

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SOUL TAKEN*

PATRICIA BRIGGS



WINTER LOST

A MERCY THOMPSON NOVEL

Titles by Patricia Briggs

The Mercy Thompson Series

MOON CALLED
BLOOD BOUND
IRON KISSED
BONE CROSSED
SILVER BORNE
RIVER MARKED
FROST BURNED
NIGHT BROKEN
FIRE TOUCHED
SILENCE FALLEN
STORM CURSED
SMOKE BITTEN
SOUL TAKEN
WINTER LOST

The Alpha and Omega Series

ON THE PROWL
(with Eileen Wilks, Karen Chance, and Sunny)

CRY WOLF
HUNTING GROUND
FAIR GAME
DEAD HEAT
BURN BRIGHT
WILD SIGN
MASQUES
WOLFSBANE
STEAL THE DRAGON
WHEN DEMONS WALK
THE HOB'S BARGAIN
DRAGON BONES
DRAGON BLOOD
RAVEN'S SHADOW
RAVEN'S STRIKE

Graphic Novels

ALPHA AND OMEGA: CRY WOLF: VOLUME ONE
ALPHA AND OMEGA: CRY WOLF: VOLUME TWO

Anthologies

SHIFTER'S WOLF

(*Masques* and *Wolfsbane* in one volume)

SHIFTING SHADOWS

WINTER LOST



PATRICIA BRIGGS

ACE
NEW YORK

ACE
Published by Berkley
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2024 by Hurog, Inc.

Penguin Random House supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for every reader.

ACE is a registered trademark and the A colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Briggs, Patricia, author.
Title: Winter lost / Patricia Briggs.
Description: New York: Ace, 2024. | Series: Mercy Thompson
Identifiers: LCCN 2024001112 (print) | LCCN 2024001113 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593438985 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593439005 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Thompson, Mercy (Fictitious character)—Fiction. | Shapeshifting—Fiction. | Werewolves—Fiction. | LCGFT: Paranormal fiction. | Fantasy fiction. | Novels.
Classification: LCC PS3602.R53165 W56 2024 (print) | LCC PS3602.R53165 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240117
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024001112>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024001113>

Ebook ISBN 9780593439005

Cover design by Judith Lagerman
Cover illustration © Daniel dos Santos
Interior design adapted for ebook by Kelly Brennan

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

pid_prh_7.0_147301320_c0_r0

CONTENTS

Dedication

Prologue

Interlude

Chapter 1

Interlude

Chapter 2

Interlude

Chapter 3

Interlude

Chapter 4

Interlude

Chapter 5

Interlude

Chapter 6

Interlude

Chapter 7

Interlude

Chapter 8

Interlude

Chapter 9

Interlude

Chapter 10

Interlude

Chapter 11

Interlude

[Chapter 12](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

147301320

To my partner in crime—Dan dos Santos, who understands that a picture paints a thousand words. Thank you, my friend.

PROLOGUE



MERCY

AN ARTIFACT IS AN OBJECT THAT EITHER HAS A MAGICAL EFFECT or can be used to create a magical effect. Most of these are minor things—a lucky penny or a staff that helps you find your way home when you are lost. But magic is unpredictable, and some artifacts change in purpose and power.

Most artifacts are intentionally made, usually by the fae, though witches, warlocks, and wizards have also made their fair share. Some artifacts just happen. My friend Warren has a car, given to him by his lover with the intent of making him safer, that magicked itself spontaneously. That car tries to take care of him. Annoying, but also sweet.

The Soul Taker was an artifact like Warren's car, in that it just happened. But it was the furthest thing from sweet. It was old, a sickle used to harvest the blood of sacrifices in service of some unknown and long-forgotten god. By the time I encountered it, it had become sentient and fixed in its purpose of bringing its god back on a bridge of the dead.

It did something to me, to my magic and to my soul. I thought that those effects would go away when I had it destroyed.

I was wrong.

