm like Dog the Bounty Hunter, from that reality series. That's the knee-jerk response. They hear *bail bondsman*, they think "bounty hunter"—like the two go hand in hand. They think I chase fugitives for a living, but that's not it at all. Forget that the Dog Chapman approach just wouldn't cut it in New York. (Yeah, if I walked into the South Bronx waving a pellet gun, looking for some kid who jumped bail, I'd get *destroyed*.) And forget that bounties only come into play when someone jumps on me—meaning, when a client I've bailed out fails to turn up for a court date and forfeits his or her bond, leaving me on the hook.

I don't chase bad guys. They mostly come to me. Why? Because I lend them money at a rate. Because I'm their get-out-of-jail-free card—only it's not exactly free. They're still tied to the court, still in the system, still obligated to stand trial or work out some type of plea deal. Plus, they have to put up a house or a business or a piece of property as collateral. They have to pay me a fee. They have to promise not to skip town or duck out on a hearing. And with me, it's more than just a promise. It's like a blood oath, because if you fuck with me, you fuck with my living. You fuck with my family. It happens, but I don't like when it happens, so I do what I can to make sure it *doesn't* happen. Sometimes I make clients wear an ankle bracelet or some other type of monitoring device, so I can keep tabs on them while we're waiting for their next court date to come around on the calendar. Sometimes all I can do is scare the piss out of them, tell them I'll jack up their family so hard they'll have no place to live and nothing in the bank.

I'm like a legal loan shark, what it comes down to. A *macher* who steps in and finds a way to get suspects out from behind bars to wait out their trial dates at home, go about the business.

The bail bond business is one of the oldest professions on the planet—but not always the most honorable. I *get* that. The concept of bail goes all the way back to medieval times. I *get that*, too. The way it works is a judge sets a bail—a dollar amount, secured by cash or property—which is then pledged to a court to secure the release of a suspect from jail, pending

a trial. On a misdemeanor—say, a breaking-and-entering charge, with no priors and no reason to think the defendant is a flight risk—bail could be as low as \$500. On a felony—say, a rape or a murder charge, with a violent history and no good reason to stick around to stand trial—bail could run to seven figures. Or a judge could decide not to grant bail at all, for any reason at all. Up until 1984, pretrial detention was based solely on the risk of flight, but since then judges have had leeway to hold suspects charged with a crime of violence, drug offenses carrying maximum penalties of ten years or more, or in cases with the possibility of obstruction of justice or witness tampering.

It's a business of risk, basically. For the most part, the judge has to weigh the severity of the crime and the danger to society a suspect might pose on the streets against the presumption of flight risk. On my end, I have to consider the size of the bond against whatever cash or jewelry or property my client is able to put up as collateral, and then I weigh *that* against my own thoughts on whether that person is going anywhere.

Basically, you don't want to need to call me—but I'm a good guy to have on your side if you do. I don't give a shit if you're innocent. That's not my problem. I don't give a shit about the mistakes you might have made in your past—just the ones you might make next. One thing I care about is that you don't screw me over and take the roof over my head. If I trust you, I'll go to the wall for you. But I need something back in the bargain. I need to know you'll be good to your word.

And here's the thing: if I trust you, I'll do you an extra solid. I might be the only person keeping you from getting sucked up in *the injustice system*. Think of it: you're locked up in Rikers, with no protection and a pretty face—who the hell else you gonna call? I know who to touch for a favor to make sure your time inside goes easy. I know which judges might let you slide and which ones have zero tolerance. I have a direct line to white-shoe lawyers who'll work pro bono for the right case, and I know the cops and the DAs who believe in second chances.

So, yeah . . . I guess I'm a *macher*. I know people. It's my job to make things happen, even when they're not supposed to happen. It's my job to get you out of jail—and then, if it works out you have to go back in, to make sure you're protected. I've helped enough pimps, hustlers, and gangbangers to where there's always someone I can call.

I've got more favors coming back to me than I know what to do with—might as well put 'em to work, right?

1

The Fixer

So let's see what a day in these murky waters looks like—one day in particular.

I got a call from a lawyer I hadn't worked with before: "Mr. Judelson, I have a fifty thousand-dollar bond I need to get done. Wondering if you're available."

