

**ADAM GREEN
AND THE JEWELLERY
THIEVES**

Written by Luca Saltini

Chapter 1

Jonathan Green's laboratory did not look like the research facility of the world's leading botanist. One would naturally expect a large university complex with hundreds of employees, but instead it was a home-like setting, with rugs covering the wooden floor, a large red sofa against the wall, bookshelves laden with volumes, and two armchairs flanking a small table with a lamp. Light streamed in through the open windows, looking out onto an expanse of meadows and a forest. In the centre of the room stood a large dining table that served as a workbench. It was almost entirely cluttered with complex equipment and technical devices built by Jonathan himself. Of course, wherever you looked, you saw plants: arranged in pots, in display cases, placed inside containers hanging from the ceiling, and neatly arranged on various shelves. The room definitely resembled an old living room, and, in fact, it was one, since the laboratory occupied the entire ground floor of the house on the outskirts of Albany. It was an early-twentieth-century cottage that had belonged to his grandmother Rose, the woman who had passed on her passion for botany to him.

Sometimes Jonathan felt a bit cramped in that house-laboratory, but he was keen to keep it just as it was because he lived there with his son Adam. Unfortunately, his wife had died when the boy was still young, which was why he hadn't wanted to move with him to the university centre where he worked. He preferred that the boy grow up in the quiet place where he was born. Adam, for one thing, had shown a strong interest in botany from the very beginning and an eagerness to learn as much as he could about the subject. Although he was only twelve years old, he assisted him in many of his experiments and was the only one who could decipher his top-secret notebooks. They spent a lot of time together talking about plants and fungi, working side by side with scientific instruments, but every now and then Jonathan would be away for a few days to attend conferences. When this happened, he would ask his sister Julie to look after the boy and assign him the task of tending to the plants.

That afternoon, the house was enveloped in absolute silence. Only the rustling of leaves beyond the open windows brought a faint sound. Adam held his breath as he finished taking measurements for one of his father's delicate experiments. With precise movements, he turned a crank while keeping his eyes fixed on the screen of an electron microscope.

After nearly two hours of work, the image was finally coming into focus. The intricate structure of a root organelle was gradually revealing itself to his eager gaze.

At that moment, from the driveway behind the house, came the roar of an engine revving at full throttle, followed by the screech of tires and finally the sharp sound of brakes.

Adam hesitated for a split second. He pressed his lips together, shifted the knob imperceptibly between his thumb and index finger, and managed to stay focused. The image became even clearer. The proof of his father's theory was materializing before his eyes, just a matter of moments...

The work shattered like glass struck by a sash. The front door slammed. Someone strode heavily across the foyer toward the kitchen. They were in a terrible mood, muttering incomprehensible phrases from which only a few words emerged, such as "it's all that damn tree's fault," "I'll make them pay for this," and "I'll lock them up for thirty years." The refrigerator opened with a faint creak, followed by the crackling of ice just removed from the cold, and finally the woman's cry: "Ouch! Damn them!"

Adam's hand trembled again, and the image blurred completely. He slumped, drained of strength, into the armchair behind him. Just then, Julie came out of the kitchen. She was a beautiful woman in her thirties, with short black hair and hazel eyes. Small arrow-shaped earrings peeked out from her earlobes, as pointed as her nose. Her lips were thin as well and hid a candid smile, which she couldn't manage to bring to her face that afternoon. She was wearing a leather jacket, ripped jeans, and heavy red combat boots.

"I came to see how you were doing. Ever since he left, your father's been bombarding me with messages!" she said as she flopped down on the couch, resting her head on one armrest and her feet on the other. She held a sandwich to her forehead with her hand.

"As if I didn't know how to take care of a little kid! Have you eaten, by the way?"

"Yes, Auntie."

"And don't call me Auntie! You make me feel like a dinosaur! I already have a headache."

"I'm sorry. Did something happen to you?"

"There's a gang of robbers that's been going around for weeks breaking into houses, and complaints are pouring in like it's monsoon season!"

"So no movie tonight?"

Julie mumbled something unintelligible as she pressed the ice to her forehead. With the movement, her jacket rode up, revealing a nasty cut on her forearm. Adam was about

to ask a question, but decided to avoid getting a snappy reply. He got up quietly and headed toward the French doors at the far end of the living room. They opened onto the back of the house, where there was a well-manicured garden with the grass cut short and several flower beds of roses, lilies, calla lilies, irises, peonies, and gerberas. They were arranged in a seemingly random manner, but in reality they were placed in the spots with the best sun exposure and created a harmony of colours that spread throughout the garden. There were a few bushes around them. On the side facing the woods, a birch tree was already quite tall. Adam walked over and looked for something on the tree trunk. Almost immediately, he found a mushroom sprouting from a knot in the bark. It was about ten centimetres across, round in shape, and pale in colour.

