

CHAPTER 10

IZZY



A limo picked me up at six in the morning at the curb outside my apartment building. The driver introduced himself as Tony and said he took care of Ms. Teivel's people. He handed me an envelope that contained instructions and travel money. Your mission, should you choose to accept it...

I had never been in a limousine before but when my body sank into the soft tan-colored leather upholstery, I was willing to give it a try. There was a bar, a button to call the driver, knobs to set the temperature and magazines in a pouch. I pushed the button that said "Driver."

“Tony, how long before we get to JFK?”

“About an hour and fifteen minutes,” he replied.

The *Mission Impossible* theme was running through my brain as I opened the envelope and saw my tickets and itinerary. I would be flying Pan Am to Albuquerque, with a stop in Chicago. I counted the money. Ten crisp \$20 dollar bills.

I checked out the magazines. One was the latest issue of *Vinyl Vision* with a portrait of the lead singer of Queen, Freddy Mercury, on the cover. He was shirtless, wearing black leather pants and grinning through a thick black mustache. The headline: “We are the Champions: Freddy’s Rise to Fame.” I opened the magazine to check the photo credit. Isadora Teivel. I leafed through the magazine, fantasizing what it was going to be like to work with the great Izzy. I must have been lost in this exercise for quite some time because the next thing I noticed was the airport looming in the distance. I had a sudden attack of paranoia: I was about to commit a felony. I pulled up my sock as high as it would go.

After checking my bag at the Pan Am counter, I headed for my gate. Several times I passed uniformed cops but they were uninterested in me. At the security checkpoint a young man looked at my ticket and ran a metal detector up and down my body. My heart was in my throat. He nodded and pointed me to my gate. Nobody gave a damn about the coke! I was on my way to fame and fortune.

In Albuquerque, at the baggage claim, I heard my name called. “Sam, Sam.”

I turned and saw Mark walking toward me. We gave each other a hug.

“I wasn’t sure you would really come,” he said.

“I told you I would. How’s your wife and kid?”

“She is totally psyched that I’ll be home today. She’s climbing the walls with the new baby.”

“Well, I’m glad I could help. So, where is Izzy?” I said looking around.

“She’s back at the hotel in Santa Fe, still asleep I’m sure,” Mark said.

“What’s she like?” I asked.

Mark sucked in his cheeks before he answered.

“Oh, she can be difficult. But if you disregard her off-hand comments and just focus on the work, you’ll be OK. As far as what your job is, well, you’ll set up the lights, load the film, keep the receipts, and make sure she gets up in the morning. Other than that, you’ll figure it out.”

Mark placed his hand on my shoulder.

“I really owe you Sam. When you get back to New York, I’ll take you out for a beer or something even stronger. Here’s the car rental contract and keys. You’ve got a red mustang. It’s in the drop-off zone. This is an info sheet with phone numbers and places you’ll need to be aware of.”

I looked at the piece of paper. It had the hotel address, directions to get there, Izzy’s room number and the magazine editor’s phone number. At the bottom was written, “Best of luck buddy!” I looked at Mark.

“Um, I have a special package for Izzy. When do I give it to her?”

“As soon as you see her. It will make her very happy and put you on

her good side. OK. I got to go. Give my best to Izzy. She knows all about you. I may have exaggerated a bit about your experience, so just improvise.”

Mark turned around and walked away.

Improvise? What the hell does that mean?

I stepped out into the bright sunshine and breathed in the dry desert air. It felt great. I located the drop-off zone and saw a red Ford T-top Mustang, a muscle car. It had a ticket on the front window. I threw my bag onto the back seat and grabbed the ticket. \$25. I opened the glove compartment and found four more traffic tickets. For speeding.

I headed out of the airport and got onto I-25 North to Santa Fe. I had never been to the Southwest and seeing all the cacti, Juniper and Palo Verde was surreal. I remembered in college seeing images of cacti by Edward Weston and, as beautiful as they were, I never appreciated how otherworldly they look in their natural habitat. Nor had I ever experienced such vast open space as surrounded me, a deep blue sky with soft billowing clouds. I felt an unaccustomed sense of peace. What if I kept driving and never showed up at the job? Izzy might be put out a little but ultimately, would she care? I was a nobody. I could disappear into the desert, change my name, start a new life.

I saw my exit and turned off. Following Mark’s directions, I found the Eldorado Hotel. It was classic pueblo revival style. I pulled up to the front doors and was greeted by a man in a uniform who seemed to be expecting me.

“Welcome Mr. Cohen. How was your flight?” he said. He opened the door and I stepped out, looking at the grand entrance adorned with

Southwestern artifacts. “May I take your bag, Sir?”

