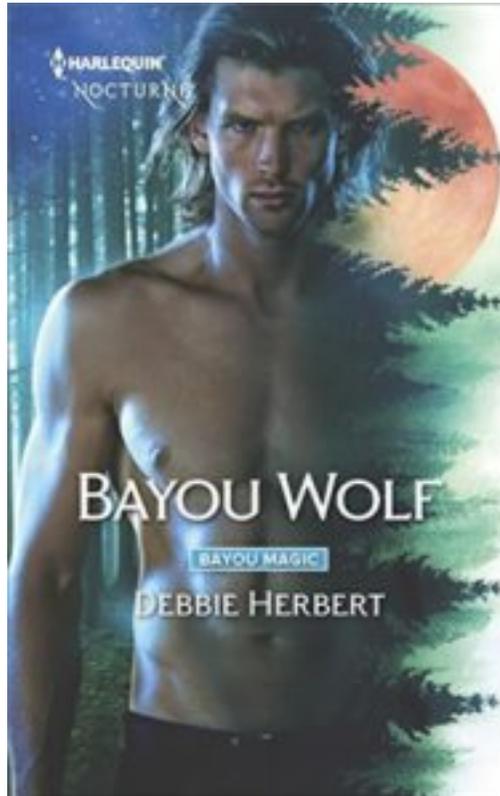


Bayou Wolf
by Debbie Herbert

Chapter One



The creature had been watching her ever since she entered the forest, half-hidden in the lengthening shadows. Trees rustled in the distance. One small sapling bowed, bending over until the tip brushed the ground. It was too far away for even her keen eyesight to locate the creature's form or even a vague outline. But Tallulah sensed its energy emanating from the woods. A deer, perhaps? No, that wasn't right. Too bold for a deer. Whatever it was, it didn't appear to be a threat—for now.

Red feathers and black ribbons fluttered in the bayou breeze as she fastened the dream catcher to a cypress branch. Dozens of similar artifacts hung in varying states of disintegration, a shrine to her one and only love.

Bo had died here—832 nights ago—in this very spot. On this lonely patch of swampland, amidst the droning roar of a million mosquitoes, with nary a loved one to hold his numbed hands. Bohpoli Leyland, one of the most courageous shadow hunters of the Choctaw, was no more.

Tallulah tidied the area, rearranging her mandalas of seashells and clumps of crystals. Usually, tending the area was a comfort, a touch of spiritual communion. Sometimes she even talked out loud to Bo, recounting the day's events or updating him on news of their friends. As if her words weren't merely empty vibrations dying in the wind.

But this afternoon, she couldn't shake the awareness of being watched. The longer the creature hung around, the more it bugged her. Whatever it was, the animal was curious, hungry, stupid, or some combination of all three.

She set about dusting pine straw from her little offerings to Bo. A hunk of rose quartz here, a beaded prayer rope there, an angel figurine.

Twigs snapped nearby.

Her brain and body lit into action. She quickly felt for the dagger tucked into her belt and scanned the gathering darkness. Patterns of long shadows crisscrossed the massive Spanish moss-draped oaks, the ever-present pine trees and the dense underbrush of saw palmettos. Nothing was visible out there, and only the barest of vibrations from the ground tingled the soles of her feet in warning.

Tallulah cautiously bent down and put her free hand in her backpack, where she carried her other weapons, all the while keeping her eyes and ears peeled for an intruder. She lifted her slingshot and pocketed several rocks, stuffing them into the leather pouch at her waist. They were the most effective weapon in battling the Ishkitini, birds of the night, and the only way to kill a will-o'-the-wisp.

But this felt different. There was no glow from a wisp, and the vibrations beneath her feet couldn't come from the birds, which swooped from above to attack.

Yet something or someone was out there, stealthily advancing.

She straightened from her crouch and loaded the slingshot. Whatever emerged from the cover of darkness, she would not run, and she would not cower. A shadow hunter faced danger head on, confident in the power of their own heightened senses. As the only female hunter, Tallulah had diligently trained to be twice as brave and skillful as her male comrades in the fight against the dark shadow spirits that roamed Bayou La Siryna.