"Sure," I said. "I'm always available. What's the case?"

"Not your usual. A young man who warranted." Meaning, a kid who'd already jumped bond—not the best quality in a potential client.

I cut the lawyer off right there: "I'm not doing the bail." The last thing I need is to get involved with a kid who's a proven flight risk. Learned this the hard way—like, a couple times over.

But the lawyer kept at it. "Please. All due respect. Just hear me out."

So I heard him out. A young man, let's call him Peter—for Peter Parker, natch—was at a club a couple years back with his girlfriend. They were in a mosh-pit-type setting, together with a group of friends and a whole bunch of people they didn't know. Someone said something or did something disrespectful to Peter's girlfriend, so Peter and another friend roughed the guy up a bit.

That would have been the end of it except for a couple details. One, the guy they roughed up was the son of a New York City detective. And two, a fight like this, two versus one, was no longer considered a simple assault in New York State. Now it went down as a gang assault, which was a whole other ball game.

The cops arrested Peter and his buddy. Worked them over pretty good. Told them they'd get fucked in the ass and hurt in every which way on the inside—not just by the cops but by the corrections officers. Scared the crap out of these kids, which is what happens when you mess with the son of a New York City detective. Peter got out on a \$10,000 cash bail and immediately bolted to Seattle. His buddy went to trial and was acquitted. Eventually, Peter was picked up for running a red light and was sent back to New York by the State of Washington on a warrant, and now they were charging him with bail jumping on top of the

gang assault.

All of this was problem enough, but there was an even bigger problem—Peter was a serious Spider-Man fan. He had webs tattooed on his chest and arms, the name Peter Parker tattooed across his chest. He was like one of these fanatics you see at comic book conventions, caught between fantasy and reality, only here the kid's fascination put him in deep, deep shit. The reason? In prison, web tattoos put it out there that you're a white supremacist—not the kind of calling card you want if you're looking to do your time unnoticed. Since he was brought back to New York, Peter had been beaten daily by the Latin Kings, the Bloods, the Crips . . . and all but left for dead, so the lawyer was pushing for a plea and a six-week “stay” to give the kid time to have the tattoos removed.

The kid wouldn't last if he was sent upstate. Not looking like *that*.

“He's a simple kid in a bad spot,” the lawyer said. “Got almost a childlike mentality. He didn't get the webs because he's a supremacist. He got the webs because he likes Spider-Man.”

I took the case.

Wasn't a lot of money. The mother was a single mom. An older brother would put up collateral for the bond, but most of that had come from a settlement in a car accident. Once I looked at the whole deal, I didn't think Peter was any kind of flight risk, so I wasn't too concerned about the numbers—but that was just me. The judge, though, he wanted some assurances that this kid would stick around all six weeks.

As part of the agreement, Peter would have to wear a monitoring device on his ankle, which he'd have to pay for, so I prevailed on the ankle-bracelet company to go easy on the fee—said, “Do the right thing here. He'll only be on it six weeks. Family's got no money. Kid's already had it rougher than rough.”

The day we got him out, the kid's eyes were swollen shut. He looked like he'd been run over—twice.

I knew this kid was going through hell. It made me sick to my stomach. All he'd done was pop this cop's kid in the face. His running buddy that night at the club had already been acquitted, but because Peter had jumped, he was now looking at one to three years on the gang-assault charge, with another one to three years on the bail-jumping charge, to run consecutively. All told, he could have been looking at four or five years—an insane stretch for what should have been a nothing violation.

At first, I'd thought this lawyer was doing a good and creative job for his client, recognizing this unique situation with the spiderweb tattoos and moving to set things right, but the more I talked with Peter and his mother, the more I realized the guy was just a hack. I don't like to hate on a hardworking defense lawyer, especially since I need all the friends I can get to build up my referrals, but this guy sounded like the poster boy for half-assedness.

I got the mother alone and started pumping her with questions. Learned she'd paid the attorney a \$15,000 retainer, and that her son had already been at Rikers for eight weeks, so it's not like this lawyer was moving with any kind of haste. Plus, the lawyer had convinced these people to take a plea—to what was essentially the top charge, on the long end of the recommended sentence.