The man grabbed my bag and told me the car would be taken care of by the valet. He led me into the ornate lobby and to the reception desk, behind which stood a very attractive young Latina woman.

“This is Mr. Cohen. He is with Ms. Teivel. Take good care of him.”

Boy I could get used to this. I returned the woman’s smile. Her nameplate said “Isabella.” I suddenly realized I needed to tip the guy. I reached into my envelope and pulled out a 20-dollar bill and handed it to him.

“Thank you, Mr. Cohen,” he said. “If there is anything you need, please let me know.”

Isabella handed me my room key and I touched the back of her hand with my finger. Maybe a bit creepy, I thought. I waited for the consequences.

“Room 412,” she said, with a smile.

I loved my new life! Then I remembered why I was here.

“Is there some way I can get a message to Ms. Teivel?” I asked.

“Oh yes. We will place a message on her phone. We have not seen her today, but she will see the red-light blinking.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling one more time at Isabella and I followed the bellboy up to my room.

It felt awkward having someone carry my bags. I wasn’t used to being served. I tipped the bellboy \$5 and felt relief when he disappeared.

Then I saw the five large rectangular black cases, the long black stand case, and a silver aluminum Zero-Halliburton case on the bed. On

the silver case was a note that read, “Sam, inside this case are the cameras, make sure to charge the Hassi every night! In the fridge are the bricks of 120mm film. Be sure to take out a brick the night before and bring an extra brick to the shoot.” Forty rolls of film, I thought, that is a lot of film! “There is also a shoot sheet in the silver case. Each setup is to be marked A, B, C ... so A1, A2, B1, B2 etc. Remember to ignore Izzy’s abusive comments. And have fun! MARK.”

So much for the peaceful easy desert feeling.

I opened the cases. Each had a number and four of them contained a strobe pack and two strobe heads, cords, light sensors. The fifth case had colored gels, more cords, strobe head reflectors, gaffers’ tape and a Leatherman. The long cylindrical case contained light stands, clamps and more extension cables. Next to all the cases was an expandable two-wheeled cart and a duffle bag with more gaffers tape, extension cords and collapsible silver and gold reflectors that we crudely called elephant diaphragms.

I felt panic. In the studio everything was stationary and in its place. It dawned on me that location photography was a studio on wheels. All this stuff needed to be transported! I opened up the silver case which contained two Hasselblad ELX bodies, lenses, a Polaroid back, lens tissues, three Hasselblad backs, a couple of sharpies, a lens shade and assignment sheet forms. The camera case weighed around 40 lbs.

I began to see why Mark was burning out. I sat on the bed and looked at all the stuff I had to schlep and wondered how I was going to manage. I wanted to go down to the bar and have a few drinks but I knew I had to wait for Izzy to call. Lying down on the bed I closed my

eyes and fell asleep.

I had a dream. I arrived at a photo shoot totally unprepared. I loaded all the film backs wrong and forgot the light meter. A scary-looking woman with hair like Medusa's started yelling at me: "You are a mistake. Go back to Ohio and work for your dad. You'll never make it as a photographer!" I tried to respond to her, but nothing came out of my mouth. The scary woman threw the camera backs at me. I ducked my head to get out of the way ... and in doing so must have hit my head on the camera case. I woke up.

Sweat was dripping down my face. I looked outside. It was dark. The phone on the bedside stand was flashing. "Oh Shit!" I thought. I had missed her call.

I called the receptionist to retrieve the message.

"Yes, Mr. Cohen. Ms. Teivel called about 10 minutes ago and wants to meet you in the bar at 10:30."

"What time is now?" I asked.

"It is 10:25," the operator said.

"Thank you." I slammed down the phone. I looked in the mirror: I looked awful. I took off my wrinkled shirt and ran my head under cold water and shook out my long curly hair. My hair always seemed to take care of itself when I ran it under water and shook it. In middle school, my friend and the guy who introduced me to photography, Dave Lindsey, called me Water Buffalo. I put on a black T-shirt and a casual lightweight jean jacket. I took one more look in the mirror: still awful.

I took the elevator down to the lobby and walked into the bar. It was

dimly lit. Soft mariachi music was playing through the speakers. I looked around and saw, sitting at the bar, a woman wearing a black leather jacket. She was sipping a glass of red wine. She had wild hair like Medusa. I took a deep breath and approached her.

“Ms. Teivel?”

She turned. Her hair was nondescript brown and shoulder length. She wore large tortoise shell glasses that were held in place by a notably large Romanesque nose.

“Are you Sam?” she asked in low raspy voice.