INTERLUDE



June

Montana

SUMMER WASN'T HIS SEASON, BUT THE CREATURE KNOWN TO THE locals as John Hunter still liked the storms. This one came with lightning and thunder, making the interior of his cabin feel like a refuge and adding unexpected percussion to the music filling the room.

It was chilly so he'd lit the fire, and the smell of the burning wood was as warming as the flames. Not that the cold bothered *him*.

He closed his eyes, stretching his legs out. His dog grumbled and scooted around until his great muzzle weighed down John's right foot again.

They both listened to the music—but the dog didn't wince when their musician hit a flurry of wrong notes.

"I told you, harp or guitar I can do. But this is not like either one of them to an amazing degree." Pause. "It probably would have helped if the person who created this thing actually knew how to play it."

Amused, John Hunter opened his eyes and turned his head to look at his entertainment.

The clever and graceful, if work-begrimed, fingers of his guest danced over the lyre. The man, dressed in battered jeans and a torn T-shirt, looked at home in the cabin in a way that the lyre did not. Silver-covered wood inlaid with luminous blue turquoise formed the arms of the lyre, ending with elaborate carvings of wolf heads, or possibly dogs. At the base, the sound box was carved into a beautiful woman's face. The artifact would have been more appropriately housed in an art museum instead of a cabin in the mountains.

“Doesn’t the magic help?” John asked.

His guest looked up, mischievous eyes alight. “Haven’t you learned by now? Magic *never* helps.”

1



December

MERCY

THERE WAS A 1960 BEETLE PARKED IN FRONT OF MY SHOP.

I eyed it warily as I let myself into the office. Having a 1960 bug parked outside was not unusual—I specialized in the old air-cooled VWs to the point where people brought them to me from other states to work on or restore. I just hadn't seen this particular one before.

I would have remembered.

I locked away my purse, draped my coat over the chair behind the counter, then walked into the garage bays. The light was already on and Zee was hard at work. He'd been here for a while because the big furnace had already heated the space to human-friendly temperatures.

Buried in the engine compartment of the car he was bitterly cursing in German, Zee looked like a wiry old man with white hair that was thinning on top and a bit of a potbelly. Thanks to fae glamour, he bore no resemblance to the Dark Smith of Drontheim, who had built many deadly weapons and used them in his time to slaughter saints, kings, and anyone else who annoyed him. Currently, he worked a little more than full-time in the garage he'd once owned, helping me repair old cars.

“Unusual paint job out there,” I told him as I got into my overalls.

Zee grunted and tapped the quarter panel of the vintage Porsche 930 he'd been working on for the last three days. It was decked out in metal-flake red

with extremely good pin-striping that included the word “Widowmaker” hand-lettered on the driver’s side in silver. The passenger door had a fist-sized black widow just below the side-view mirror with a silver web that extended over the rest of that side.

“Okay,” I said. “But the Porsche’s paint job is beautiful, and everyone knows the 930 turbo is called the Widowmaker. Why in the world would you paint a giant eye on the hood of a bright purple bug?”

Zee, back to tinkering in the engine compartment, grunted.

“Not that purple is a bad color for a bug,” I said. “And *two* eyes might even be cute—if they were soft and happy. But one crazytown eye on the hood is just creepy.”

“Shameful thing to do to a nice old car,” he agreed. “Did you see the plates?”

There was something in his voice that sent me back out into the cold to check the vanity plates on the bug.

PPLEATR

It took me a moment to work it out.

I went back into the garage and went to work. After about twenty minutes, I said, “Does it eat flying purple people? Or purple people? Or just people?”

“Now you’ve done it,” Zee grumbled. “Be silent if you can’t be useful.”

I grinned and went back to work.

Zee broke first. By lunchtime, though, we were both humming the stupid song. An hour later, to change things up, I sang the first line of “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polkadot Bikini,” and our earworm grew by one.

The phone rang as Zee was fighting back with “It’s a Small World,” which was cheating.

“Mercy’s Garage,” I answered.

“It’s Mary Jo. I—” She paused. “I really need to talk to someone about something and I think you are the right someone.”