Best I could tell, all this guy had done was pocket his fee, twiddle his thumbs, and call me in to do the bail.

Next morning, I called the ADA—the assistant district attorney—on the case, a guy I'd known for years. He had just returned to the DA's office after a stint in the private sector, so we spent a couple minutes catching up, comparing notes, but then I switched gears and started talking about the case—said, “What are you doing with this kid?”

“Ira,” he said, sensing I was more than just asking here, “he's taking a plea. It's a done deal.”

“You shittin' me?” I shot back. “You're really charging him with a C felony?” Meaning, the kind of violent crime that earns you time upstate, instead of a simple assault, a Class D felony where you might only do city time.

“He pled to it,” the ADA said, starting to get his back up.

I wasn't ready to let it go. “Come on. This wasn't a cop's kid, what would the charge be? Might even be a fuckin' misdemeanor.”

We went back and forth and all around, got nowhere. Finally, the prosecuting attorney tried to shut me up—said, “Be a bondsman, Ira.” Like he was putting me in my place.

He didn't want to hear from me on this, it was clear.

I brought the case home with me. A lot of these cases, they come home with me. Stayed up late all that night talking to my wife, Blake, running through all these different scenarios. “Blake, he's gonna get killed upstate.”

“Yeah,” she said, “but he did run.”

“He's not a bad kid,” I said, getting all worked up again. “He's just in a bad spot. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong people. He ran because these cops put the fear of God into him.”

Next morning, I got the mother back on the phone, asked her where she'd found her son's attorney.

“On the computer,” she said

“What about a court-appointed attorney? Anybody ever talk to you about going that route?”

“On the computer is better. Private is better.”

This poor woman didn't know how to advocate for her son, so I called the shit attorney and said, “Just curious, how'd you get my name?”

He gave me the name of a lawyer I knew, so I called the lawyer I knew and filled him in. I thanked him for the referral, then told him how this attorney had taken a \$15,000 retainer and basically sold out the kid, made one nothing court appearance, hadn't even broken a sweat.

The lawyer I knew said, "What do you want from me, Ira? I just sent you some business cards. That's all."

"I want you to call your friend, get him to take back the plea."

He kind of snorted, as if to say, *Yeah, like that's gonna happen.*

Next, I called back the ADA, left a message, thought there was a good chance he wouldn't even call me back—not after the way our last call had gone. But I did hear back from him, an hour or so later, so I told him to let this lawyer get his plea back.

The ADA said, "Ira, I'm gonna say this to you one more time. Be a bondsman. It's not up to me to tell this kid's lawyer how to do his job."

"Understood, but you're doing the wrong thing here."

"Kid's pleading to the charge. There is no wrong thing here." Then he hung up. Two hours later, he called back. "Have the attorney file a motion to withdraw the plea, with nonopposition from the DA. I'll let him plea to a D, a simple assault."

"What's he get out of that?" I asked.

"He'll do a year."

"You're doing a great thing here."

"Fuck you, Ira." Then he hung up again.

Going from a C to a D like that, it was huge—wasn't everything, but it meant this kid might be able to stay at Rikers, where we might be able to arrange some sort of protective custody. His prospects went from grim to not-so-fucking grim, just on the back of this one small act of humanity.

But first I had to set the damn deal in motion. I called the hack. "You ever hear of a motion to withdraw, with nonopposition from the DA?"

"Sure, that's when the judge authorizes me to take back my plea," he said.

"Why don't you do that?"

"I'm not following you, why would I do that?"

"Because the DA will go along with it."

"No way the DA goes along with it." Like he had a read on the situation instead of no fucking clue.

"I'm telling you, file this motion. The DA will go along with it."

I could hear the guy getting more and more anxious on the other end of the phone, like it was some sort of affront to his profession, me telling him what to do. He said, "Who the hell do you think you are? I brought you in on this."

“You brought me in on this? You’re taking fifteen thousand dollars from these people. You went to court once. This kid’s been beaten half to fuckin’ death, and all you’ve done is plea him to the fuckin’ charge. For the full fuckin’ sentence. Just so you can get this off your calendar.”

Things went downhill from here, and for the second time in under an hour an attorney told me to fuck off and hung up on me.

