

Dark Rider

by Caroline Burnes



John Itawasa

AGE: 42

VITALS: Native American— handsome with dark, slightly long hair and dark eyes

OCCUPATION: Spokesman for Choctaw Nation

Astrological Sign: Scorpio

STORY

An outspoken advocate for protecting the history of the Native American Mound Dwellers, John Itawasa is a man with both ethics and passion. His life has been devoted to preserving the small pieces of the past of Native American Indians, and nothing has ever interfered, until he meets Myra Lawson.

Myra and her eight-year-old daughter, Cassie, hold John's heart in the present, not the past. And when Cassie is abducted, John must call upon all of his skills as a tracker to hunt for her in the treacherous woods of the haunted Blackthorn estate. With a fierce storm threatening, John confronts the legends of the ghost of the murdered Andre Agee and his black stallion, Diable, as well as the reality of Cassie's all-too-human abductor.



Myra Lawson

AGE: 39

VITALS: Chestnut hair, blue eyes, slender figure.

OCCUPATION :Waitress

Astrological Sign: Taurus

STORY

Myra has just ended a painful and abusive marriage to a man who chose alcohol over her and their eight-year-old daughter, Cassie. Working as a waitress in Ella's Café, Myra is slowly piecing her life back together, with a bit of assistance from the folks of Natchez, Mississippi. She has fallen in love with John Itawasa, but the thought of another emotional attachment is terrifying. She can't trust John or any other man. When Cassie is abducted while fishing on the Mississippi River, Myra faces a fear even worse than that of being abused by a man.

When she goes into the woods with John to track Cassie and her kidnapper, Myra learns that sometimes it's safe to trust

Chapter One

Myra Lawson put the hamburger steak and fries in front of Clyde Johnson with a flourish. Ella's Diner was quiet, caught in the lull of a chill Mississippi winter afternoon. Clyde was the only customer, and Myra took a seat to talk with him. Clyde and his daughter, Amy, were like relatives to Myra. They'd welcomed her to town when she'd first moved to Natchez, Mississippi, five years before.

"It was good of Amy to keep Cassie last night," she said to the local hardware storeowner. "John and I needed some time alone." There had been a time when she resented the fact that everyone in town knew her personal business, but in the past few months, she'd grown to appreciate the concern the people of Natchez had shown her.

"Everybody needs some personal time," Clyde said, digging into the steak. "I know you're still gun-shy since the divorce last summer, but you got to put Ed Lawson behind you. John Ittawasa is a different kettle of fish. So how'd it go with you two last night?"

Myra laughed. "I don't kiss and tell." She didn't have to. The flush on her face spoke volumes.

"John's a good man," Clyde said. "He's about the most knowledgeable person in these parts. He loves Natchez, and if I'm any judge of cupid's aim, I'd say he loves you and your little girl. I'm glad you got back together."

Myra took a slow breath, ignoring the bait that Clyde dangled. Her feelings were complicated. Love, while so beautiful in the movies, had been very different in her experience.

"Don't let a bad experience keep you from love, Myra. John adores you and your daughter. He never used to come in the café until he met you here last August. And Cassie."

"He's told Cassie hundreds of stories." She smiled. "She's only eight, but she hangs on his every word."

"Especially the ghost stories about Andre Agee and Blackthorn," Clyde said with a chuckle.

"My mama used to keep me in line by telling me that if I was bad, Andre Agee would ride up on his black horse and snatch me up." He chuckled again. "She said he'd take me into Blackthorn woods and I'd never be seen again."

"I hear the heiress of Blackthorn is due in town this week," Myra said, a frown touching her face. John was worried that the young woman from the north would sell the huge Blackthorn estate for development. If that happened, a lot of valuable history of John's Native American ancestors would be lost to the bulldozers.

"Just have to wait and see what happens there," Clyde said. "Nothing we can do." He checked his watch. "Amy said she'd have the kids back before dark."

"Amy's a great girl," Myra said. "And I thank her for giving me some time alone with John last night." Myra was suddenly overwhelmed by the memory of the night she'd spent in John's arms. It was all the more passionate because they'd come so close to breaking up. Because of Ed Lawson, her low-class ex-husband. John's crime had been that he'd asked her to marry him. That had scared her so badly she'd broken up with John. Ed had really done a number on her.

"Myra, I don't mean to worry you, but Ed was in the store yesterday. He was spouting off about how you'd taken Cassie away from him. I'd keep an eye on him."

"He's furious," Myra agreed. "The last time he had visitation he got drunk and slapped Cassie, but I have a court order that says he won't ever hurt her again."

"Let's just hope the word of the law is enough," Clyde said.

Chapter Two

John Itawasa whistled as he got out of his truck and walked toward Ella's Diner. The day was dark and stormy, a serious cloud building to the west. But he had no quarrel with the weather. He barely noticed it. He had his focus on other things.

John had a picture of Myra Lawson in his mind that involved tangled sheets, the pale light of dawn and a beautiful expanse of naked thigh. It was going to be hard as hell to keep his hands off her in the diner. He'd almost called Ella and asked for Myra to have the day off — except that such interference would have infuriated Myra. She was very prickly where her independence and her job were involved. And he knew why.

He pushed open the door and stopped. Myra caught sight of him, and her smile made his heart hammer. Thank goodness they'd patched up their differences. When he'd offered her a diamond engagement ring two months before, she'd acted as if he were trying to give her a snake. She'd been so frightened of the idea of marriage that she'd told him she didn't want to see him again. But she'd changed her mind — with a little help from Clyde and some other folks who'd talked to her about what real love was like. And now they were dating again. He'd missed Myra. And Cassie, too.