“Sam I am,” I said, having no clue why I suddenly decided to turn into Dr. Seuss.

“Okay,” she responded, looking at me like I was the jerk I just proved myself to be. Her eyes wandered up and down my body. Then she spoke again.

“Let’s establish the rules. First, don’t call me Ms. Teivel, I am not your teacher. Call me Izzy. It’s easy to remember. Can you remember that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied sheepishly. This is not going well.

“And don’t call me ma’am either. Just Izzy. Now sit down and order a drink. We need to go over tomorrow. Mark said you paid a visit to Queenie. Did you bring it?”

“It’s in my room. Do you want me to get it now?”

“Not right now. You can bring it to my room after we go over the drill for tomorrow.”

The bartender came by and asked what I wanted.

“Scotch on the rocks,” I said, again not knowing why I said it. I was not a drinker and I had never had Scotch, much less Scotch on the rocks, in my life.

“A Scotch man!” she said, and her eyes once again traveled over my body.

“Given where we are, I suppose I should have ordered a Tequila,” I said.

Izzy slid her wine glass away from her.

“Cancel that Scotch,” she growled at the waiter. “Bring us two glasses and a bottle of Tequila. Make sure it has the worm.”

The bartender brought two shot glasses and a bottle of Tequila with lemon and a small bowl of salt.

Izzy looked at me without a smile. “I guess we’ll be here awhile.”

I poured the Tequila into both shot glasses and raised my glass. “Here’s to a successful shoot.” We clicked glasses. She downed hers in one gulp. I imitated her example.

There was a worm in the bottle. She fished it out and handed it to me.

“Eat it,” she said.

I hesitated. The thing was disgusting.

Her brown eyes peered into mine through the tortoise glasses.

“I need to know you’re ready for anything,” she said.

I swallowed the worm.

There followed a strange interlude during which she looked at me

and I could think of nothing else to do but look back at her. I felt this was some sort of challenge or test, but to what end I had no idea. It was just very weird. I finally thought of something to say to end it. “You know Izzy, Mark didn’t tell me much about the assignment...”

“You know what? I’m glad Mark didn’t tell you much about the assignment. Do you know WHY? Because you are now working for me. I will tell you about the assignment. And guess what? You are not to tell anyone else about the assignment. WHY? Because if you do, I will make your life miserable. You got that?”

I nodded as if I were a bobblehead.

“Vinyl thinks I am on vacation, but I am actually on assignment for another magazine. It’s a cover shot but won’t appear in print for three months. That will give me time to figure out which magazine I want to work for.”

“OK,” I said, realizing how much I still had to learn about life at the top. “So, like, who are you photographing?” I poured us both another shot and chugged mine.

“Here’s a hint. It’s a she and she just became famous.”

“Does she have a name?” I asked. The Tequila was kicking in.

Izzy looked at me, and slowly, very, very slowly, she emptied her glass before speaking.

“Thelma Zinger. Do you recognize the name?”

“The *Soldier Boy*?” I said.

“For the record, her co-star Mitchell Dear was a total dick to her.” Izzy grabbed the bottle and poured herself—but not me—another shot

and downed it. “I’ve been down here a week and only had one session with her, which sucked. I can’t get the portrait I want.”

I took the bottle and refilled my glass.

“What type of portrait do you want,” I asked.

“That’s a dumb question. I won’t know till I’m there.”

I guzzled my shot, Izzy-like, only to instantly regret it. My head was starting to spin.

“OK, then,” I said. “What’s the schedule tomorrow?” I needed to wrap things up and retreat safely to my room.

“The schedule? The schedule, Sam, is you pack the car, we meet at 2 PM in the lobby, and we head over to where Thelma’s staying, about half an hour outside of Santa Fe.”

I stood up and immediately felt dizzy. I steadied myself on the stool. Izzy signed the tab and said, “Let’s go to your room so I can pick up my present.”

When she stood up, I could see she was much shorter than me. She looked up into my eyes. “I have a rule. I don’t sleep with my assistants. So don’t get the wrong idea when I come to your room.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I said. I grabbed hold of the counter of the bar to steady the room.

She now dramatically presented herself to me.

“Don’t you think I’m attractive?”

I assumed she was being facetious. “How could I not?” I said. I was worried I might hurl at any moment.

She was imposing and very serious. “Your lying!” she said, and her eyes once again wandered up and down my body. “But that’s OK. I will let you off the hook. This time.”

We went up to my room and I grabbed the bag of cocaine and handed it to her and said, “Before I forget, Queenie said, no more until you pay your tab.”

“Fuck that!” Izzy said, turning around and storming out of the room. I ran to the bathroom and started vomiting into the toilet.