He pulled a small knife from his pocket to cut off a piece. He sliced it into thin pieces and placed them in a handkerchief. As he turned to go back inside, he noticed Julie's car. It was parked in the driveway, its side covered in scratches and the hood dented on the right side. A few leaves – probably linden leaves – were scattered across the windshield, but from that distance he couldn't be sure.

He went back inside and sat down on the floor next to the sofa.

"Give me your arm," he said.

Julie opened her eyes and looked at him questioningly, then saw the bleeding cut.

"Damn them!" she shouted. "When I catch them, I'll ruin them!"

"Maybe you should disinfect it first." "You're not a doctor! Your dad's the scientist!" "Yeah, but he taught me a few things, too!" Julie sighed, then held out her arm. She closed her eyes again and let Adam examine the wound. Suddenly, she felt something slimy on her skin and jerked her head around. On the cut, she saw a series of whitish streaks.

"What on earth is that?" she blurted out.

"*Fomitopsis betulina*, a parasitic fungus that grows on birch trees. It has strong antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties. It's a natural bandage."

Julie shook her head.

"That's gross!" she said, but she let Adam finish dressing the wound. The entire cut was covered with strips of mushroom, and the wound was wrapped in a clean cloth. Slowly, even the headache began to subside.

"Well? Aren't you going to tell me what happened?"

The woman sighed. She removed the ice from her head and let it fall to the floor, then sat up, leaning forward.

"That gang of thieves again. This is the seventh one in two months, and my boss is bleeding me dry!"

"Don't you have any leads?"

"Nothing! Not a shred of a clue, a mistake, anything out of the ordinary. Nothing at all! They leave no traces; they're extremely well-organized. They show up, take what they want, and disappear as if they were made of air. Mansions, luxury apartments, penthouses. They're only after jewellery, but not just any jewellery. Collectible pieces—things that belonged to kings or queens, sold at prestigious auctions, works by famous goldsmiths, things like that."

"Do you think these are heists done on commission?"

"I'd say so. To make that kind of merchandise disappear, they must have important international contacts. There's a network. It's not something improvised."

Julie looked at her arm with disgust.

"When can I take this bandage off? It looks like a band-aid!"

Adam looked at her seriously and tightened the bandage even more.

"What happened to the car?" he asked in his calm voice.

The woman clenched her fist and slammed it hard against the back of the sofa.

"Don't make me think about it!" she said. "This time I almost caught them! They pulled off a heist at a luxury apartment in downtown, in the Washington Park area. A neighbor noticed something was off and managed to call the police. But these guys move fast. They strike and get away in three minutes. But I was in the area, and it took me no time at all to get there. In fact, I saw them coming out the front door of the building. There were four or five of them, and they had motorcycles."

"Could you recognize them?"

"No, unfortunately. They were wearing helmets, and I was still far away. I couldn't even see the license plates or tell what kind of motorcycles they had. Anyway, I had them right in my sights! I would've caught at least one of them!"

"And then?"

Julie's face darkened again, and she slammed her fist against the back of the sofa once more. Adam thought about saying something, but decided against it, for the sake of his father, who was very attached to that piece of furniture!

"I didn't have time to get going. A truck came barreling out of a side street, rear-ended me, and slammed me into a tree. Damn him!"

"He didn't do it on purpose!"

"Of course he did, Adam! The guy behind the wheel got out acting all sweet, but meanwhile he was making sure the motorcyclists could get away safely! He was their damn accomplice!"

"But you don't have any proof of that either, and you had to let him go."

Julie snorted, nodding.

"We're always stuck in the same dead end! Before coming here, I even got an earful from Thompson."

He stood up and, imitating a shrill little voice, said, "Detective Green, the investigation isn't getting anywhere. What am I supposed to tell the mayor, who's bombarding me with phone calls, while you guys keep letting those crooks make fools of you? Detective Green, taxpayers pay their taxes – especially the rich folks living in those ransacked mansions – and they want results... Detective Green... That turkey really gets on my nerves!"

Adam laughed heartily at his imitation of Leonid Thompson, the city police chief with whom Aunt Julie didn't get along very well, then got up and went out into the garden. He put on gloves and rubber boots and began hoeing an iris bed. She didn't have to wait long before her aunt appeared. She was leaning against the doorframe, looking out toward the lawns. Her brown eyes were particularly bright in the evening light, which was growing warmer.

"I tell you I'm at a dead end, and you go and tend to the irises?" she snapped.

"My father says the best ideas come when you're working in the garden."

Julie sighed, and perhaps she'd wanted to pout, but her lips curled into a smile. "What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Go water the *Zantedeschiae aethiopicae*."

Julie picked up the watering can and headed toward the calla lily bed. She bent down and began to water the flowers gently, taking care not to touch the leaves or petals, but only the stem, near the soil.

"Are you testing me?" she said with a mischievous look. "You know, I used to spend my afternoons here with Grandma Rose after school too, not just your dad! I remember the names of all these flowers and many others!"

Adam smiled and continued weeding the iris bed. He felt an idea forming in his mind that might help Julie solve her case.