A metallic whiff blended into the normal scent of pine and sea, and her mouth soured at the taste of copper. What new hell was this?

Before she could think too deeply about the mystery, a growl purred in quiet menace. She swallowed hard and unsheathed her dagger. If it was a bobcat, she'd shoot a stone near its body and scare it away.

The growl erupted into a hiss of anger, and she located the sound's source—about fifty yards away in thick underbrush. Her eyes strained in the dark. Despite her heightened senses, she didn't quite have the nocturnal sight of an owl or cat. But her sight was good enough to hunt and find predators in the night. It was what she and Bo and a dozen others had been born to do. A sacred gift and duty to keep good and evil balanced in the bayou.

Shadows shifted, patterns realigned and huge paws emerged from cover. Eyes gleamed in the darkness, but Tallulah held her ground. This was no bobcat—this was a monstrously oversized coyote, the largest she'd ever seen.

"Get outta here," she yelled.

But the damn thing stalked forward, and her scalp prickled at its approach. This was no ordinary coyote. If she weren't positive that Nalusa Falaya was safely imprisoned in their Choctaw sacred tree, she'd be suspicious that the bayou's most powerful shadow spirit had returned and shape-shifted into a new form.

Tallulah held up the loaded slingshot and pulled back the band. "I said git!"

But it displayed no fear, instead advancing another few feet. Must be rabid, she decided. What else could account for such strange boldness? Tallulah narrowed her eyes, studying the creature. Its twitching ears were short, with rounded tips, and its snout was broad, whereas coyotes sported long, pointy ears and a narrow snout. Not only that, but the animal was also too large for a coyote.

It was wolf-sized.

Impossible. There were no wolves in south Alabama. Her arms shook from the tension of holding back the slingshot's band.

Its eyes glowed, and it again growled, gnashing its teeth.

Tallulah released her grip, and the rock whirled through the air to strike the beast's furry chest. It let out a small yelp of surprise, but it didn't turn tail and run. Instead, muscles flexed on its lean flanks as if it were preparing to take a running leap.

Strange. Most wild creatures had a healthy respect for humans and their weapons. But if that's the way it wanted to play, then she was prepared.

With the speed and accuracy gained from years of training as a shadow hunter, Tallulah unleashed a volley of shots, peppering the creature with rock after stinging rock. The animal snarled and glared, and stood its ground, unyielding. She swore it had an eerie intelligence that marked her for a future encounter. Tallulah reloaded her slingshot and once again raised the weapon, a warning of more shots to come. The beast turned and loped out of sight.

Alone again, she realized her arm was burning with the strain of the rapid shooting, and she caught her breath as her adrenaline surge subsided. "Did you see that, Bo?" she panted, her breath quick and shallow.

How ironic it would have been if she had ended up dying in this exact spot, just as Bo had. His death resulted when the great shadow spirit, Nalusa Falaya, had shape-shifted into a rattlesnake and had bitten him

repeatedly, sending supercharged venom into Bo's body. A mauling by this wolf creature would be just as painful, maybe even slower.

Tallulah put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "This place gets freakier and freakier. There's more than just the will-o'-the-wisps and the Ishkitini we fought together. Now there are fairies and who knows what else."

And here she thought she'd seen it all. Should have known better after last year, when she and the other hunters had discovered a secret fairy world existing under their noses. The fae weren't evil like the shadow spirits that roamed these woods, but they had their own code of self-preservation that made them untrustworthy allies in the fight to keep evil contained in the bayou.

Maybe tonight's wolfish creature was an anomaly. Maybe she'd never see it again.

And maybe she'd grow wings and fly. Like Tinkerbell. She couldn't help snorting. Anyone who knew her for more than a day realized she was light-years away from a sparkly, bubbly, fairy-type personality—in truth, she more closely resembled a grouchy goblin. Those who cared for her called her *challenging* or *abrupt*, while those who cared nothing for her, which was the majority of people, merely called her *bitchy*.

