

# **Splintered Silence**

**A Bone Gap Travellers Mystery**

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**Kensington hardcover**

**December 2017**

**Also by Susan Furlong**

*Peaches and Scream*

*Rest in Peach*

*War and Peach*

**Written as Lucy Arlington**

*Played by the Book*

*Off the Books*

### **Author's Note**

In late November 2013, a tornado ripped through central Illinois, devastating hundreds of homes and leaving many residents in my rural area homeless. Contractors could not work quickly enough to repair the damage. Subcontractors were hired, and workers came from throughout the United States to ensure that families could be back in their homes by Christmas.

Our home received only minor damage, but it was during that time that I met a family of Irish Travellers. They arrived in a caravan of work trucks, pulling trailers laden with the tools of their trade. The family that came to our house travelled from Tennessee and had their young son with them. While both the mother and father worked, their son hung out in my family room, eating snacks and watching television. He was shy at first, but once he felt comfortable, he told me about his travelling adventures, how he loved to be on the road, and how he couldn't wait to be old enough to carry his own weight. I found this young boy utterly charming and his family's lifestyle fascinating.

It's estimated that over 25,000 Irish Travellers reside throughout the United States. Descendants of nomadic Irish peoples who immigrated to the U.S. during the Great Famine, the Travellers settled throughout the country in extended family groups or clans, with the largest

concentrations living in South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, and Tennessee. As itinerant workers who speak distinct dialects of either Irish Gammon, Cant, or Shelta, they are often marginalized for their unique lifestyles and esoteric customs.

I am not an Irish Traveller. I'm a story writer, and while I have tried to portray Irish Travellers as accurately as possible, they are a secret, closed sect of our American culture. Endogamous, they prefer to live quietly, frequently going to great extents to protect their privacy. Travellers are often stereotyped as immoral and lawless, yet these characterizations overshadow what I have come to know as a culture filled with decency and built on strong family bonds and unbreakable fortitude. Through my writing, I hope readers will come to have a greater understanding and appreciation for the Irish Travellers' unique way of life.

For our son, Patrick

“...until we meet again, may God hold you in the hollow of his hand.”

*May you have the commitment to know what has hurt you, to allow it to come closer to you and, in the end, to become one with you.*

—Abbot Finton of Ireland

## **Chapter 1**

The sound of gunshots cut through my nightmare and jarred me from my sleep. I jerked up, drenched in sweat, anxiety tight in my throat. On the pillow next to me, Wilco stirred but didn't wake. I nudged him, then rolled off the bed and crawled across the floor, taking shelter behind the corner dresser.

I huddled there, crouched low, my breath heavy as I assessed the distance to my service weapon, infiltration sights, escape routes . . . but something wasn't right. I saw pink walls, lacy curtains, and a pretty flowered bedspread. Where was my cot, my tactical pack?

The shots sounded again: a sharp, pounding rhythm that came from just outside. *Bam . . . bam . . . bam*. Not gunshots, I realized, but the sound of a hammer. *Stupid, stupid, Brynn!* The all-too-familiar taunts of embarrassment and self-disgust came rushing back.

My body was safe from war; my mind wasn't.

And neither was Wilco's. Sensing my fear, my dog had jumped off the bed and now stood in the middle of the room, trembling and staring at me with wide eyes. I crawled from behind the child-sized bureau and wrapped my arms around him. "It's okay, boy." I clutched my quivering, sixty-pound, combat-trained best friend. Weeks of intensive drills, hours upon hours of discipline, airlifts and drops from parachutes in howling desert storms, scouring rubble for the dead and the injured—all that and my fearless companion had been reduced to a quaking mass of fur. Deaf and missing a hind leg from our IED "incident," as the military so euphemistically called being nearly blown to bits, Wilco relied on his sight—and on me. I choked at the thought. As if I could even care for myself, let alone for my dog. A damned hammer noise and I'm a blithering imbecile.

*Breathe!*

I placed my face alongside his. *In, hold, exhale.* I could still hear the doctor's voice leading me through exercises designed to control the surge of emotions that came with my flashbacks.

I continued inhaling and exhaling, until both of us stopped trembling. "Okay. We're okay," I stupidly whispered against his muzzle. My dog was deaf, for God's sake, and I was not okay. This was only too obvious by the fact that I was cowering in a pink bedroom in my grandparent's mobile home.

