

500 million dollars. He started to feel dizzy. “More than twenty times as much?” He wanted to say “a hundred times,” but didn’t dare. The possibility that he might come into a vast fortune approaching those of such legends, just like that, without doing anything for it and without a lick of talent seemed obscene.

For a moment it was quiet. The lawyer looked at him and said nothing as he chewed his lip. Then he finally said, “Get used to the amount of two billion.” Then he added, “Dollars.”

John stared at him. Something heavy ... something heavy as lead seemed to have been placed onto everyone present in the room. This was no fun anymore. The sunlight shining through the windows blinded him; it hurt like the bright light of a lamp used for interrogation.

No fun at all.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” John simply asked with dry lips.

Alberto Vacchi nodded.

John looked around nervously, as if he tried to find a way out. BILLIONS! The number rested on him like a ton of weight, pressing his shoulders down, crushing him, and squeezing his skull together. Billions; that was a dimension he never even would have dreamed of. Billions. That means being on the same level as Rockefeller, the Rothschilds, the Saudi Arabian oil sheiks, and Japanese real estate magnates. Billions. That was more than wealth — that was craziness!

His heart was still pounding. A muscle was twitching in his lower right leg and seemed to not want to stop anymore. He had to calm down. This is starting to be too much for him. Such a thing simply did not happen — not in the world he grew up in. Four strangers show up one day just to tell him that he has inherited two billion dollars? No. It cannot be. Something was wrong here. Although he had no idea how an inheritance proceeding is usually performed, this seemed too farfetched.

He tried to remember how this was done in the movies he’d seen. Dammit, he watched so many films. He spent his childhood and youth more or less in front of TVs and in movie theaters. How was it? A last will and testament was revealed ... that’s it! When someone died a testament was read out, in front of all those who were mentioned in it. Then they would hear from the notary how much each person would get. Finally they would all get into a fight over it. That’s how it goes.

What exactly happens when someone died and left a fortune behind? The first ones to get anything are the spouse and the children, weren’t they? How could it be that he got to inherit something and his brothers didn’t? And why was he getting anything at all when his father was still alive?

There was something not quite right here.

His heartbeat and his breathing leveled off a bit. Just don’t count your chickens before they hatch. It was time to be skeptical. John cleared his throat. “I have to ask a stupid question,” he began. “Of all people, why do I inherit anything at all? Why me?”

The lawyer nodded gently. “We have performed a very detailed and thorough investigation. We would have never invited you to such a discussion if we were not one hundred percent certain.”

“Fine ... you are sure, but I’m not. Did you know that I have two brothers? Don’t I have to share the inheritance with them?”

“In this case, no.”

“Why not?”

“You have been chosen to be the sole heir.”

“Sole heir? Who in the hell decided that I should be the sole heir of two billion dollars? I mean, my father is a shoemaker. And though I don’t know too much about my family’s history, I’m sure we have no billionaires. The richest person in my family is Uncle Giuseppe, who owns a taxi company in Naples with ten or twelve cabs.”

“That’s correct.” Alberto Vacchi smiled. “And he’s alive and well as far as we’re informed.”

“Okay, then where is all this money coming from?”

“You sound as if you’re not very interested in the inheritance.”

John could feel himself getting angry. He hardly ever got angry, and even less so really angry. But here and now it may happen that he got really angry. “Why are you being so mysterious? Why are you making such a secret out of this? Why won’t you just tell me that so-and-so died?”

The lawyer looked through his papers. It looked like a diversionary maneuver. Like someone who was paging through an empty schedule pretending to have a hard time finding an opening for an appointment. “This is not,” he finally admitted, “a normal inheritance case. Normally, there is a testament, an estate attorney and a probate. The money involved in this case belongs to an endowment. In a way one could say that the money belongs to itself. We have only functioned as its trustees since the testator’s death, which was a very long time ago. He decreed that the fortune is to be bestowed upon the youngest male heir who is alive on the twenty-third of April, 1995. And that is you.”

“The twenty-third of April ...” John’s eyes narrowed. “That was the day before yesterday. Why then?”

