

## Excerpt:

### Prologue

AN ALLURING MIDNIGHT seeped through the preserve, where huge, wavy leaves danced beneath the moonlight. The setting was suited for a late night encounter between two friends. But almost immediately, their conversation went awry. "Everything's alright, I guess." Ross Dawson weighed his words. His eyes roamed away from his friend. "But you've changed."

An imposing Joaquin Grayson grabbed Ross's arm, squeezing it to the point of pain. "You don't think I'm capable of leading us in the right direction, do you? We can't stay here going nowhere. I chose you to go with me. We need to stick together!"

His long nails dug into Ross's skin, the piercing, half moon impressions nearly bursting through. His flaming hand absorbed Ross's fear, the constricted flow of blood beating against his palm.

Ross bore the numbness of his arm. "Look at you. It's like I don't even know you anymore!"

"We've been doing fine for almost a year." A blush wine color flooded Joaquin's cheeks. "Why do you want to cut out now?"

For the first time, Ross trusted himself to speak up, to question the mounting dissension clouding their friendship. "Man! Why do you need so much power?"

He remembered when a youthful adventure had first brought them to these forbidden woods. A place with tales of strange happenings, mysterious noises, and unsolved disappearances... or so it was said.

During that youthful adventure, they'd all changed. Then, *he'd* changed. And somehow, the misunderstood, glowing energy that had dripped from the huge leaves awakened a solo ambition fueled by wrought emotions.

Regardless, the two friends stood firm in the dark night.

Joaquin breathed deeply. As a result of Ross's questions, and while wondering what would happen to Ross's gift, he set his intention. He let go of Ross's arm and ran his fingers through his long, thick hair.

He stilled his lean, muscular frame, restraining the rising tension in his body, hiding any indication of his next move. Still clutching his hair, Joaquin closed his eyes, listening for Ross's movements. He knew he would not be able to turn back. *It's on me. I'm the only one who can build a new way of life.*

And in the absence of even a hint of an exchange, Joaquin spun around and lunged at Ross. He grabbed him by the throat, knocking him down.

With brittle leaves and debris thrust upward, the two were enveloped in a dark, hazy hell as they engaged in a violent struggle for what seemed like an eternity. Ross flared up. "Get the hell off of me!"

Joaquin persisted. "What are you going to do, Ross? Where are you going to go?"

Ross scrambled to his feet, fighting back with a blow to Joaquin's head, followed by several body punches. Joaquin stumbled and fell, giving Ross those precious few seconds required for his escape.

Fueled by a rush of pulsating adrenaline, Ross ran frantically, stretching his quivering legs. His rich brown skin tightened as he pounded through the forest. He tried to ignore his thunderous heartbeat while scanning the pathways, searching for possible escape routes.

With his baseball cap lost to the wind, his short, curly hair had exposed to the open air. Ross grasped the moment, one littered with deep panic and a singular appreciation for survival.

This turn of events stemmed from countless episodes in which Joaquin, only nineteen yet extremely demanding, had tried to control those around him.

The violent exchange was the smoky glow at the end of a dark tunnel, and they had ventured across the breaking point inside this lush landscape.



At the same moment, on the other side of the preserve, Della Sato and Juson Yamada examined the stars on this warm summer night. Although disturbing tales had contributed to the mystery of the forest for generations, it offered privacy unavailable in their everyday lives.

Juson stood beneath trees adorned with apple-green moss. "I know we're not supposed to be in here, but look at this place."

"I heard people got lost in here and they never came out," Della said, pulling back. "Do you think that's true?" "No way," Juson convinced himself, unsure of the validity of the tale. "If someone gets hungry enough, they'll find their way out."

"Our neighbor said there were weird noises coming out of here one night," Della recalled, as she clutched her purse.

"That's not true. It looks safe in here." Juson took her by the hand. "Maybe their TV was up too loud. C'mon." Della grasped Juson's bicep as she began to move her feet. Tiny lights greeted the couple. They set foot in the forest, walking and talking, looking for the perfect place to nestle. It was quiet, peaceful, and visually unlike what they had imagined.



With his feet tearing across the forest floor, Ross's vision blurred, and he became lost in the darkness. Surrounded by a blackness offering no hope, layers of greenery swallowed him, slowing him down. But when the sharpness returned, a kaleidoscope of hues filled his eyes, and he tore through the brush.