But this guy must have heard me, or maybe somebody else talked to somebody else, because four weeks later Peter was back in court, withdrawing his plea. He looked like he’d lost a ton of weight. His bruises had started to heal, but the tattoos were a problem. He’d been to a couple tattoo-removal experts, but the best these people could do was make them darker and more unrecognizable. The kid was still all tatted up, but you couldn’t tell they were webs, so he was good on that score at least.

And the ADA was good to his word. He let the attorney take back his plea and cop to simple assault. Peter wound up finishing his bid at Rikers, in protective custody, and he was still screwed in all kinds of wrong ways . . . but it could have been worse. It could have been way fucking worse.



Another day in particular.

A female teacher in Brooklyn, thirtysomething, charged with having sex with a minor, sixteen-year-old student. Kid was a football player. According to the charges, they’d had sex in the teacher’s office at school, in an SUV parked outside the kid’s house, in the teacher’s house. There was a “paper” trail of over three thousand text messages.

No getting away from this one.

The complaint came from the kid’s ex-girlfriend. The kid denied it at first, but then the detectives pushed up on him, showed him the phone records, told him there were eyewitnesses. Plus, the kid had his chest out. He’d been bragging to his teammates—basically, telling anyone who’d listen.

Hey, I’m fucking my teacher.

Like it was a big deal.

The call came from the teacher’s husband—an attorney who mostly worked guardianship trusts. “Ira, man, how you doin’? I’ve got to arrange bail for my wife.” Like he’d known me for a hundred years.

I listened and kept thinking what this poor husband was dealing with. His wife brings this kind of shame on his house, on his marriage, it’s all over the tabloids, and all he could do was work the phones, try to make things easy for her.

The shit some people are forced to slog through, the choices they make when they're up against it . . . it was in my face every damn day and it never stopped surprising me.

The husband told me his wife had been assigned a teachers' union lawyer to handle her arraignment. He gave me the name. I told him I'd never heard of her, which was not exactly true. "She's sending us to another bail bondsman," he said. "Every attorney I know, they say I should use you, but this union lawyer, she's sending us to this other guy."

From his voice, I got that he was on top of things, wanted to do the right thing, but underneath he sounded beaten, whipped. Like he'd rather be doing just about anything else than arranging bail for his adulterous wife—his *scandalously* adulterous wife. It had to be humiliating, infuriating.

I said, "Listen, I don't want to get into a pissing contest. You know who I am. Your friends, these other lawyers, they know who I am."

Truth was, it didn't much matter who wrote this teacher's bond. A bail up to \$50,000, an unlicensed bondsman could do the job. It only gets complicated when it gets complicated—like when there's a surety hearing, and the district attorney wants to know who's putting up what piece of property to secure the bond. Bottom line, judges want to know where the money is coming from, and the more money's involved, the more documentation they need. Also, the bigger the headlines, the more attention gets paid to these kinds of details, so it starts to matter.

No way to know just yet what kind of number we were looking at for bail, but I didn't think it'd be huge. Probably \$50,000 . . . \$75,000 . . . somewhere in there. I didn't say anything to this lawyer husband, but it felt to me like his wife had a deal going with another bondsman. That's how it goes. I show my appreciation to lawyers that I work with. You send me a bunch of business, I'll send you to see *Rock of Ages*, *Jersey Boys*, whatever's big, whatever's a tough ticket. I've got Yankee seats, Ranger seats, a table at Rao's. The lawyers I work with, I give to all their charities. I'll send them over a nice case of wine, something.

This guy, he decided to go against his wife's lawyer. He wanted to call his own shots, so he came by my office the next day, a Thursday. He said if the bail was low, he'd put it up on a credit card. If it was high, he'd use his brother-in-law's house as collateral.

Either way, it was fine by me.

A lot of folks, these kinds of circumstances, they wonder why they need me. If they have the money, the collateral, they figure they can post the bail on their own, save themselves the percentage, but that's not how it works. The court won't let you put up your house directly, it's got to flow through a licensed bondsman, so I told the husband what he already knew. Told him his wife wouldn't be arraigned until the next day, maybe not until after the weekend, and he was okay with that. I got that he was pissed, a little—not at me, but at the situation.