I held on tight and took another minute or two of comfort before reluctantly unwinding from Wilco and hurrying to find my duffel bag. After cramming my legs into rumpled jeans, pulling on last night's sweatshirt, and tying on one of my many wool scarves, I squinted at my reflection in my dresser mirror. The lines around my eyes were more pronounced than before.

The hot desert sun had baked my skin, and sleepless nights since had deepened the crevices. War had aged my features beyond my twenty-eight years. And aged my spirit beyond recognition.

Wilco pranced by the bedroom door, so I motioned for him to stay while I quickly ducked into the hallway bathroom to do my own business. Afterward, as we made our way through the trailer home, I glimpsed into the spare room, where Gramps was still sleeping. His oxygen tank hissed a rhythmic sound, like a whispered *death, death* with each puff. I should've felt sad about his failing health, but I didn't. Instead, I felt guilty. Guilty because, in some small way, his death would bring respite from the years of tension and resentment that had built up between us. And relief from the daily burden Gran endured taking care of him.

Wilco, anxious to go out, nudged me out of my thoughts, so I led him to the front door, where he fumbled his three legs down the steps to the grass to relieve himself. Out on the stoop, Gran was hunched over, working on something.

She looked up, tossed aside the hammer, and held out her arms. I stepped down to her embrace. Her dark gray curls, still damp from her morning shower, were wet against my cheek, and she smelled of soap and rosewater, a scent I remembered well from my youth. She was the only mother I'd ever known, the only anchor in my life. I clung to her just a little longer, reluctant to let go.

She pulled back a little, her blue eyes sparkling with joy. "*Me Lackeen.*" Our Shelta language for "my girl." She gestured toward her work tools. "I'm making a ramp, so that dog of yours can get up these steps easier."

I pressed my palms to her cheeks and leaned in until our foreheads touched. "Thank you."



She gave me another squeeze, then let her arms drop. “Sorry I wasn’t here when Meg brought you home last night. I’d run to the market for a few things. You were already asleep when I got back.” *Or passed out drunk*, I knew she was thinking but didn’t say. I’d stopped off for a little liquid encouragement before coming home to face Gramps. As it turned out, I’d taken in more than I could handle. My cousin, Meg, drove me home.

“I was tired. I said a quick hello to Gramps, then went to bed.” That wasn’t *exactly* true either. I’d come in last night and had gotten barely a nod from the old man before I went to my room. No hello, no nothing. ’Course, I hadn’t said anything either.

She touched my cheek. “You’re wearing your hair longer.”

I cringed, brushed away her hand, and adjusted my scarf.

She bit her lip. “I know you don’t really want to be back here. But I hope you’ll stay a while.”

I looked around: mobile homes, trailers, and RVs; jacked-up trucks emblazoned with chrome accents, ATVs, and sleek motorcycles as far as the eye could see. The wheels of the Bone Gap Travellers. Gypsies, as most called us. Pavees, as we called ourselves. A culture built on wheels, and meant to move, but that had somehow settled in this Tennessee backwoods. She was right. I didn’t want to come back. I’d worked hard to escape this place. And paid the price. But Gran was the one person I loved most in this world, and she needed me.

“I’ll stay as long as you want me.” Relief washed over her face, and I felt a pang of guilt because there was a good chance this was another half-truth between us. Could I keep such a promise? I’d been restless since returning stateside, blowing through several jobs and relocating every couple of months.

I avoided her gaze and instead let my eyes wander to where Wilco pawed at a patch of weeds. He was still distressed: his ears flicking, flinching at a trembling leaf, his nostrils constantly working. I kept a close eye on him. The explosion had forever changed Wilco too. And not just the obvious physical wounds. Once a war dog at the top of his game, who anticipated my orders and showed excitement for his work, Wilco had become unpredictable. A challenge. We were alike in that way.

“How’s he doing?” Gran asked.

“He has his days.”

“And how are you gettin’ along? With the injury, I mean.” Her eyes were drawn back to the area covered by my scarf. No longer blazing red, my scar had morphed into a deep crimson color with white edges raised and puckered like a crumpled napkin. Everyone told me that I was lucky; it could have been worse, it could have been my face. They were right, I supposed.

“Are you still in pain?”

“No.” *Thanks to a steady supply of Vicodin.* “I’m fine, Gran. Really. The VA doctors fixed me right up. I’m almost as good as new.”

“I was worried about you, Brynn.” Her eyes darted away, then back again. “We both were.”

