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“I NEED YOUR phone.”

It was the second time in twenty minutes that someone had said those exact four words to Warren Archer. This time definitely rated as the more troubling one, if you're keeping score at home. Probably because the guy who spoke them was pointing a gun at him.

Archer looked around. No one else in the mall seemed to be paying attention to him or to the guy who was holding the small semiautomatic close to his own suit coat, just below the lip of the brushed-aluminum table.

Archer had been sitting in a coffee bar in the Prudential Mall in Boston's Back Bay for just over an hour. The coffee bar's logo was in the kind of unreadable fake-handwriting font he hated. It had open walls and was set up to look like an Italian trattoria. So technically, he was sitting out in the mall's food court.

The thickset man with the gun who had sat down opposite him looked about fifty. He wore a dark gray three-season suit that fit him well enough to suggest that he had bought it off the rack but then had it tailored. He almost looked the part of a fairly senior executive, maybe at a large insurance company. Except for the gun.

Archer looked around again, this time hoping to see a police officer or even a mall cop nearby. No such luck. In a fancy shopping gallery like this one, there weren't going to be many sharp-eyed law-enforcement types.

“You understand that we're in a shopping mall, right?” he said.

“So?”

“So there are probably a dozen stores that sell mobile phones. You could buy a brand-new one for yourself. I'm pretty sure I saw a kiosk in front of the Orange Julius.”

The guy didn't smile. Archer had the sense that he didn't smile much.

“I don't want a new phone for myself. I want your phone.” He moved his right hand, which caused the open mouth of the gun barrel to dance a bit, punctuating his sentence.

“You're really serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

Archer said, “You don't make friends very well, do you?”

The guy said nothing. Just made a face to show that his patience was running out.

J A Y S H E P H E R D

A voice inside Archer's head kept saying, "This is not happening." He wasn't panicking, because he wasn't much of a panicker. At the moment, he was more puzzled than anything. But another voice inside his head said that he had a serious problem, and that this would probably not turn out well.

Then again, having multiple voices going on inside your head was a problem in itself.

Archer reached into the inside pocket of his sport coat and pulled out his phone. He made sure his hands moved slowly and smoothly. Didn't want to give the guy the wrong idea while the gun was pointing at him. But the man must have sensed that Archer was unarmed. The guy's index finger wasn't on the trigger, although it was inside the trigger guard.

He put the phone on the table. The man with the gun picked it up, his eyes remaining fixed on Archer. Good peripheral vision. Probably not an insurance executive. You don't really need good peripheral vision in insurance.

Keeping the gun pointed at Archer, the man flipped the phone around in his hand and pressed the home button. Slid his thumb across the bottom of the screen, which lit up to show a keypad.

"Code," he said. It was a command, not a question.

"That's private."

For the first time, irritation lit across the man's face. But just as quickly, he recomposed himself. "The code," the man said again.

"It's one-two-three-four."

The man's eyebrow raised a fraction, which was probably about as close to smiling as he got.

Archer said, "What? Is that yours, too?"

The guy tapped in the four digits. Archer thought he was going to start poking through the phone's different screens, maybe take a look at his email or call register. Instead, he pointed it toward Archer, as if he was taking a picture. Then the man pressed the sleep button and dropped the phone in the inside pocket of his suit coat.

"So we're good now?" Archer started to get up.

The man stood up so fast that Archer lost track of where the gun went. Now they were standing close to each other: two friends finished with their chat, ready to walk away.

"You're going to come with me." Again, the quiet, measured tone of command.

"Yeah, hey, I'd love to. The thing is, I'm supposed to meet someone here. It'd be rude to leave."

TRADE SECRETS

Archer began to back away, then stopped short as the man gripped him around the left wrist and squeezed tight. Archer was surprised at how strong the man's hand was. They were about the same size: six feet, one-eighty. He'd assumed that the man would be weaker because of his age. But he could feel his own pulse under the man's grip.

The guy pulled Archer's wrist sharply downward, which forced him to lean in close. To the other mall-goers, it might look like one friend was saying something quietly to the other. "You're going to come with me," the man said again, his breath in Archer's ear. He'd recently had a cup of coffee, and he was also a smoker. "The gun is in my pocket. If you run or speak to anyone or try to signal anyone for help, I'll shoot you. You'll be dead, and I'll be long gone before anyone knows what's happening."

His tone and the hard look in his narrowed eyes told Archer he was serious. They walked away from the table, Archer in the lead, the man with the gun a few feet behind him.

They left the food court and entered the main part of the mall. There's got to be a way out of this. Archer's hopes rose when he saw a mall security guard walking toward them, wearing what must have been someone's idea of a paramilitary uniform: Beret-style cap, navy-blue tunic, pants with maybe seventeen different pockets tucked into paratrooper-style black boots. A utility belt with so many modules that it would make Batman jealous. And a holstered gun.

For a moment, Archer thought that his captor would be concerned about seeing the armed rent-a-cop. But the man didn't hesitate. Just kept walking, neither looking at the guard nor away from him.

Archer considered the angles and odds in doing something to get the security guy's attention. But the guard didn't look like someone who was trained in handling extreme situations. He probably never worked as a real cop, and he lacked the sharp, knowing look of a former soldier. He would have no real instincts, and would probably make the situation worse.

The guard passed them without a second look.

They turned a corner and entered a gauntlet of kiosks selling everything from language courses to eyebrow threading (whatever that was) to gluten-free cupcakes (ditto). Archer couldn't understand why an upscale mall felt the need to clutter its corridors with random rip-offs. Probably some consultant had decided that the fake carts reminded people of village squares or something. Or maybe they were designed to slow down passersby, increasing the chances that they'd stop to buy something. Which gave him an idea.

J A Y S H E P H E R D

They reached a cart with a bored young woman selling sunglasses. A fancy sign with a French name suggested that the shades were straight from Europe, rather than Taiwan or China. But what had caught Archer's attention was next to the cart: an upright rotating display with more sunglasses in narrow racks. Each pair was attached to the rotating stand with a retractable wire. The stand looked solid but top heavy.

Archer quickly looked to his right, checking the gunman's reflection in a nearby store window. He was just five feet behind him. Archer passed the sunglasses stand. In a flash, his hand came up and grabbed several sunglasses, then yanked hard. The strong wire cords zipped out to their full lengths, and then the stand toppled over. The gunman didn't have time to get out of the way, and the stand fell on top of him and knocked him over.

Before the guy had hit the ground, Archer was already racing down the corridor. He tore around the next corner. Up ahead was a yellow steel door with a small sign that said "Parking Stairway." The garage would be a good place to lose the gunman. As he reached the door, he glanced back. No sign of the guy. Then he crashed through the yellow door and into the stairwell.

Where he was pancaked by another man waiting for him.