At his wife. Don't think it mattered to him too much if she stayed in custody another day or two. I mean, they had her for messing around with this high school kid, they had these three thousand text messages, his life was plastered on the pages of the *Post*. That had to be tough—so maybe he was thinking a little payback, a little time inside, wasn't the worst thing in the world.

That night, six thirty or so, I was coaching my kid's Little League team, trying to squeeze a couple hours of normal into my crazy day. Our team was the Long Island Orthopedics—not the most menacing team name in the league, I'll give you that. I'd wanted to sponsor the team myself—Judelson Bail Bonds, has a nice ring to it—but the league organizers didn't think that was such a good idea, and when I pointed out it would be like the Chico's Bail Bonds team from the *Bad News Bears* movies, they still didn't think it was such a good idea, so now we were the fightin' Orthopedics. It rubbed me wrong. I'd wanted to do right by our community, give back a couple dollars and sponsor my own kid's team, but the folks who run the town think there's a negative to what I do. Bail bonds? Either they don't get it, and they're afraid of the association—or they do, and they're even more afraid, which in some ways is worse.

We had the field from six to seven thirty, and I wanted to make good use of our limited practice time. Two other dads with sons on the team, they helped me out with the coaching, so we had the kids split up, doing different drills. Coaching youth baseball, there can be a lot of waiting around, so we tried to have two or three things going on at a time to cut down on that standing still—and usually, it worked out pretty well.

On this night, though, I was pulled away by my cell phone. My wife is on me about this all the time, but my big worry is, if the phone rings and I'm not there to answer it, they'll just call someone else. That's the nature of the bail bond business. Folks want out when they want out. They want help when they want help. They don't want to wait around for me to finish dinner with my family, for me to get done teaching these kids how to hit the cutoff man, for me to sign down at my desk first thing in the morning and start returning calls.

They think to call me, I should be available to answer the phone.

Anyway, practice kind of came to a halt as I waved to one of my assistant coaches to take over for me so I could slink behind the fence and flip open my phone. A court officer I knew in Manhattan was calling, and at first I couldn't think why.

“Hey, Ira, you working this teacher case out in Brooklyn? The one supposedly having an affair with a student?”

I was half-listening, half-paying attention to the drill I'd abandoned on the field. “Yeah. How'd you hear about that?”

Before the guy could answer, I put my phone to my chest and shouted out a reminder to my son, Casey, telling him to crow-hop on his throws back to the infield—something we'd been

working on, a way for him to put a little extra something on the ball.

Turned out this court officer was married to the union attorney assigned to represent the teacher. I'd had no idea. I heard that and thought, Small world. And it is—only in the small world of New York's criminal justice system this means you've got to be careful how you play it. Everyone knows everyone else. Every move can come back to bite you on the ass or kiss you full on the mouth. Like here: I take a case, guy comes into my office to sign the papers in the afternoon, end of the day the whole city knows about it.

Still, I couldn't think why this guy was calling, so I played dumb. "What can I do for you?"

"My wife, she's worried about this case. We're supposed to leave town for a couple days on vacation, but she doesn't want to lose this client." So he was calling to see if his wife was about to get pushed off the case, and to see if he needed to smooth things over with me. He didn't say as much, but he was fishing. He knew the husband had been to see me.

"You asking me if the teacher is looking for another attorney?" I said.

"Yeah. Guess that's what I'm asking."

So I laid it out for him. "If I had to bet, I'd say this teacher's gonna use your wife as an arraignment attorney because she's covered by the union. But that's only for now."

We went back and forth for a while—him, angling for some kind of inside track, asking if I could put in a good word; me, thinking how to tell this guy I knew his wife was sending business to my competitors. This, after his wife and I had worked together in the past, so it's not like she didn't know me from any other bondsman in the phone book. Here was the correction officer reaching out for a favor, for information, and here I was sitting with this trump card, wondering when to play it. Knowing it'll make the favor twice as big, the information twice as valuable. Finally, I just came out with it: "The thing is, your wife is telling the teacher and her husband to use a different bail company."