Alberto shrugged his shoulders. “That’s what it says.”

“And I’m the youngest Fontanelli? Are you sure?”

“Your uncle Giuseppe has a fifteen-year-old daughter. But a daughter does not count. A cousin of your father had a sixteen year old son, Lorenzo. But, as you probably know, he died suddenly two weeks ago.”

John stared at the highly polished burl tabletop as if it were an oracle. It might really be as the man said; his brother Cesare and his wife always got on his nerves at Christmas get-togethers with lengthy discussions how useless and even how criminal it was to have children in this day and age. And Lino — well, his only interest is airplanes. John’s mother told him recently on the phone about a Lorenzo who had died due to something ridiculously mundane ... a bee sting or something like that. Yes, whenever his Italian relatives were being discussed, it always involved weddings and divorces and diseases and deaths, but hardly ever children. It might very well be true. “What form exactly does this two billion dollars take?” he asked. “I suppose they are stocks and bonds and oil wells and such?”

“Money,” Alberto answered. “Just money. Money in countless savings accounts in countless banks around the globe.”

John had a sour feeling in his stomach as he stared at him. “And I’m getting all this just because I happen to be the youngest Fontanelli as of two days ago? What sense does this make?”

The lawyer looked at him pensively for a long moment. “I don’t know what sense it makes,” he admitted. “It’s just how it is. Just like so much else in life.”

John felt dizzy. Dizzy and dirty — a man dressed in rags that hardly pass as clothing. There was still this voice inside him that told him he was the butt of a joke or fraud or deception and that he was being scammed. And there was still this feeling very deep inside of him like the granite foundation of Manhattan that was telling him that this voice was very wrong and that it was nothing more than the product of the many hours of watching TV, where nothing so unbelievably good ever happened to anyone like him. The dramatic composition of movies and shows doesn’t allow for such a thing. Something like this can happen only in real life. Wasn’t there a saying? Truth is stranger than fiction.

The feeling he had when he entered these chambers — to be at the threshold of a transition in his life — was still there; stronger than before. Only, now he feared to be crushed by this turnaround.

Two billion dollars!

He could dare to ask for money up-front. If they came to give him two billion dollars, then they could fess-up a few thousand dollars without it hurting anyone financially. Then he could get his own lawyer who would get to the bottom of whatever was going on. His old friend Paul Siegel came to mind. Paul knew lawyers. He knew the best lawyer in town. That’s it. John took a deep breath.

“The question,” Alberto Vacchi, lawyer and asset manager from Florence, Italy, said softly, “is still the same. Will you accept the inheritance?”

Was being wealthy a good thing? Up to today he had always spent his time trying not to be so poor. He had always condemned the wealthy. But on the other hand, life was so much easier and more comfortable if you had money. Not having it meant always making late payments. Having no choice. Having to do certain things — whether you wanted to or not. It had to be true, the old saying that you were better off with money than without. He exhaled. “The answer,” he said, and thought it sounded cool, “is also still the same. Yes.”

Alberto Vacchi smiled. His smile felt warm and genuine. “I congratulate you,” he said, closing the folder.

John felt a surge of relief, and sank back into the cushion of his chair. So, now he was a billionaire. Worse things could happen. He looked at the three lawyers sitting across from him, like an induction committee, and he almost grinned.

It was at that moment that the old man sitting by the window rose from his chair.

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JOHN'S CHILDHOOD had been full of mysterious men. They came alone, or in pairs, or groups of three. They had watched him from the edge of playgrounds, smiled at him as he went to school, talked about him when they thought he couldn't understand them or was out of earshot. "That's him," they said in Italian and, "We must still wait." They talked about how difficult it was — the waiting. His mother had been alarmed when he came home and told her about the men. For a long time he wasn't allowed out of the house alone. From his window he had watched the other children play outside. He started to keep it to himself when the men showed up. One day he did not see them anymore, and they gradually faded into the dim recesses of his memories.