He looked around the restaurant. "Where's Cassie?" he asked.

"Amy took her fishing," Clyde said with a grin as he pushed back his plate. "And I'm headed back to the store. Looks like the heat in the kitchen is going to be nothing compared to out here."

John ignored him and walked to Myra. He kissed her tenderly. "It's been a long day without you."

John loved the blush that rose up her neck and into her face. He loved the way her blue eyes crinkled at the corners when she laughed. He loved her thick chestnut hair that tickled his chest whenever she leaned over him in bed. He loved the gentle touch of her hand on his cheek. He loved — Her expression changed to panic as the bell over the café door jangled.

"Cassie's gone!" Amy Johnson wailed as she ran inside from the cold. "I've been hunting her for the past two hours. I can't find her anywhere. She's disappeared in Blackthorn woods. I've already called the sheriff and he's out there now." She muffled a sob. "Andre Agee must have snatched her and now it's going to storm."

As if to punctuate her sentence, lightning flashed outside the café windows.

Chapter Three

Driving toward the river where Cassie was last seen, John looked at the darkening sky. It was going to be one of those rare January thunderstorms that brought high winds, deluging rains, punishing hail and often deadly lightning.

Beside him Myra gave a small gasp as a huge lightning bolt zigzagged through the sky. He put his arm around her.

"John, I've heard you telling Cassie stories about Andre Agee. Folks here believe his ghost haunts the Blackthorn woods. They believe he's evil." She looked at him and he saw the fear in her eyes.

"Andre was a good man. Even if his ghost did haunt the woods — which it doesn't — he wouldn't hurt Cassie."

"I hate that place. And those woods are dangerous. A college student nearly died there last summer when she got lost camping. And it wasn't even cold like it is now."

"We'll find her, Myra. Cassie's smart. She'll seek cover from the storm." John spoke with more confidence than he felt. As bad as the storm was, he had worries of a more volatile nature. Ed Lawson. It wasn't like Cassie to head off into the woods by herself. He couldn't help but wonder if Ed hadn't kidnapped his daughter. Glancing at the pale woman beside him, John knew to keep his worries to himself.

"She's afraid of storms," Myra said, her voice breaking. "She's only a little girl and she'll be terrified."

"Cassie isn't afraid of Blackthorn woods," John said. "I'll bet she was exploring, maybe looking for Andre Agee." He tried to soothe her. "We'll find her safe and sound."

"I never should have let her go fishing on the Mississippi River," Myra said softly. "This is my fault."

The next turn took them from a twisting, tree-lined road to a field that sloped down to the river. Four patrol vehicles were already at the site.

John brought his truck to a stop next to one of the cars. Before he could kill the motor, Myra hopped out and ran toward Sheriff Dru Colson.

"We haven't found her yet, Myra." Dru glanced at John, and John felt a chill. Something was very wrong.

"Myra, why don't you give my deputy a description of what Cassie was wearing," Dru said smoothly as he handed Myra over to a deputy. "John, I need a word."

John followed Dru to the bank of the river. "She didn't go in the water, that's for sure. It looks like Cassie was abducted," Dru said without preamble. "She was standing here," he pointed to a place where the grass beside the river was crushed. "And we found these footprints here." He indicated a set of larger prints. There were also signs of a struggle.

"Ed Lawson. He's taken Cassie. He's a mean drunk and since the divorce last summer, he's been worse," John said, his gut knotting. "Dammit, Dru. He abused Myra, and he threatened to hurt Cassie. He'd do it, too, just to hurt Myra. He'd hurt his own daughter just to hurt Myra." John fought to control his temper. "He needs to be locked up."

"If I had my way, Ed would be in Parchman State Prison right this minute." Dru's voice held anger, too. "The man's dangerous."

"He's put Myra through a living hell. He used her as a punching bag for the last year they were married. I proposed to her, and it scared her so badly she quit seeing me. It took me two months, with the help of half the town, to get her to let me back into her life. Now the first time she lets Cassie out of her sight, Ed snatches her." John shook his head. Ed Lawson was a cruel man with a streak of insanity when he was drunk. "We've got to find that little girl."

"Before it's too late," Dru said, nodding toward the sky where another bolt of lightning spiked the black clouds.

Chapter Four

"That storm's going to hit hard before long," the sheriff said, scanning the sky. John and Myra did the same. "If Cassie is lost, we need to find her quickly."

"If?" Myra asked John. "What's Dru talking about? Of course she's lost."

John had delayed as long as he could. "Myra, Dru and I both think Ed may have taken Cassie."

"Ed?"

If John had thought Myra looked frightened before, he saw the true depth of her fear as she considered what her ex-husband might have done to Cassie. "John, he might kill her to get even with me for leaving him."

John nodded slowly. "I know, Myra."

"Then find her!" Myra's blue eyes were iced with panic.

Dru put a calming hand on Myra's arm. "I've called the state patrol, and they've got a helicopter equipped with a FLIR unit en route. That's an infrared imagining system that registers body heat. They'll be here in thirty minutes. They'll fly over the woods and tell us exactly where Cassie is." He looked up at the gathering clouds. "Weather permitting."

"But we've got to do something now," Myra insisted. "My baby's in those woods. Maybe with Ed. He's crazy when he's drunk. He could hurt her."