A sour taste entered my mouth. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“Give him a chance. It’s been a long time since you’ve been home. He’s changed. He’s not the same man.”

*And I wasn’t the same woman. Never would be again.*

The squeal of a screen door drew my attention across our yard to a brown and yellow corrugated metal trailer with rust lines dribbling from its fastenings. A half-dressed man stepped out and took note of Wilco pawing around in his yard. “Get out of here, dog!”

Wilco, deaf to the man’s command, continued happily clawing at a garbage can next to the trailer. Then he turned, lifted his stubby nub of a leg, and gave it a good dousing.

“You damn dog!” The guy headed toward Wilco, the muscles in his lean torso rippling with anger.

I sprinted across the yard, my hands in the air—less to protect Wilco, who could handle himself, than to protect the man. With the guy coming up unexpectedly behind him, it was hard telling how Wilco might react. “He’s deaf! I’ll get him. I’m sorry.”

The man studied me for a second. His long, dark hair partially covered his angular face; still, I sensed something in his eyes—the insolent stare of a man who thought very little of excuses and had no use for others. I held his gaze long enough to show I wasn’t intimidated, then rubbed the prickles down on my arms and turned back to Wilco.

Only Wilco wasn’t there.

“He’s gone ’round the other side of the tra-ailer,” the man said, his “trailer” elongated in a light Irish accent with hints of the Pavees’ Shelta dialect. I’d heard that brogue from the old-timers in our clan, but not men in their thirties, as he seemed to be. He must be new to Bone Gap or at least from a different clan.

I scanned the area as Gran made her way to the far side of the trailer, calling out Wilco’s name. She’d forgotten that he was deaf.

I caught up to her. She pointed toward the tree line. “There he is! Go after him. I’ll get his leash.”

My gaze caught on a familiar flash of tan fur. I went after him, cursing myself for not clipping on his lead in the first place. I knew better. How many times had he run off lately?

I was closing in on him when he flattened his tail and wildly pawed at the ground. He'd sensed something, caught a smell of who knew what. I picked up my pace as he sniffed his way into the woods that surrounded the trailer park. For only having three legs, he was amazingly quick. A few minutes into the chase, I lost him.

I used to love the woods. As a young child, I'd happily lose myself for hours under its green canopy, playing out the stories in my head: Davy Crockett, Robin Hood, and Pocahontas. A thick tangle of tree trunks would serve as my hideout, the colorful underbrush my magic carpet; a stick could easily become a rifle or a bow, whatever I needed to defend my territory against marauding pirates or masked robbers. But that was back when the world still seemed innocent, before I knew and had experienced real evil. Now the forest surrounded me with a menacing tangle of unknowns, and every unknown spelled danger.

Tree trunks formed a dense black crop of shadows, their bare branches knotted against the sky like snarly witches' hands. My eyes darted about, drawn by every new scuffle of sound in the thick underbrush of decaying leaves. From somewhere in the woods, I heard the sound of voices, low and masculine, the words indistinguishable. Probably hunters. The forest was full of them this time of year, and not all of them sharp enough to know a deer from a dog—or woman in dark denim jeans and a shadow-gray hoody, for that matter. I carefully treaded through the patch of trees, one eye peeled for any more activity ahead of me.

Behind me, the neighbor man called out. “Hey, lady! Lady!” He’d put on a shirt and carried Wilco’s leash in his hand. Gran must have given it to him. “Wait up. You shouldn’t be out here alone. These woods are no place for a woman.”

*No place for a woman.* How many times had I heard that? It seemed the world was full of places where men thought women didn’t belong. “And why’s that?”

“Because you never know who you might run into.” His eyes nervously scanned the woods. We both wheeled around at the sound of rustling leaves behind us.

It was Gran.

“Have you lost him?” she asked, then flinched as a sharp howl ripped through the air.

Shivers ran through me. *Wilco!*

Another doleful canine cry reached my ears, and I turned and bolted toward the sound. I plunged through the underbrush, swiping tree branches aside, my temples pounding. I skidded my way down a rocky ravine, my dog’s distress pulling me forward despite stone outcroppings that poked out at angles nearly impossible to navigate. Several times I lost my footing on the boulders and pitched forward, gashing my skin.

“Wait!” the man called from behind.

I ignored him and kept moving forward. A couple of times, I stopped and listened in order to regain my bearings. I located Wilco’s baleful howl in a spot known by locals simply as The Rocks—an area where the dense cove forest gave way to mounds of sharp, jutting boulders with deep crevices that made natural traps for animals. It was common to find intact skeletal remains of whole animals inside many of the rock-like pits, which is why the indigenous people aptly named the area Bone Gap.