When he turned twelve he discovered that Angelo, his father's most distinguished customer, had a secret. To John Mr. Angelo had always been like a messenger from heaven. Not only because he always looked so sophisticated, sitting on a stool by the workbench with father, dressed in a white suit, speaking Italian casually with father and his stocking feet resting on the metal bar. No, his first visit of the year meant summer was near; wonderful endless weeks of ice cream, splashing around in kiddie pools on hot afternoons, trips to Coney Island, and warm nights. For his second visit of the year, he dressed in a gray suit, then, when he handed his shoes to his father and wanted to know how the family was doing, then summer was just about over and autumn was near. "They are good Italian shoes," John heard his father tell his mother once. "Wonderfully soft, made for Italian weather. Fairly old, but very well maintained, I have to admit. I bet you can't buy shoes like these nowhere these days."

It was natural to John for heavenly messengers to wear special shoes.

On one particular day, when the summer of 1979 — and more than just the summer — was coming to an end, only no one knew it yet, John was allowed to go with his best friend Paul Siegel and his mother to JFK airport. Jimmy Carter was still president and the hostage crisis in Teheran had not begun yet. It was the summer when Garfunkel sang "Bright Eyes" and the Village People sang "Y.M.C.A.," and Paul's father was supposed to return from a business trip in Europe. Paul's parents owned a watch store on 13th Street. His father could tell exciting stories about the robberies he had been through. There was even a real bullet hole on the wall in the back of the store, covered by a framed photo of Paul as a baby.

It was the first time in his life he had been to JFK, and together with his friend Paul they squashed their noses against the large windows in the terminal to watch the passengers come and go.

“They’re all arriving from Rome,” Paul explained. Paul was very smart. On their way to the airport, Paul told him the history of New York perhaps all the way back to the Stone Age. He told him all about Wall Street, and who built the Brooklyn Bridge and when it was inaugurated and went on and on. “Dad is arriving on a flight from Copenhagen. The plane will be at least a half hour late.”

“Great,” John said. He was in no hurry to get back home.

“Let’s count the men who have beards,” Paul suggested. That was typical Paul. He always had ideas what to do. “Only those with full beards and whoever gets to ten first wins. Okay? I already see one, over there, the one with the red briefcase!”

John narrowed his eyes and concentrated. There was no chance of beating Paul in a game like this, but he had to try.

That was when he discovered Mr. Angelo.

It was him, without a doubt; the light-gray suit, the way he moved, the face. John blinked, expecting him to disappear again, like a phantom, but Mr. Angelo didn’t. He walked along amidst the other arrivals from Rome without looking up and carrying nothing but a plastic bag.

“The man with the brown coat,” Paul said. “That’s two.”

A man in uniform stopped Mr. Angelo, pointed at the bag and said something. Mr. Angelo opened the bag and took out two shoes; a brown one and a black one.

“Hey,” Paul complained, “You’re not even playing.”

“I think it’s boring,” John told his friend without taking his eye away from Mr. Angelo and the uniformed man.

The uniformed man was visibly surprised, and he asked something. Mr. Angelo answered with the shoes still in his hand. The man in uniform then gestured to Mr. Angelo to go on, whereby he put the shoes back into the bag and went through one of the automatic doors.

“You’re just scared to lose,” Paul said.

“I always lose anyhow,” John responded.

Later that evening John found out that Mr. Angelo had indeed been in father’s workshop. He had left some gifts for the children; chocolate and a ten dollar bill for John. When John took the chocolate and the ten dollars he had an uneasy feeling, like discovering a secret that should’ve remained a secret.

“I saw Mr. Angelo at the airport,” he said, nevertheless. “He arrived on a flight from Rome, and all he had with him were his shoes.”

Father laughed.

Mother took hold of John, hugged him and sighed, “Oh, my little dreamer.”

That’s what she always called him. She had just finished talking about Rome; about a cousin who was born to some relatives there. John thought it odd to have relatives in Italy whom he’d never met.

“Mr. Angelo lives in Brooklyn,” father explained. “He comes here sometimes, because he knew the man who had the shop before me.”

John shook his head, but said nothing else. There was nothing else to say. The secret was revealed. He knew that Mr. Angelo would never come again. And he didn’t.