"Myra, with that storm coming in, it would be foolish to send men into the woods to search. Those hills can be dangerous in the best of weather."

"Cassie is a child," Myra said, her voice breaking.

"Dru, let me look for her," John said. "I know the woods and I'm one of the best trackers in the southeast." John had grave reservations that the helicopter would ever arrive with such a storm building.

"You are the best," Dru agreed, "but I'm not sure even you can track in conditions like this."

"Dru, let John try. I know he'll find her, I just know it. Let him try before it's too late."

Before Dru could speak, a deputy hurried toward them. "We found a Harley hidden in the bushes down the road," the deputy said. "We checked the registration. It belongs to Ed Lawson."

Chapter Five

"We can't wait," Myra said. "If Ed has my baby, he may hurt her." Myra couldn't think of what Ed might actually do. She remembered too clearly the look of madness in his eyes the last time she'd seen him. She'd been very foolish to think that a court order would keep him away.

"I'll find Cassie," John said.

Myra felt instant relief. John had learned his tracking skills from a wise member of the Choctaw tribe. His abilities in the woods were almost legendary.

"It's too dangerous," Dru said. "Those hills are treacherous enough in good weather. We've got one missing person. I won't risk two."

Myra felt her heart drop to her knees. Dru wasn't going to allow John to hunt.

"That helicopter you're waiting for won't come," John said as lightning forked the sky yet again. "It'll be grounded in this weather and you know it. I'm your best chance of saving that little girl, and maybe Ed Lawson, too."

Myra watched Dru consider his options. When he finally nodded, she felt as if she could breathe.

"Okay, John, but understand you'll be on your own."

"No, he won't. I'm going too," Myra said.

"When hell freezes over," Dru said angrily. "That's the most foolish thing I've ever heard you say, Myra."

"I'm Cassie's mother."

"Then start acting like a mother and think about what's best for her."

"I am thinking, Dru. I'm thinking that if Cassie's scared or hurt she might not recognize John in the storm. She might even think he's some kind of ghost or something, she's heard so many stories about those woods."

"You mean she might run from him?"

"It's possible," she said.

Dru thought for a moment, and then replied. "No, it's too dangerous."

"Let her go, Dru," John said. "We're losing light and wasting time. Besides, she may have a point about Cassie not recognizing me. And if Ed does have her, I may need Myra to keep her safe."

Myra watched the silent exchange between the two men. They didn't need words to communicate their concerns. If Ed had Cassie, it would most likely take lethal force to control Ed. If John was injured in the process, it would be up to her to get her daughter out of Blackthorn woods and to safety. And she would do it, too. The danger was irrelevant. Cassie was all that mattered, and she'd protect her daughter no matter what.

Chapter Six

John and Myra entered the woods directly behind Cassie's fishing spot. The sky was black, and though it was only late afternoon, they needed flashlights to see their way through the dense foliage. Thunder shook the earth, and lightning rumbled overhead as John located a small animal trail and began searching for signs of Cassie.

His gaze switched from the leaf-covered earth to the tips of bushes near the ground. No branches appeared broken or disturbed. Maybe Cassie hadn't come down this trail.

"Can you see anything?" Myra asked. "Footprints?"

She was standing so close behind him that he could feel the tension in her body as she breathed. More than anything he wanted to protect her from pain and loss. "No footprints."

He knelt down and began sweeping leaves from the trail. There it was: a recent indentation about the size of a child's shoe embedded in the soft ground beneath the leaves. He pointed his flashlight directly at the imprint.

"What is it?" Myra asked, peering over his shoulder.

"The wind has blown the leaves so that they covered the impression," John said, "but the soft ground underneath still holds the print of a shoe. Cassie has recently been here. We're on the right path."

"Thank God," Myra sighed.

They continued to follow the trail until it ended at a dense thicket of black-barked trees with vicious-looking thorns. The impenetrable plants created a dense barrier across the trail. It was as if Cassie had simply been picked up in thin air.

"What are those plants?" Myra asked.

"The devil's walking stick." John gave the Native American name for them. "Legend has it that they spring up to protect Andre Agee."

"Cassie couldn't have gone through them. Where is she?"

Myra's voice held a low note of hysteria, and John felt his own helplessness. The trail ended in the trees. Where, indeed, had Cassie gone?

The wind was a constant rush of noise, rattling the winter-stripped tree branches and making any hope of hearing Cassie impossible. He used his flashlight to search the area for a sign as to which direction Cassie had gone. Nothing.

"We've lost her, haven't we?" Myra's voice cracked.

He reached out and touched her arm. "Don't give up so easily. Give me a while to study some things."

"I've got confidence in you."

Myra's simple words touched John deeply. He knew what it had cost Myra to believe in anyone, and now she was trusting that he could bring her most precious daughter safely home to her.

A vicious spike of lightning dazzled the sky and then struck a tree not twenty feet from there. Sparks flew and a ball of fire rolled up the tree into the top branches. In a few seconds there was the sound of wood tearing and snapping, then the loud whoosh as the top of the tree fell to the ground.

"Cassie's going to be terrified," Myra said. "We have to find her quickly."

How could John admit that he had no idea where her daughter was?

Chapter Seven

As John stood silently in the darkness of Blackthorn woods, he remembered his grandfather's voice: "The lost take the path of least resistance." The saying was meant for souls lost in life, but it also applied to those lost in the woods as well. Even if Cassie was with her father, the chances were that both of them were lost. All light had gone from the sky.