Mary Jo wanted to talk to me. Maybe the Purple People Eater had changed the orbit of the planet, or hell had truly frozen over.

IN DECEMBER AT SIX P.M., EVEN WITH THE STREETLIGHTS, IT WAS dark. I was running a little late because I'd stopped at home to change.

The overhead clouds blocked the stars and left the waning but still nearly full moon a faint glow in the sky. Snow drifted down in the giant fat flakes that only happened when the temperature was just perfect, snowman-building snow. The kind, in fact, that stuck to my wipers so they both squeaked and also left water splotches on my windshield.

Mary Jo had asked me to meet her. As I drove through the accumulating snow, I had the same triumphant feeling in my belly that I did at the end of a difficult but successful hunt.

Mary Jo and I had been not friends but certainly friendly until her Alpha had pulled me into the werewolf pack as his mate. She wasn't the only wolf who had resented him bringing in someone who turned into a coyote, but Mary Jo had been the central player in the anti-coyote faction of the pack.

At first I'd tried ignoring their dislike of me. The pack was Adam's problem, and they seemed to run better when I kept my head down. He'd put a stop to any active harassment, and what various of the werewolves had *thought* about me hadn't mattered.

But things were different now. Our pack was responsible for the safety of anyone in our territory, thanks to yours truly. As an added bit of icing on the cake, we had to do it as a lone pack.

The Marrok who ruled the werewolves in this part of the world was worried that our actions could draw them all into a real war. So he'd cut us off. If we were unaffiliated (what a pedestrian word for the blood-and-flesh bonds that bound the werewolves together), then the worst that would happen is that the fae would wipe out our pack. Or the humans would kill us all. Or the witches. Or the vampires. Or some unknown nasty we hadn't run into yet. But the damage would be local and not an interspecies war.

We were on our own and in over our heads. That meant we didn't have time for petty rivalries or stupid games within our pack—we were too busy running to put out one figurative fire before another started. I *had* to fix the damage bringing me into the pack had done.

As Adam's mate, I'd taken my share of organizing the defense of our territory. I had made a point of taking on the worst of the resultant jobs myself—and I'd made sure to bring Mary Jo with me. Every time we went out, she was a little less unhappy with me. Two days ago, we fought a fishy-something-with-teeth that decided to take up residence on one of the small islands in the middle of the river.

When Mary Jo killed it, the unidentifiable giant river monster thingy had exploded into a mass of inch-long versions of the giant thing. My legs still had bite marks. But Mary Jo had given me a high five when we'd hunted the last of them down.

Mary Jo wasn't the only recalcitrant wolf I brought with me to awful jobs. She had just been the most resistant. There was nothing like shared misery to build relationships. Adam said that he'd felt the pack bonds settling in tighter since I'd started my campaign.

As I headed to the meeting with Mary Jo, I thought that just possibly I could start giving some of the worst jobs to people other than me. That would be nice.

My cell phone rang as Columbia Drive swung west on its trip to the Blue Bridge. The suspension bridge would have made the journey a lot shorter, but a troll fight had damaged it, then a fae lord demolished it. Reconstruction was set to finish, barring delays, in the spring, and in the meantime the Blue Bridge, already overcrowded, had become the main artery between Kennewick and Pasco.

I'd taken my Vanagon tonight. Built in the last century, it had a CD player but no Bluetooth. As a small business owner and the mate of the Alpha of a werewolf pack, I needed to answer my phone. I'd solved the problem with a Bluetooth earpiece.

My stepdaughter, Jesse, rolled her eyes when I first put it on. "The time-share call center called, and they want their headset back. Get some earbuds,

Mercy, you'll thank me later.”

Earbuds and mechanicking weren't good partners—at least not for me. I'd lost three pairs of earbuds before I decided that my twenty-dollar Bluetooth earpiece that could go through the wash and still work was a better option.

The phone rang twice before I'd fumbled the earpiece in and tapped to activate it.

“Mercy here,” I said.

No one answered.

I knew that silence. My breath hitched because my diaphragm thought it would be a really good idea to run away from whatever was scaring us. Scaring me.

