

Insidious

by Craig Lancaster

An hour after the campfire had been shoveled under, after the scoutmasters had retired to their adjacent tent and begun blasting peripatetic snores, the boys began plotting.

"I hate him," Quinton whispered, the first to break the silence.

Assent came from Rex, nestled in the sleeping bag across the hulking canvas tent. "I hate him, too."

Three of the other boys — Kevin, Bobby, Lance — mumbled in the affirmative.

"Who?" asked Alan, the tenderfoot.

"You know who," Quinton spat into the darkness.

"Don't be stupid, Alan," Rex whispered to the boy next to him.

"That dick Carlson."

"I'm gonna get him," Quinton said. "And you guys better help me."

Thirty years later — and all the years in between — Alan Walton would remember how insidious it was, the anger that started that night with Quinton Harris, fifteen years old and the undisputed leader of the troop, and spread like a virus to the other boys in the tent, boys who spoke openly of high crimes beneath a shroud of darkness. As night tumbled into early morning, Ernie Carlson's punishment was agreed upon, with no leniency to be granted or even considered.

* * *

At the mess hall for breakfast, Rex approached Carlson.

"Hey, Ernie," he said, sitting down next to the instructor, who scooped scraps of fried egg onto his toast. "I found a really odd-looking plant yesterday in the woods. I think I remember where it is. I figured since you approved me for the plant science merit badge, you might recognize it. Can you take a look?"

"Sure, bud, no problem. Let me finish eating."

"Sure." As the Eagle scout, now a twenty-year-old college student, wolfed down the last of his eggs, Rex looked him over and let doubt edge into the picture. Carlson had a couple of inches and twenty

pounds on the biggest of them, Quinton. They'd have to take him down quick, without hesitation. Quinton was game. So was Rex. He wasn't sure about the others.

"All right, bud," Carlson said, standing. "Let's see this thing."

* * *

Rex led the young instructor out of the Jamboree camp, into the hill country.

"How far are you from Star?" Carlson asked.

Rex picked up the pace. "A few more hours of community service."

"That's great, bud. You're doing great."

They crested a bald knob and headed into a thicket of live oak.

"You were really back in here, huh?" Carlson said. "We must be a half-mile from camp."

Rex aimed for the heart of the dense growth of trees. "Yeah, I kind of lost track of time. Anyway, here it is."

Carlson, lagging, jogged a few steps to catch up. "Where?"

"Here," came the voice from behind him. When Carlson turned, Quinton smashed a rock between his eyes. Carlson fell in a heap at his feet. The others — Alan, Kevin, Bobby and Lance — emerged from behind the oak that had hidden them all, looking at Carlson's twisted body and at the wreckage of his face.

"He's dead," Alan said.

"Don't be stupid. He's not dead," Quinton said. "Look at him. He's breathing."

Rex sat in the dirt, unable to catch his own breath. Lance began whimpering. The others just stared.

"I want to go back to camp," Lance wailed.

Quinton stepped over to the boy and plowed a fist into his nose, dropping him. "Nobody's leaving. Now help me get his clothes off."

* * *

These are the things Alan Walton thinks about decades after the fact, the things that wake him up in the early-morning darkness, tormenting him with doubts about the way he's raising his own boys.

He tries to do the right things, tries to set a moral foundation and hopes that his sons make the right choices.

And yet ...

The boys who set upon Ernie Carlson that morning were fine young men. Boy Scouts. All from nuclear families and from good Baptist churches, God-loving and pure. Even Quinton. And still they beat a man, undressed him, lashed him to an oak tree using knots Carlson had taught them, and slathered his chest and neck and face and testicles with bacon grease, leaving him there for an August baking.

Alan wrestles with the guilt and gives himself no mercy even for his act of leading the head scoutmaster to the spot a few hours later, to a naked, bitten, bloody, parched Ernie Carlson, who had screamed himself into collapse. Alan's shrink and his priest tell him that he did the right thing — no matter how late it was, he did the right thing — and that he should give himself some grace. He can't.

He remembers it all. Above all else, he remembers Carlson begging, pleading, as the boys left him.

"I'm going to die," he said, sobbing.

Quinton turned around and smiled — *God, he smiled*, Alan thinks now — and said, "Be prepared."