John scanned the Blackthorn thicket and then began weaving his way through them in an area where the trees were the thinnest. There was a path; he simply had to find it.

"Be careful of the thorns. They can cut like daggers," he said to Myra as she followed closely behind him.

After weaving through almost a hundred yards of thorn trees, they came to a small clearing covered with winter rye. Flashlight in hand, John slowly walked until he came upon minute indications of bent grass.

"Cassie," he said in a low voice.

"She's been here?"

He couldn't be certain it was Cassie, but someone had rested on the grass, and it could have been the child. "Yes," he said, wanting to give Myra the assurance he couldn't give himself. "I believe we're back on her trail."

Myra leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "I knew you could do it."

"Don't get too excited. We haven't found her yet." John wanted to reassure her, but he didn't want to give her false hope. It was a thin line he walked.

As they stood surveying the clearing, the wind died and they heard a distinctive rustling in the undergrowth.

"What is that?" Myra asked. "Do you think it's Cassie?"

John listened intently. It wasn't the little girl. Something large was moving, tearing through the underbrush.

"Is it a bear?" Myra asked. "I've heard some of the men in the café say they've seen bears in the woods." Panic was in her voice.

"It's too large for a man, but I doubt it's a bear," John said.

"What's out there?" Myra's voice rose. "Is it Andre Agee on his huge black stallion, riding down trespassers?"

John felt a tingle on his skin. He told the ghost stories of Andre, but he never believed them.

But whatever was tearing through the woods was as big as a horse. Someone, or something, was out there, possibly watching every move they made. "I'll check it out. You wait here."

He was at the edge of the thorny thicket when he turned back to Myra. "If I don't come back, get out of the woods. Get back to Dru and make him send in a search party for Cassie," he said. "You have to promise me that."

Chapter Eight

Myra tried to sit perfectly still and focus on John's safe return. Blackthorn woods were filled with dangerous creatures, one of them an evil spirit. John could try and paint Andre Agee as a good man, but she'd heard the stories of how he'd rob the rich. Some victims he left in humiliating positions. Others were left dead.

At the thought of John encountering such an evil ghost, she rose and started to the place where he'd disappeared. Then she thought of Cassie.

John Itawasa was a man who could take care of himself, in any situation. But she had to admit, even if just to herself, that she couldn't stand it if something happened to him. She tried to convince herself that she didn't love him. But she did. And so did Cassie.

The wind roared around her like a hungry beast, and she swung her light to the left when she heard something in the underbrush. Nothing.

And the clouds wouldn't hold forever. It was going to be a mighty downpour and all evidence of her daughter's trail would be washed away.

"Myra?"

She heard John's voice and felt tremendous relief. He was okay. He hadn't been injured.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Stay put. I'll be right there."

She closed her eyes. What a unique experience to listen to John talk and believe he meant what he said. Marriage to Ed Lawson had been one nightmare after another, especially after Cassie was born. Cassie, whose daily life had been watching her father hit her mother.

Cassie had been afraid of John at first. But she'd warmed to him in the safety of Ella's Café, growing eager to hear his stories. Whenever the bell jangled and John walked in, Cassie's face opened with happiness. Cassie had grown to love John almost as much as her mother had. Her flashlight beam caught John returning through the thicket. There was a flash of something white in his hand.

"What is it?" she asked, getting up and hurrying over to him.

"It's Cassie's hair ribbon," he said. "I found it on a shrub."

Myra clutched the ribbon. It was a little piece of her daughter, proof that Cassie had been that way.

"I think we should turn back," John said. "The deeper we go into the woods, the harder it's going to be to get out. Cassie could be hours ahead of us."

"I'm not leaving here without my daughter," Myra said. "The thing that worries me is why Ed would bring her here."

"Perhaps he intended all along to lure you here, where there aren't any witnesses, so he could hurt you."

Chapter Nine

John and Myra pressed forward through the increasingly dense underbrush. He was growing more and more concerned. It was clear that Cassie wasn't traveling alone. He hadn't told Myra, but that ribbon had been left tied to a shrub, as if someone meant to leave it as a clue. If it was Ed Lawson who had Cassie, then Ed actually knew where he was going in Blackthorn woods.

John had hoped that the kidnapper would grow confused and begin to circle back on himself. But that didn't appear to be the case.

Cassie and whoever had her were headed due east, away from the river and deeper and deeper into Blackthorn. John had a bitter thought — Ed was a poacher, and no doubt Ed had been hunting on the property. That would explain his knowledge of the estate.

"John!"

He felt Myra's hand on his arm, her fingers digging into him in fear.

He swung his light to join hers. Illuminated in the beam of the two lights was a small red tennis shoe.

Myra rushed forward.

He caught her before she could touch the shoe. She didn't have to. She recognized it.

"It's Cassie's," she said. "Now she's out here in this cold without a shoe."

John's careful examination had revealed something even worse. He leaned closer and saw that the dark stain across the top was indeed blood.

"She's hurt, isn't she?" Myra said, her voice dull. "That's blood."

"I'm sure she's okay," John said, but he was growing less and less certain. Ed Lawson was a reckless drunk, and he was mean. He'd hurt Myra, but John had never really believed he'd endanger his own daughter. Until today.

"Ed won't take care of her if she's hurt," Myra said. "He may have even hurt her so that I'd find this shoe and worry."

"Keep visualizing how it'll be when you and Cassie are back together," John said gently.

"Picture that and nothing else."

"If he's hurt her —"

Myra didn't finish her sentence. The brisk wind brought another sound to them, and this one made them stand up and hold perfectly still.