I'd gotten a different number and switched carriers. Only the pack and family had this number. It wasn't listed anywhere—and my current phone was under Warren's boyfriend Kyle's name.

It could have been a misdialed number or a failed robocall. I hoped for a thickly accented voice to tell me their name was Susan and they were calling to talk to me about my credit card. But I knew who it was.

I felt my heart rate pick up as the seconds ticked slowly by. I should have disconnected, because anyone I knew would have already spoken by now. But I didn't hang up. He would only call back.

The windshield screeched again, so I turned the wipers off. Someone honked at me. To get out of traffic, I took a right-hand turn too quickly, veering briefly into the wrong lane. Rather than continuing to drive, I pulled over and parked next to a used car lot.

“So nice of you to join us,” whispered Bonarata, the Lord of Night.

He wasn't here. But I pictured him in my head, looking more like Thug Number Three in an old movie about the Mafia than the vampire who ruled Europe and, from what I had been able to gather, any other vampires he cared to take over. A little less than two months ago he'd fought Adam and beaten him. He'd beaten me, too—but I'm a lightweight. In the ten years I'd known Adam, I'd never seen anyone beat him in a fight. Bonarata had made it look easy.

If Bonarata had wanted to, he could have killed us both. Instead, he chose to play a game. He'd decided to make an example of me because I'd escaped from him and made him look weak. I hoped that it would work out to being a fatal mistake—but we wouldn't know that for sure until the game ended one way or another.

The phone calls were to let me know Bonarata had not forgotten his promise.

My hands were shaking and I was hyperventilating. Bonarata scared me more than I would have thought possible. He had promised to kill everyone I loved—and I believed he could do it. But that would not be today, I reminded myself. Today, right now, I needed to control myself or Adam would notice.

I'd left Adam preparing for an online meeting with his business partners in New Mexico over some military legal snafu. I understood it was a dangerous matter, that lives had already been lost. Tightropes needed to be walked and tempers soothed. Adam was good at tightropes, but the temper thing was not his strong suit. Adam didn't need to know about this call right now.

I was supposed to get help when Bonarata called, so we could trace his call and figure out where he was. But we hadn't managed to trace the location meaningfully the last twenty or so times he'd called. I didn't think that this call would be the one to change that.

I could hear someone breathing in my earpiece now, shaky, shivery breaths like a rabbit pinned by a fox. The bunny knows it's about to die, but not when that moment is going to come. Bonarata was a vampire; he didn't need to breathe. And if he chose to, he wouldn't breathe like that. The Lord of Night had invited a guest to join us.

This was going to be one of the bad calls.

I'd hung up the first time and gotten an audio CD of what Bonarata had done over several hours after I'd disconnected. If I listened when he called, he said at the end of the CD, he'd be more merciful. If I hung up, he'd enjoy himself. The length of his victim's suffering was my choice.

If this was going to be one of those calls, I was going to have to do something more than just keep calm, or Adam would drop his important

business to come save me when I was in no danger at all.

I shared two bonds with my mate—the bond that made me a part of the Columbia Basin Pack that he ruled, and the more intimate mating bond. I knew how to shut them down hard so that very little information traveled from me through them. Adam had shown me how to do that.

My mate understood that sometimes being part of a werewolf pack could be overwhelming to someone who'd spent most of her life on her own. Sometimes I desperately needed to be alone again. He knew that. He'd shown me how to find solitude when I was bound to him and to the pack—and to the vampire Stefan.

Because that was the other bond I held in my soul. Stefan was careful. Like Adam, he knew that if he tried to hold too tightly, I'd chew my metaphorical foot off to be free. Stefan wasn't going to know about this call. I always kept that bond as closed as I could manage, and Stefan was used to that.

But after our pack and mate bonds were silenced and I was spirited off to Europe, Adam wasn't so sanguine about me closing down our bond, even though he could still sense me. We'd had to figure out something else.