The correction officer didn't say anything. For a beat, I wondered if the line had gone dead but then he started to talk. "About that," he said. "That's probably my fault. I'm the one who knows you. Probably, I didn't do such a good job letting my wife know you're the guy to see."

"Don't worry about it," I said, trying to walk the high road, leaving the door open on our doing business in the future.

"No, you should know. It's on me. My wife, she works with a bondsman one week, that's the guy she recommends the next week. She doesn't always pay attention."

I left this alone because I thought I'd made my point. I knew if I found a way to keep the guy's wife in the picture, I'd be the first guy her clients called, here on in.

The whole time we were talking, I kept setting the phone down to coach one of my kids on the field—reminding this one little guy to stay low on a ground ball, to keep his body in front. I was only half-listening to this court officer, reaching out on behalf of his lawyer wife, only

half-following what was going on with the fightin' Orthopedics, trying to get ready for a big game on Saturday. I hated that I was spread so thin, but this was nothing new. Everything's up in the air with me. I'm constantly juggling a million things. The trick, always, is to keep any one thing from crashing to the ground.

At least, that's the idea.

I turned my attention back to the phone call, to this husband. "Tell you what. We get through the arraignment, I'll get with the teacher, maybe with her husband, I'll tell them it makes sense to stay the course with your wife. I'll tell them they're in good hands."

"That's decent of you, Ira." He wasn't expecting this—not after the way I'd busted his hump about his wife's referrals. I was playing three sides against the middle, but we both knew the drill.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Works out for both of us. I put in a good word for your wife, she puts in a good word for me down the road."

Next morning, I got to the courthouse in Brooklyn before noon. The place was packed with reporters, rubberneckers. Roseanne Colletti was there, from Channel 4, WNBC-TV. Julie Papa, from 1010 WINS. John Slattery, from Channel 2, WCBS-TV. Reporters from all the local newspapers. It's like I had to run a gauntlet on the way in, everybody shouting at me:

Hey, Ira, can I get a few minutes?

Ira, I need a statement.

What do you think about this judge, Ira?

The usual.

The husband was waiting for me inside. He was wearing a colorful old suit—and along with his wild, Fu Manchu-type mus-tache, he seemed pretty out of place. Our eyes met.

I walked over to him. "How's it going, man? You holding up?"

"What can I tell you?"

I liked this guy, wanted things to go well for him. "Let's hope the bail's low."

"Yeah. Save my money for a divorce lawyer."

He made a lot of jokes like this. *Someday, when I'm single, maybe we'll go grab a beer*. Like that. They were more jabs than jokes.

The judge read the charges against my client. Child molestation, endangering the welfare of a minor, and on and on—a long list, but there was no statutory rape charge because they couldn't prove the sexual intercourse, not yet.

The DA asked for a \$50,000 bond, then detailed how my client had performed oral sex on this kid football player in his bedroom, with more than a dozen sexual liaisons, and I kept looking over at the husband, his head in his hands, this ashen look on his face. I put my hand on his hand. It was something to do, some way to tell this guy I knew he was hurting, listening

to all this shit about his wife.

Hard not to like this guy, feel for him.

Finally, after the DA made his case and the union lawyer made her case for the teacher, the judge set bail at \$10,000. I was surprised at the low number—glad for the husband, who no doubt didn't have to dig too, too deep to save his wife's ass; not so glad for me, because it meant my fee would also be low, since it's done by percentage.

We got through what we had to get through, and at the other end there was a whole other gauntlet on the way out of the courtroom. The same reporters, asking the same questions.

How's the husband, Ira?

What did she use to secure the bail?

Where will she go from here?

I'm thinking, How the hell do I know where this teacher goes from here? How do they *think* the husband is doing? But all I could say was that this was a difficult time for the family, that I didn't believe my client was a flight risk, that I would have written this bail up to any amount the judge asked.

As I left, I caught a glimpse of my client, the teacher. We hadn't spoken yet—all of my dealings had been with her husband. But here I was up close enough to look right into her eyes, and they came back blank. It was almost creepy, the empty stare that bounced off this woman. I didn't know if she was in shock, or on some type of medication, or if she'd just completely shut down. But then I caught myself and thought, Maybe this is the only way to get through something like this. Maybe if you're a teacher and you step out with a sixteen-year-old student and get caught in such a public, flagrant way, the only thing to do is shut down.