"Cass-sie!" A deep, male voice seemed to float on the storm-charged air. It was not Ed Lawson's voice. In fact, it was not a voice John had ever heard. "Where are you, Cass-sie?"

Chapter Ten

Myra involuntarily stepped toward the direction the voice had come from. "Who are you? Leave my daughter alone!"

Before she could rush into the treacherous thorn trees, John restrained her.

"Let me go! Who was that? Who was calling for Cassie?"

John didn't answer.

"There's someone else in these woods," Myra said, the horror of her daughter being pursued by strangers making her almost hysterical. "What if it isn't Ed? What if someone else has her? Someone...sick!"

John pulled her into his arms and held her, and for a moment, she allowed herself to draw from his strength. "We'll find her, Myra. I don't know who that was, but we'll find Cassie and whoever is responsible for taking her."

"My poor baby," Myra said, weeping into his leather jacket. "My poor baby."

"Cassie's strong and smart. She's obviously gotten away from whoever took her or they wouldn't be calling her," John reasoned. "That's a good sign. We just have to keep looking."

"Should I call her?"

John hesitated. "That might be smart now. At first, I didn't want to alert whoever had her. But if she's on her own, maybe she'll find us."

John's words gave her new hope. "Let's keep looking," she said. She called Cassie's name in all directions. She had to work hard to keep the image of her little girl, shoeless and terrified, from breaking her.

John took her hand and led her back to the trail. They were still headed east.

A light rain drizzled down, but they both ignored it. The wind picked up, and the sound of the storm getting ready to break made it impossible to call out for Cassie any more.

Myra bent her head against flying sticks and leaves. She thought she heard something behind her, and as she whirled, she felt John grab her and push her off the path. Something large and heavy ran past them not twenty yards through the trees. In the storm, it looked like a black blur.

"What was that?" she yelled.

"I didn't see it clearly, but it sounded like a horse," John said.

In a flash of lightning, Myra saw the worry on his face. "Andre Agee?" The old stories came back to her along with a good measure of fear.

"Andre Agee is a ghost story," John said. "He's used to spook little children. This was a real horse, and far more dangerous. If someone is riding a horse through these woods in this storm, they know Blackthorn inside and out. They could simply be playing with us."

John was glad the darkness concealed the worry on his face. He wasn't afraid of old legends, but he was very concerned that Ed Lawson had put a terrible plan into action, and that Cassie would suffer the consequences of it before he and Myra could save her.

Chapter Eleven

John was glad of the dark and the driving wind and rain that forced them to hold their heads down. He didn't want Myra to see his expression, because he was worried. Very worried. Someone with superior knowledge of the woods was out there. And that someone knew Cassie's name. He could only speculate what might have happened to the little girl. One thing for certain, it wasn't Ed Lawson on a horse.

The horseman put a whole new perspective on Cassie's disappearance. But as he'd told Myra, the good thing was that the rider was hunting for Cassie just like they were. By some stroke of fate, Cassie had obviously escaped him.

The wind picked up, growing into almost a steady howl. John knew, too, that once the rain really started, all tracks of Cassie would disappear. Time was against them.

He paused and looked up through the dense trees to examine what he could see of the sky. He'd never been in a storm that was so massively dark and yet lingered like this one. If he hadn't known that it was going on five o'clock, he would have thought it was night.

In fact, it would be night in another hour or so. He and Myra were deep in the woods. He had to find Cassie, but he also had to keep Myra safe. The sensible thing to do would be to start backtracking now — while they could still find the trail out. Of course, they wouldn't do that. They couldn't abandon the search for Cassie.

"John, can we stop for a minute?" Myra asked, yelling to be heard.

He found a small windbreak formed by three cedars and they huddled together. It was a relief to be out of the constant wind. He put his arm around her and pulled her against him. She was trembling.

"Tell me about Andre Agee," Myra said when the wind had let up a little. "You've told Cassie all about him. Tell me. The truth, John, not some feel-good story."

John nodded. "Andre was hanged on this property, but he wasn't a bad man." He would tell the truth, but that didn't mean he wouldn't tailor it. "He robbed from the carpetbaggers and gave the money back to the rightful owners. He was actually sort of a modern-day Robin Hood."

"But he protects Blackthorn against trespassers, right?" Myra asked. "And sometimes his ghost hurts people?"

Chapter Twelve

"Those are just old tales that get started to scare kids off the property," John said, trying to reassure her. "Any place with a history like Blackthorn is going to lend itself to ghost stories." Myra nodded. What John said was true, but the rumors of sightings of Andre Agee were too numerous to discount. In life, he'd injured and sometimes killed. Why would his ghost be different than he was? Certainly the local teenagers were terrified of him. They claimed he tried to ride them down on his huge black horse. She'd never put much credence into those claims — until now.

"Forget Andre," John said. "If Blackthorn is haunted, it's by the ghosts of my forefathers. The Mound Builder Indians." He gently massaged her shoulders. He could feel the strain and tension in her body. "And if Cassie is with the ghosts of my people, she's safe."

"Thanks, John," Myra said, relaxing a little. "Before we go any farther, I need to tell you something."

"We can talk when this is over."

"No, now." She turned to face him and in a flash of lightning, she could see the compassion, and the passion, in his face. "I freaked out when you asked me to marry you because I was afraid once I agreed, you'd change."

"Like Ed?"