Adam had been married before, but I was his first mate. That should have meant that both of us struggled through how to deal with our mating bond, but he'd been an Alpha since before I was born, and that gave him a distinct advantage. The mate bond was different from the pack bonds, but the rules they followed were written in the same language, figuratively speaking. He understood how the magical ties worked better than I did, and he'd figured out something that would give me privacy when I needed it without causing him to overreact.

Shadowing the bond, he called the new method. "Pull veils across the path until it's difficult to see through," he said. Pack magic, I'd discovered, involved negotiating through a lot of metaphors. Instead of closing it down like a faucet, I layered our bond with stretchy and filmy curtains. The metaphor gave me a method that worked as long as I didn't worry too much about what the curtains were made of.

Sitting cold and frightened in my old van, I pulled the shadows around my bonds until I was alone in the night with the vampire. On the phone, I reminded myself. He was on the phone.

There was a sharp noise that made me jump. It took me a moment to realize the sound had come from the earpiece.

Maybe it had been a slap, because it was followed by a pained squeak. Then someone started crying. It wasn't a cry for attention—those kinds of cries are about hope. Someone will care. Someone will do something about the situation. There was no hope in the sound I heard.

Most of Bonarata's calls were voiceless, just me listening to environmental sounds—a street or woods or inside a building—until he hung up.

The last time he'd hurt someone, it had been a man. We'd had a package delivered from Romania with body parts in it a week later. Adam had traced it to the facility it had been mailed from, but no one there had remembered the package or who had mailed it.

That's when I'd gotten the new phone and the calls had stopped. It had taken eight days for him to figure out how to contact me again.

I should hang up. I knew I should. He couldn't make me answer the phone. But I couldn't leave this person—who sounded like a child—alone with the vampire.

"There, there," crooned the familiar deep voice. In my twenty-dollar earpiece it lacked the resonance it had in person. That didn't make it any less scary. I felt like I needed to hear every nuance in order to predict where the attack was coming from.

I pushed my earpiece deeper into my ear, and the sound got a fraction more clear.

"Are you scared?" he asked, a faint amusement in his voice that did not vanish when he repeated his question in French. "*Tu as peur, ma petite?*"

"*Oui.*" And now I could tell the child was a girl. A little older than I'd first thought—though that didn't make it any better.

The speed and raggedness of her breathing told me that she was way beyond scared. Me, too. I was so scared for her—and there was not a thing I

could do about it.

I put a hand over my mouth so I wouldn't make a sound. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

His next word was a whisper. "*Bon.*"

There was a gasp that sounded more like a noise a kitten might make, followed by a high-pitched whine. I sat frozen in my seat, listening to the wet sounds of Bonarata feeding.

I couldn't have said how long I sat there before there was a little pop of cartilage giving way followed by a dull thump of a body hitting a hard floor.

On Bonarata's orders, vampires were not allowed to kill their prey anymore. That didn't mean the humans they fed upon didn't die accidentally. They hid them in car wrecks and drownings. Sometimes they buried them in places the dead were unlikely to be found.

Evidently Bonarata did not follow his own rules. Color me not surprised.

Silence was sometimes very loud.

After a few more seconds, the caller disconnected.

I drew in a shaky breath and told myself what I'd just listened to had not been my fault. The problem was that I was well aware that might not be true. Maybe if Bonarata hadn't decided to make my life a living hell, that girl would have lived a long and happy life. Maybe she had always been destined to be the food of vampires.

Maybe it had been a performance just for me and no one had died at all.

My fault or not, there had been nothing I could have done about it. That was truth, but cold comfort. I breathed slowly until I thought I was feeling more or less normal.

Then I got out the baby wipes I kept in all of my rigs because I never knew when I was going to get my hands covered with the mess mechanicking engenders. Baby wipes are surprisingly good at cleaning off grime. I used them now to wipe away tears and snot.

When I was sure that my face was clean—because I didn't want to know what I'd looked like directly after that call—I pulled down the visor and popped open the mirror. I looked a little flushed—but that would fade by the time I made it to Uncle Mike's. There was not much I could do about my