Soon as I could, I broke for my car, where my right-hand man, Damon Romanelli, was waiting. My buddy. I'd known Damon since just about forever; he was a couple years ahead of me in high school, and he's become one of my closest friends. Guy's been through some rough patches, but these days he's doing okay. He works for me, collects money for me, watches my back. Some people in this business, they call a guy like Damon their muscle, but with me it's way more than that. He's my muscle, my head, my heart. He's got my back—and he knows his shit. Spent ten years in jail—first for an armored car heist and later on for attempted murder. He's an ex-Marine, he knows how things go in the joint, on the street, all over, and I can't imagine doing what I do without Damon at my side.

Plus, I like having him around.

As I slipped into the car, Damon asked how things went in court, but before I could tell him, my phone started vibrating. First it was the union attorney thanking me for my help. Then it was the husband thanking me for my support, making another half joke about how he would soon be single. Then it was Laura Italiano from the *Post*, looking for a comment. After

that, Roseanne Colletti asked me to call if anything broke on this case.

Between calls, Damon and I talked, listened to the radio. The usual bullshit. Soon, 101 WINS had a bulletin, Juliet Papa giving her report, and there I was, coming through the car speakers, talking about the case.

Damon heard me on the radio and started laughing. “Ira, man, this is fuckin’ sick.”

And it was. It *is*. We were used to it by now, but Damon’s right—it *was* completely sick. This swirl of attention, this media circus, me in the middle.

Me, of all people . . .

2

Story of My Life

I didn't exactly grow up wanting to be a bail bondsman—but I did know what a bail bondsman was.

I used to hear plenty of stories about guys who were serving at Rikers from my father, who was a teacher there. Guess it was a little strange, looking back—me as a kid, knowing what it meant for someone to do time at a place like Rikers. To understand what it was like *inside* for a lot of these guys. In my neighborhood, most kids didn't know shit about prison life, other than what they saw in the movies, on television. It wasn't real to them, but it was real to me. Wasn't anything I was interested in, in my own life, but it was in the air and all around—kind of like the background music of my childhood.

Sports—that was more my thing. I wanted to be a professional ballplayer. Baseball or football . . . I was good at both. Even had a shot at a football scholarship at Columbia if I could have gotten my SAT scores within spitting distance of a halfway decent number. Academically, though, I couldn't get out of my own way. I learned in high school that I had ADD, attention deficit disorder, something it would have been nice to know *way* before I was sixteen. I remember hearing this diagnosis and being so completely pissed. At my parents, at my teachers, at the world. Those three little letters, ADD, explained away all my struggles, but they found me too late to make any kind of difference. No resource room, no extra help . . . none of that. Only way I'd gotten through some of my classes was by cheating and conniving and sweet-talking. I'd been a star athlete all through high school, so that helped. I was all-star and all-county in football and baseball, all-conference in basketball, and when you can hit and run and jump and tackle, your teachers tend to look the other way and leave you alone. They didn't know enough to notice, or to mind. I was passed along from one grade to the next, thinking school was the same tough slog for everyone else.

I couldn't get my scores anywhere close to what I needed to land that Columbia scholarship; ended up going to a bunch of different colleges. Didn't last too long at any one of them: community college to get my grades up, Cortland to play football, Iona to finally finish

things out.

I could probably have stayed at Cortland and had a decent college career, Division III, but I got homesick after just a week or so. Plus, my mom was in and out of the hospital, struggling with breast cancer, so I turned tail and headed home. In terms of football, I should have stuck it out. In just that first week of preseason, I'd worked my way up from sixth or seventh on the coach's depth chart, playing safety, to first or second, so I had that going for me, but the tug of home was powerful. I was a mama's boy, I guess—that, and I felt out of my element. Not on the football field, I had that part down, but in the classroom, on campus, everywhere else. I was always looking for angles and ways to cut corners.

I just wanted to get out and get on with it.