She nodded. "He wasn't always a monster. There was a time, so long ago I can hardly remember, when he seemed to be normal. When his smile was like a gentle touch." She shook her head. "You know, I can't remember the last time I saw him smile."

"Alcohol destroys some people," John said. "It changes them."

"It's more than that. He's so angry." She shrugged. "I did everything I knew to help him." She rose to her feet. "But that's the past, and it's done. I just want you to know that I'm going to try to stay focused on the present." She couldn't promise more than that now. She hoped it would be enough.

"Let's find Cassie," John said, standing beside her. "Looks like the storm is going to hold off a little longer. I've never seen a storm quite like this. It's...waiting." He touched Myra's arm.

"Perhaps Blackthorn is blessed," he said.

"More likely cursed," Myra said as she fell in beside John as he began the arduous task of trying to track by flashlight.

Chapter Thirteen

An hour later, dark had fallen. John felt the strain of intensive searching hovering behind his eyes. Myra had to be near the point of collapse, but there was no way they could stop. They'd followed the faintest trail, ever eastward, until they were deep in Blackthorn. The estate was so vast that it was possible for people to get so lost they had to be brought out by search parties. Or, in rare instances, in a hearse.

John knew the FLIR-equipped helicopter had never left the ground. Rain had not begun to fall heavily yet, but the wind and lightning were so severe that the chopper couldn't take off. That was too bad, because he had a feeling he was going to need backup.

Along the trail, John had found evidence of two people walking and one horse. He hadn't mentioned this to Myra, because it would only intensify her fears.

But the bottom line was that Cassie wasn't alone in the woods. She was with an adult, and she was being trailed by someone on horseback.

"I wish you could tell how far ahead she is," Myra said as they trudged forward.

John nodded, choosing not to try to yell over the wind. The light drizzle had stopped, thank goodness. But serious rain was not too far away. He could smell it on the wind.

He moved his flashlight over the ground. The beam picked out something light at the base of a tree.

"Look," he said, rushing forward.

At the foot of a live oak were a number of small rocks in the shape of an arrow.

"Cassie must have left these," John said, his voice rising with excitement. "I told her how people left messages in the woods. She remembered."

"It's pointing east," Myra said. "We're on the right track. Let's go."

Myra rushed past John in her eagerness, but she hadn't gone ten yards before she was stopped by a plaintive cry that rang out from somewhere ahead of them.

"Mama, help me! Don't let him hurt me!"

"Dear God, that's Cassie!" Myra cried as she rushed headlong into the woods.

John tried to stop her but without success. Myra tore free of his grip and disappeared into the thick woods.

Chapter Fourteen

"Stop it! I hate you!"

Cassie's frightened voice cut into Myra like a sharp blade. She ignored the branches that lashed at her face as she ran toward the sound of her daughter's voice.

"Cassie! I'm coming," she cried. She realized that she'd left John behind, but she couldn't stop herself. She had to get to her daughter. She had to stop whoever was hurting Cassie. And if it was Ed, heaven help him. She'd do what so many of her friends had suggested she do — kill him.

She dove headfirst into some horrible shrub, losing her flashlight. She heard a thunk and the light went out. She didn't have time to look for it. Half crawling and half running, she forced herself through the bush and into a clearing.

A heavy boot came down on top of her right hand, grinding it into the earth.

"Stop it!" Cassie screamed.

Myra ignored the pain and looked up into Ed Lawson's cruel eyes.

"I knew you'd come after her," Ed said easily. "It's a good thing you lost your boyfriend. Of course when I'm finished with you, I'll have to take care of him, too."

"Stop it," Cassie cried, throwing herself against her father's legs. "I hate you! I hate you!"

"Shut up." Ed took a swipe behind him with one huge hand and knocked his daughter to the ground. "You're a little whiner. Stay out of this if you don't want to have a reason to cry."

Grabbing Myra by the hair, he pulled her to her feet. "I told you I'd never let you go. Not alive, anyway."

Myra knew better than to argue with Ed. She didn't have a weapon.

"I made a mistake, Ed. I shouldn't have divorced you," she said. She'd lie to him, and if she got a chance to live and see her daughter safely out of these woods, she'd take the next opportunity to make certain Ed could never harm either of them again.

"Right," he said. "What else are you gonna say?"

"I'm sorry. I was wrong."

"Beggin' won't do any good. I'm gonna hurt you bad and then I'm gonna take care of that Injun you've been seeing."

Myra clamped her lips shut. Words would only make Ed more determined. The best thing she could do for her daughter was to remain silent.

"Andre Agee will get you," Cassie said to her father. "You just wait. If you hurt Mama again, he'll cut your head off with his sword."

Chapter Fifteen

"What kind of foolishness have you been feedin' this kid?" Ed said, laughing as he dragged Myra along the trail. "She's been ballyhooing about this ghost ever since I grabbed her."

"He's going to get you," Cassie avowed.

Ed pushed his daughter none too gently. "Shut up and keep walking."

"Don't hurt her," Myra said, unable to keep her mouth shut.

"Another word from you and I'll show you how I can hurt her," Ed said. "I need a drink."

One thing Ed didn't need was a drink, Myra thought. He reeked of whiskey. It was as if he'd bathed in it. But that wasn't unusual. Toward the end of their marriage, he'd quit eating completely. He wanted only alcohol.

"I'm hungry," Cassie said.

"I've got some food stashed ahead," Ed said.

Though Myra was glad Cassie would eat, Ed's words chilled her. He'd planned this abduction. This wasn't some spur-of-the-moment whim he'd concocted in his alcoholic brain. He'd actually thought this through.