Tallulah stuffed the slingshot in her backpack and slung it over her shoulders. "Bye, Bo," she whispered. "Love you forever."

This moment of saying goodbye always pinched her heart. Resolutely, she straightened her shoulders and hurried down the path. Experience had taught her it was best to keep the goodbye brief.

"Be back tomorrow," she called over her shoulder. The silence of the woods mocked her words. And she couldn't shake the memory of the creature's eyes boring into her own, memorizing her sight even as it caught her scent. She hadn't seen the last of that one.

Vroom, vroom, vroom.

The loud whir of the skidder powered into the morning's quiet. The cab of the heavy engine rumbled as it lifted felled trees and transported them to the waiting logging trucks. Payton grinned at the familiar vibration that shook his body. It felt damn good to get back to work after the last week of moving from Montana and settling into the new place. A fresh start was exactly what they all needed. An escape from the unwarranted accusations and territorial disputes from other wolf packs.

Besides, being cooped inside too long made him feel caged and claustrophobic. The great outdoors lifted his spirits, even when it came to back-breaking work. Sitting in some cubicle in a monkey suit would be his idea of torture.

Payton expertly maneuvered the skidder, creating cleared trails on the new land they were harvesting for its wood. The twenty-three-ton machine bulldozed through the thick underbrush. Cautiously, he kept a watch for his pack members, all of whom worked with him in the same timber clearing crew. Most of them were on the ground, felling trees with chainsaws. Those unlucky bastards might have a few snake encounters in this swampy land. Not for the first time, Payton was glad to be ensconced in the cab. He'd take his chances on a rollover or a fallen log over a rattlesnake bite any day.

Their pack leader, Matt, served as the lumberjacking supervisor. He directed traffic around Payton, the other skidder operator, and the truck drivers parking their vehicles at the edge of the property.

Payton lifted the edge of his T-shirt and wiped the sweat off his face. Seven o'clock in the morning, and it was already hot as Hades. Adjusting to the Alabama weather would take some time. What would it be like two months from now in the heat of summer?

Sweat stung his eyes, and he blinked. What the hell was that in front of him?

A gorgeous, olive-skinned woman stood a mere ten feet from the skidder, hands on her hips and a fierce gleam in her dark eyes. He slammed on the brakes and waved his arms. "Get out of the way!"

She scowled more deeply but otherwise didn't budge an inch from her entrenched position. Was she crazy? Suicidal, perhaps?

Payton shifted to Neutral, settled the brakes and lowered the skidder's blade. "Gorgeous or not, she's a damn nuisance of a woman," he sputtered, unbuckling the seat belt and hopping to the ground. He strode in front of the machine, boots squishing in the wet, red-clay soil. "This is a logging site. You can't be here."

Her eyes narrowed. "Is that so? Well, I am here, and I'm not moving."

The heat, coupled with her defiance, stirred his temper. "Are you nuts? Move it, lady!" She folded her hands across her chest. A beautiful chest, he couldn't help noticing.

"No," she said simply.

No? She had some kind of nerve. "What the hell do you mean? You trying to get yourself killed?"

"I'm trying to stop you from destroying our land."

Confusion knit his brow. "Excuse me, are you the owner?"

"Not legally. But—"

So she was one of those conservation types. They'd dealt with them before. Payton slapped on a fake smile and tried a placating tone of voice. "Look, lady, uh...what's your name?"

"Tallulah," she replied grudgingly. "Tallulah Silver."

He nodded. "Payton Rodgers. Now, unless you have a property title in hand, Miss Silver, you have no say in this matter."

"All of Bayou La Siryna once belonged to my people, the Choctaw. I'm not moving."

An uncharacteristic silence settled over the workplace. All the men had turned off their chain saws and regarded the intruder quizzically. A few were just plain getting an eyeful.

Payton had to admit the crazy woman was easy on the eyes—she was tall with lean muscles but all the right curves, long black hair and angular features. Her fierce don't-mess-with-me attitude was a characteristic some men found to be a welcoming challenge. Not that he was one of them. Nope. Give him a woman with a soft voice and gentle, feminine manner. Someone that didn't ask too many questions or make too many demands.

