

CHAPTER ONE STUNG

□ □ □ The man startled awake, stung by a jolt of pain in his neck. “Serves you right, you old fool,” he muttered to himself.

Lumbering to his feet, he glanced at the monitors that recorded each floor of the building. Dawn slid smoothly along the terra-cotta tiles, past carved stone and wood, the glow of old paintings, the shimmer of gold leaf, lacquer, and glass.

But what was this?

A draft ruffled the giant ferns in the courtyard. *Air moving*. It was too early for the relief guard to be arriving. And besides, he'd never leave the door ajar.

Something is wrong, the man thought.

Tossing empty bottles into the trash and covering them with a newspaper, he grabbed his cell phone and burst out of the security room, heart thudding.

“Hel-lo?” he called out, hurrying toward the inside garden.

“Shouldn't have fallen asleep,” he growled. “Bad idea, celebrating St. Patty's Day.”

As he stepped through an arch and into the open, a breeze poured down from above, stirring blossoms, vines, and even the edge of one of the tapestries. Next he heard the familiar creak of a broken window on the fourth floor, followed by the wail of wind moving through hinges, dragging the cracked storm casement open and then shut. *Scree-ka-ka-thunk!* Still, it didn't make sense — not that much of a draft. His scalp tingled and the hair rose on both arms.

There was the ghost, of course. He shook his head; what a load of hogwash. Some thought she opened that pesky window in her old bedroom upstairs when she wanted to attract attention.

“Why can’t they just keep up with the repairs?” the guard grumbled.

Straightening his glasses, he rounded the corner to the Dutch Room — and froze.

He couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Or rather, what he *wasn’t* seeing.

His cell phone fell and the case shattered, the shards of red plastic skittering brightly through shadow. Trembling, he sank to his knees, realizing that his life, as he knew it, was over.