"What are you going to do with us?" Myra asked.

"I thought about killing you," Ed said, his voice low and in her ear. Myra was repulsed by him, but she was glad Cassie hadn't heard. "But I think maybe I'll keep you around for a while. But I promise, by the time I finish with you, John Ittawasa or no other man will want you."

Myra's knees grew weak, but Ed pushed her forward. "Why do you hate me so?" she asked. "I thought you were different," he said, his grip on her arm tightening painfully. "I thought you loved me. But you're just like all the others. You left. Just like my mother and the others. You packed up and left."

Myra could have told him that he'd run her away. But it wouldn't do any good. She'd learned the hard way that no one could reason with Ed Lawson.

There was the sound of something moving in the brush beside them. She coughed, hoping to cover the noise in case it was John, trying to rescue her.

"Your boyfriend's tailing us," Ed said, whispering in her ear again. "That's good. In fact, that's perfect. Just as I planned."

Chapter Sixteen

John moved through the underbrush parallel with Myra, Cassie and Ed. He couldn't use his flashlight, but he could follow them by the noise they made. It was apparent that Ed Lawson didn't care who heard him as he took his hostages through the woods.

As much as John wanted to rush over to Lawson and beat him to a pulp, he had no way of knowing if Myra's ex-husband had a gun. One wrong move and Ed could hurt Myra or Cassie. It wasn't a gamble he was willing to take.

Still, he'd have to do something. And soon.

The wind picked up again, and this time it contained rain. Huge drops hurtled down on him like small stones. Lightning forked the sky, and in the dazzle, he was able to see Ed push Myra so hard she stumbled and went down on one knee.

"Damn you," John said softly, furious that he could do nothing. His only hope was to get far enough ahead of Ed so that he could lay a trap. With that in mind, he began to pick up his pace. The rain would work in his favor, blinding Ed. It was the best chance he was going to get.

* * *

Myra glanced to her right. She'd thought she saw something moving beside them. Someone. But she was afraid to get her hopes up.

"Stop a minute," Ed said, pulling on her. "I got to check my bearings."

The rain was pelting down on them, and Myra pulled Cassie against her body. Her small daughter was trembling. It was enough to break her heart. There was a long scratch on her leg, which must have bled on the tennis shoe she'd found. She helped Cassie put the shoe on.

"Cassie, I promise you. We'll be okay," she whispered into her daughter's damp hair.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I didn't want to go with him. He said he'd hurt you if I didn't."

"It's not your fault," Myra whispered, stroking her daughter's hair and face. "It's not your fault."

"Andre Agee will help us," Cassie said. "John told me all about him, and he'd never let us be hurt."

"Cassie, listen to me. When I tell you to run, I want you to do just that." Myra knew she couldn't wait for help from Andre Agee or anyone else. "Don't look back. Don't worry about me. Just run when I say so, okay?"

Chapter Seventeen

John could only pray that the tree he'd chosen would be in the direct path of Ed Lawson. All he had to do now was wait. And that was the hardest part of all.

To his utter amazement, the worst of the storm had blown by. The wind was still kicking up, but to the west he could see stars. Soon the moon would be out. He hoped Ed traveled beneath his tree before that happened.

He tensed as he heard his prey coming.

"I'm tired," Cassie said. "Can we rest?"

"No," Ed said sharply. "Not here."

"She's only a little girl," Myra said. "Can't you even act human?"

"Shut up and keep moving."

John silently cursed as the moon slipped out from behind the dense cloud cover. Not ten yards away, Ed, Myra and Cassie were coming toward him. If Ed looked up, John would be a sitting duck.

Perched on a limb, John tried to make himself invisible. In another few seconds, he could launch his attack. The element of surprise would be important.

As bad as the moonlight was for hiding, it allowed John to see that Ed's gun was in the holster on his hip.

As the trio drew near, John gathered himself. Cassie passed beneath him, then Myra, with Ed right behind her. John timed his jump and then leapt. He landed on Ed's shoulder's, knocking him to the ground.

"Run, Cassie!" Myra directed as she was pushed to the ground by John's impact with Ed.

"Run!"

John looked up in time to see the eight-year-old tearing off into the woods. Myra was on her knees, struggling to get to her feet. And Ed Lawson was reaching for his gun as he scrambled to his knees.

John took a swing that sent Ed on his back. "Run, Myra. Get Cassie and run!"

His attention was forced back to Ed, who was getting up again. The man seemed indestructible. John had hit him with enough force to stun an elephant, yet he was getting to his feet.

"I'm gonna kill you," Ed said, his hand reaching for his gun.

"Think again," John said, picking up a heavy limb and catching Ed in the side of the head. Ed went down hard, and stayed there. "Good enough for you," John said.

He went to Ed, shoving him with his toe. The man was out cold. He started in the direction Cassie and Myra had gone. He'd made it only a few steps when he heard Myra cry out.

"John! Behind you!"

Chapter Eighteen

John felt the bullet tear into his arm. He ducked and rolled instinctively, purposefully moving in Ed's direction. When he finished his roll, he remained on his back, using his feet. He kicked the gun from Ed's hand and then caught him again, this time in the temple.

Ed went down hard.

Not taking any chances, John ignored the pain, got up and frisked Ed to make certain he didn't have another weapon.

"John, you're hurt," Myra said, rushing to him. "You're bleeding."