"Stay then. Suit yourself," he said, bluffing, as he climbed back into the cab and gunned the engine. He thrust the gears and moved forward a couple of feet.

Damn it to hell. She stayed rooted to the spot and regarded him defiantly, a smirk flirting at the edge of her full lips.

Payton sighed and jumped back out of the skidder. Heat flushed up his neck as the pack watched his defeat. "What do you want me to do?" he asked her, throwing up his hands. "You really gonna stand there all day?"

"As long as it takes."

Smart-ass woman. "You know you're wasting your time. We'll just work around you."

A flicker of uncertainty lit her dark brown eyes, and he felt momentarily guilty. Payton wasn't entirely unsympathetic to her cause. If anyone had the right to protest timber cutting, it was Native Americans. "We're only harvesting the wood," he explained, keeping his voice reasonable. "We'll plant new trees when the job is finished."

Tallulah lifted her chin. "I've seen what these crews do. You'll clear valuable hardwood, and when you leave, you'll replant only pine. Doing that destroys the wildlife habitat."

"The company we work for replants the same ratio of tree species as what we clear." This he could say with a clear conscience. He wouldn't do this work otherwise.

Miss High-and-Mighty only sniffed. "Like I'd believe you. Even if that were true, you're still disrupting our wildlife."

Payton shifted his feet. Yeah, he wasn't too wild about that, either. But if he didn't do it, someone else would. This was the employment his pack had chosen. In many ways, the job was perfect. Work in a transient crew a few months, and then move on. That way, no one had time to really get to know you and discover your big, hairy secret. And when trouble brewed with neighboring packs, you could always cut out for greener pastures. If he had twinges of guilt, that was his problem. A small price to pay for the pack's safety.

"Sorry you feel that way," he said stiffly. "But that doesn't change the fact that you aren't allowed to be here. It's dangerous."

"I have no fear of danger."

Because she was daft. He tried to appeal to her sense of self-preservation. "You might get sliced with a chain saw or run over by heavy equipment. You see all of us in hard hats and goggles? There's a reason for it."

Tallulah shrugged.

Maybe an appeal to her dignity would do the trick. "Leave now, or the police will come out here and forcibly remove you," he threatened.

She didn't blink. "They can try."

He caught movement in his peripheral vision as Matt strolled over. Great, she'd make him look like an idiot in front of his alpha.

"Is there a problem?" Matt asked in his wry, quiet way. He signaled the others to get back to work, and a loud buzzing returned to the scene.

"Yes. I've got a problem with you destroying these trees." Tallulah tossed her mane of black hair and raised her voice over the whir of the chain saws. "Some of them have stood for decades."

"They're coming down," Matt said firmly. "Unless you have a court order to stop us."

She flushed. "I don't. Not yet. This project sure was kept on the down-low. I didn't know about it until I happened to drive past and heard the noise."

"I suggest you protest this through the court system," he murmured.

"By then, it will be too late," she spat out. "All the trees will be cut."

Matt didn't respond, but his powerful, firm energy was like a force of nature. Being the alpha came naturally to him.

Tallulah turned her attention from Matt and shot Payton a daggered look with narrowed eyes. "I'll be back," she promised. "And I won't be alone."

Payton removed his hard hat and ran a hand through his hair. He nodded at Tallulah, but she'd turned away, her spine ramrod straight as she made long, purposeful strides toward the county road.

Of course she'd return.

What fun this job was shaping up to become. The long, hot summer stretched before him, full of conflict with the locals, high heat and humidity and increased guilt over the destruction of yet more land.

He wasn't the only one watching her ass sway in angry strides to her car. Eli, one of the ground cutters, approached and nudged his side. "What a looker. You get her number?"

Payton snorted. "I reckon she'd rather spit on me than exchange phone numbers."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Eli said with a slow drawl. "Where there's sparks, there's chemistry."

Huh. More like "where there's smoke, there's fire." And an opportunity to get burned again when it came time to pick up and leave again for the next job, the next town. No thank you.

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