This left me pretty much unprepared for whatever came next. I was no closer to any kind of goal, or even any kind of starting line. Yet, by some sick string of miracles, I'd got my college degree, but I hadn't *learned* anything, other than how to get through college. I had no interests, no talents, outside of sports. I certainly had no training in any kind of field or discipline, so I bounced around for a while, kept throwing opportunities against the wall, hoping something might stick.

I didn't have a head for business, but I couldn't see myself in any kind of traditional job. Sitting at a desk, pushing papers around, going to meetings, sucking up to a boss . . . it was like nails on a chalkboard to me. Something to be avoided at all costs—or for as long as possible. By default, I started thinking like an entrepreneur, figured I could be in business for myself, do my own thing. Wasn't the best fit for me just then. Didn't exactly match with my skill set—but that was mostly because I didn't have a skill set, just a set notion of what I *didn't* want to do.

So what do you do when you're up against it? When you can't think of anything else to do? You look to start your own business, but my entrepreneurial streak only took me so far. I was in the gym business for a stretch, started out well enough, but then my partner stole from me and I was back where I started. (Story of my young life—part one.) I bought and operated a couple nightclubs in the Carolinas, and they started to throw off some money . . . until those businesses went bad, too. (Story of my young life—part two.)

For a while in there, I went in with a buddy on a sports agency, thinking we'd be like Jerry Maguire and conquer the big-time sports world. Trouble was, we needed clients, and it wasn't such an easy sell, getting these young athletes to go with us when we hadn't done a lick of business. That didn't stop us, though. We were determined. We started traveling up and down the East Coast, trying to sign up-and-coming college athletes to our firm—football and baseball players, mostly, because that was what we knew. Spent a lot of time hanging around frat houses and field houses, which in retrospect was kind of creepy, but it was the best way

we could think to troll for student-athletes in need of representation. Also, it was a good excuse for me to keep drinking and roughhousing and generally goofing off, same way I'd done all through college. (Story of my young life—parts three and four, because I kept at this on and off for a good long while, thought it might amount to something.)

We managed to land a half dozen or so clients, but nobody at the A-level, no budding superstars, just good, solid, knockaround athletes who might get a shot. A couple times, we'd get a relationship going with a kid who seemed like he might get chosen in one of the early rounds of the NFL draft, and we'd go back and forth with him and his family, set him up with a cell phone, run a tab for him and his friends at one of our bars, do whatever we could to bring him on board, and then at the very end he'd call us and say he decided to sign with IMG or one of the other big-time agencies. Closest thing we had to a real payday was when one of our guys signed with the New England Patriots, but he got cut by the end of his first preseason camp, so that was that.

I was a hustler. Wasn't something I'd learned in any kind of academic way, although I guess you could say I picked it up in school, hustling to skate by. Wasn't something I'd learned from my parents, was just part of my personality, only it wasn't doing me any good, not at first. I see now that I was banking a lot of the skills I'd need one day in the bond business—learning how to read people, how not to take no for an answer, how to think for myself and get out in front of a piece of trouble. I wasn't quite there yet. Wasn't quite ready to do anything but tread some serious water. I mean, it's one thing to talk a good game—I had that part *down*—but it's something else to turn that talk into something real, something viable, and I was having a little trouble on that turn.

Got to where I moved back home with my parents, just to catch my breath, only the change of scenery didn't help. Yeah, I'd cut down on my expenses, but now I had a cap on my prospects, too. I became depressed—not clinically depressed, but I was in a deep, black funk I couldn't see a way to get myself going on any positive path. I started sleeping until one or two o'clock in the afternoons, grabbing at odd jobs just to keep a little walking-around money in my pockets. Some days, there was no good reason to get out of bed. I worked as a bouncer in a couple local bars. I hauled fish at the Fulton Street Market. The worst was a gig gluing fake labels on the backs of illegal pharmaceutical products that some guys I knew were reselling. I'd get \$100 in cash for each shift, and I'd be working alongside three or four illegal Mexican immigrants thinking, So this is it for me, huh? This is why I went to college?

From there, things went from bad to worse. They repo-ed my car, a sweet Ford Bronco with lease payments I couldn't handle, so then I had to borrow my dad's car whenever I needed to go out. Once, I asked this girl on a date, and when we got to the movies, I pulled out my wallet and saw I didn't have any money, so I did what any self-respecting young man would

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