And he was. Profusely. The pain was growing worse with each passing moment. John removed his coat and shirt, tearing a sleeve to make a tourniquet.

"Where's Cassie?" he asked.

"I lost her," Myra said, her breath short. "I couldn't find her trail, and I was afraid to keep going for fear I'd cover it. I came back for you, and it's a good thing, too. If you hadn't ducked, that bullet would have caught you right in the chest."

John didn't doubt it for a minute. Ed Lawson had meant to kill him.

"Myra, I don't want to alarm you, but we're in a bit of a predicament." With each passing second, John could feel his strength ebbing. The wound wasn't fatal — if he got to a hospital and got the bleeding stopped.

"John." Myra put his uninjured arm over her shoulder. "I'll help you get out of here."

"Let me go," he said. He stumbled over to a tree where he slid to the ground, his back resting against the trunk. "Find Cassie and try to make your way out of here."

"I'm not leaving you."

He could see that she was torn. She was going to have to choose between him and her child. And it was no contest. "Go, Myra. I'll be okay. Go and get help. Send them back for me. If you don't, I'll slowly bleed to death."

"I can't leave you," Myra said. She dropped to her knees beside him. "John, I've been a fool." He reached out and touched her face. "You've been cautious. After Ed, you'd be a fool not to be careful."

"I love you, John. I do. I've loved you for a long time. I was just so afraid of it."

"I love you and Cassie both," John said. His fingers tangled in her hair. God, she was beautiful. Even frightened and worried, she was the most perfect woman in the world.

"John, everything will be okay."

"It will," he said. "Just get help." He had to get her moving before he passed out. She'd never leave him if he was unconscious, and he knew he would be soon. "Save Cassie," he whispered. "For me."

Chapter Nineteen

Myra stepped away from John. It was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. But her daughter was in the woods. John couldn't help her find Cassie. Myra was going to have to do it on her own.

But first she had to make sure that Ed wouldn't hurt John further. She found the shirt that John had discarded before he slipped back into his jacket. Using strips of cloth, she bound her ex-husband's hands behind his back. She could only hope that he was incredibly uncomfortable. Then she got up and started running in the direction Cassie had disappeared.

"Cassie!" She called her daughter, working hard to keep the panic out of her voice. Cassie had been traumatized enough; she didn't need to think her mother was losing it.

"Cassie!"

The storm had completely passed and the woods were lighted by the silver glow of the moon. Myra could see well enough to jog, and she began to move as rapidly as possible.

"Cassie, it's okay. Your... Ed is tied up."

She paused a few seconds to listen. When she didn't hear anything, she started running again. With the skies clearing, it seemed the temperature had dropped a good ten degrees. She forced herself to continue, breaking branches along the way so she could find her way back to John. He was hurt because of her. And in his pain, he'd given her the best gift of all — the ability to tell him of her love for him.

If she could just get her daughter and the three of them could make it safely out of the Blackthorn woods, she would not waste another minute of her life. That was a vow she made. For too long she'd been afraid to care about anyone except Cassie. She was in love with John Ittawasa, and she'd been too afraid to even accept it.

"Cassie!"

She stopped. Something big was running in the woods. Something very big. The ground shook with the pounding of the creature's hooves. She froze. It couldn't be Andre Agee. He was just a story, a legend. A ghost.

"Cassie!" She was suddenly terrified for her little girl.

Chapter Twenty

"Mama!" Cassie burst from the underbrush.

"Cassie, darling, are you okay?" Myra asked, grabbing her daughter and holding her close.

"What was that?"

"It was Andre Agee. He picked me up and gave me a ride on his horse," Cassie said. "He's beautiful. His name is Diable."

Myra had no desire to fuss at her daughter for her wild imagination. Cassie was in her arms, safe.

"We have to get help. John is hurt."

"Mr. Agee told me how to get out of the woods," Cassie said. "There's a trail up ahead. He showed it to me." She tugged her mother's hand. "He said we should go and get help and send someone back for John and...the other man."

Disbelieving, Myra let herself be led by her daughter. For all that Cassie had suffered, Myra could see that her daughter was strong and resilient. They were going to put Ed behind them. Both of them.

"See, Mama. I told you." Cassie pointed to the clearly marked trail.

* * *

Dru gave Cassie and Myra a hand getting into the ambulance with John.

"I'm going to be fine," John said. "It's not serious now that we've stopped the bleeding."

"Nonetheless, you're going to the hospital," Myra said, ignoring his protests. "I haven't decided that I love you just for you to bleed to death."

John couldn't argue with that. He reached up with his uninjured arm and captured Myra's beautiful hair. She obligingly leaned down and kissed him. It began as a tender kiss, but it hinted at all the passion they shared.

"Dru, have you got Ed?" John asked once the kiss ended.

"We've got him and he's going to jail. For a long time. He won't be bothering any of you again."

John saw that at the mention of her father, Cassie had grown pale. He struggled into a sitting position and grasped her hand. "I hear Andre Agee told you how to get out of the woods," he said, winking at Myra over the child's head.

"He did. He saved all of us," Cassie said. "And he told me that no one would ever hurt me again."

John and Myra both hugged Cassie as they made a small unit of three. John caught Myra's eye, and he saw her agreement not to dispute her daughter's belief in a ghost. If Andre Agee made Cassie feel safe, that was the important thing.

"Thank goodness for Andre Agee," Myra said, kissing her daughter's head. "And for John."

"Thank goodness that we're going to be a family," Cassie said, and all of the paleness and worry was gone from her face.

The End