Joaquin's labored breathing grew louder with each passing moment. He pressed his hands into the earth, feeling for the warmth of Ross's steps. He lifted his hands into the air, distinguishing wind patterns offering clues as to Ross's direction, validated by swaying leaves in the trees. Powerful nerve receptors in his fingertips quivered with the weight of his desires.

Forging ahead, he caught up with Ross.

He slammed Ross to the ground, wrapping his arm tightly around his neck. Joaquin's long hair whipped and swung, practically covering them both, stinging Ross's sensitive eyes.

Ross struggled against Joaquin's grip but was unable to break free. He finally managed to drive an elbow into Joaquin's ribs.

Joaquin gasped for air, loosening his hold long enough for Ross to wrench away and stagger to his feet. They exchanged a flurry of punches, jabs, and kicks, setting the bruising process in motion.

Despite fatigue setting in, Ross found the strength to circle behind Joaquin. He landed a ferocious blow to Joaquin's back, knocking him down yet again.

Catching his breath, Ross resumed his search for a way out of the preserve. His eyes cut across the landscape sharply.

But Joaquin took only moments to compose himself, his face returning to its expressionless state. His pursuit of Ross had resumed, and with furious determination.



Beneath the glow of the moonlight, the appeal of the curvaceous foliage mesmerized Della and Juson. Resting among fallen leaves deeper inside the preserve, Juson looked into Della's almond eyes and stroked her hair. "We'll be married someday. It's in the cards, you know. I really love you."

Della smiled softly. "I love you, too."

"You're smart, beautiful... creative." Juson caressed Della's slender waist. "I'm pretty sure all the guys are jealous of me right about now."

Della brushed Juson's face with her fingers. "Well, look who's talking... the handsome prince." "We could make a nice home here and raise some kids." Juson tried to maintain a serious expression.

“We’ll have one to wash dishes and one to clean the house.”

“Oh, really?” Della wrapped her leg around Juson. “Well, that means you’ll be mowing the yard, mister.” His solid, athletic frame meshed with her delicate figure. Hidden behind a massive leaf, their passion spilled over. They drew in close and kissed with animated fervor, but the sickening sounds of a brawl interrupted. “What the heck was that?” Juson whispered. Trying to determine the direction of the commotion, he pressed his hand over Della’s mouth. The look in his eyes signaled the need for silence. They peeked out briefly and saw the brutal fight.

Della began to shake. Shocked at the sight, she looked for an exit in the thick brush. Sensing she might dart away, Juson held her close.

As the fight continued, Joaquin landed multiple blows on Ross’s head and took a few in return. He charged forward, pushing Ross into a tree where a low, protruding branch punctured his torso.

“Aargh!” Ross grasped the wound, screaming. His torn shirt absorbed the blood spilling out of the gash. Branches cracked and fell around them, one whipping the leaf covering Della and Juson, but it quickly snapped back into place.

Ross stumbled over a branch and fell, landing just inches from Della and Juson, his body pressing against the leaf sheltering the two.

Fear silenced Della’s panicked desire to cry out, as Juson protected her with his body.

Joaquin pounced on Ross, striking him in the face. He wrapped his hands tightly around Ross’s neck, pressing his full weight into the evil act.

Ross’s contorted face began to relax.

Saliva dripped from Joaquin’s mouth as he squeezed tighter.

Ross’s legs stopped twitching.

Joaquin waited for the end to arrive. The forest fell silent apart from his strained breathing.

It was over.

Joaquin collapsed beside the body.

Ross’s empty, wide-open eyes expressed the sheer horror of his fate.

Exhausted, Joaquin stayed there for a few minutes while the forest absorbed the intentional, malicious act. Pained moans escaped him as he stood rubbing his eyes, which were suddenly burning.

Unable to see clearly, he stumbled out of the forest, going anywhere the night would take him. His eyes burned a furious, deep red. He would remain in an agonized condition for three long days.

Terrified, Della and Juson guessed at what had just happened. Afraid to move, they had no choice but to show more patience than they had thought possible in their lifetimes. The scared couple clung to each other, wondering what new horror awaited them.

The minutes seemed like hours, but they remained still, even as a bright light swept through the preserve. The light was sharp, electric against the blanket of darkness. It brought with it a clicking noise, which drove its way into their ears with a musical rhythm.

As the light zoomed in closer to Ross, it pounced against the leaf covering the two, then went dark as the clicks faded.

As the night progressed, Della and Juson found the courage to make their move. In disbelief, they ran home, holding a frightening secret in their hearts. A secret of murder, committed under a striking, glowing moonlight on the most fateful night of their young lives.

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