Now I spied Wilco trapped at the bottom of one of these fissures—seven, maybe eight feet deep—and he was unable to paw his way out. He was whining, barking, and frantically scratching at the side of the pit. Then he'd drop down and race back and forth, like he did when he wanted me to follow him.

I pressed my belly flat against a boulder and reached toward him. "I'm trying to get to you, buddy." But it was no use. He was too far down.

"Is he okay?" I heard Gran ask. I stood and saw the neighbor man helping her the rest of the way down the rocky hillside. They reached the edge of the crevice and peered down.

"He's okay," I reassured her. "Just stuck. And freaked out."

The man stepped forward. "I could help. If you want." *This from a guy who'd just cursed my dog a few minutes ago?* I took a good look at him. There was something unnerving about him. Anger and tension hummed around him like dark waves, yet there was an undercurrent of something else. Sadness? Vulnerability?

Gran had moved closer to the side of the pit. "This is Kevin Doogan, our new neighbor. And you'd better let him help you, hon. That dog of yours is working himself into a frenzy."

I weighed my options: I could get in and out of that crevasse by myself, but there was no way I could lift Wilco all the way up. I looked over at Doogan. "I'll go down there and lift my dog up to you, okay?"

"Fine by me."

I flipped around and lowered myself into the opening. Instead of rushing toward me, Wilco sat down, faced away from me, and stared deeper into the shadows, his ears pricked forward, his focus concentrated, on duty and on alert—the way I'd trained him, the way I'd seen

him too often in our past. A chill shot up my spine and down my arms. I knew why he was so keyed up.

He'd found something.

I clamped my eyes shut. *This isn't a war zone.*

"You okay down there?" Gran called out.

No, I wasn't okay. But I opened my eyes again to see what Wilco had found. He'd done his job—alerted me. I needed to do mine and show that I'd taken his cue.

*Probably a dead raccoon or squirrel.* I was just kidding myself. Wilco was trained to detect and alert for only one scent:

*Human* scent. And he was good at it.

Tentatively, I peered closer. My fear was confirmed: Against the back wall of the pit, the rocks narrowed to a thin crevice where leaves, twigs, and brush had collected. Sticking out from under the debris, blending in with the bright russets and orange colors of fall foliage, was a mass of tangled red hair. A sick feeling chewed at my gut, the scent of decayed flesh pricked my nostrils, and bile threatened in the back of my throat. I'd seen enough death to last a lifetime, handled it time and again without any reaction. But I'd left all that behind . . . and now Wilco had found a body.

I snapped back to my military training, crouched low, and maneuvered into the crevice the best I could without disturbing anything. The scene was unnerving, even to me, someone who'd witnessed torsos with tattered shreds for arms and bloodied scraps of blown-up flesh scattered and seeping into desert sands. But this was different. This woman wasn't a casualty of war. She had a round, dark-red bullet wound in her left temple, indicating that her death had been either suicide or murder. She'd been there for a while. Putrefaction had set in, and bugs and

rodents had gotten to her face. Probably other parts of her body too, but I couldn't tell without further penetrating the scene. I stepped back, pulled out my cell, and snapped a few pictures, something I'd been trained to do at wartime crime scenes where evidence was often quickly disturbed by the harsh desert elements.

I looked upward. This part of the pit wasn't visible from above. Kevin and Gran couldn't see what I was doing and were calling out for me. I walked back to Wilco, who was still sitting on alert, confident and proud, and praised him with long strokes down his back until he flipped over for his ultimate reward—a generous belly rub. “Good boy. Good boy!”

“What are you doing?” Doogan asked. He and Gran were peering down at me.

I stood and dialed 911, but there was no reception. “Could one of you try calling the cops?”

“The police?” Gran asked.

Doogan chuckled. “No need for the cops. We can get your dog out of there.”

I pocketed my phone. “No. It's not that.” I ran sweaty palms down the side of my pants. “There's a . . . someone was . . . hurt here.” I looked up, silently meeting their stares. I'd said “hurt” but asked for the cops, not an ambulance—and the meaning was all too clear to them both.

There was a period of stunned silence; then before I knew what was happening, Doogan maneuvered over the edge and dropped down next to me. I held out my hands, but he pushed past me, then stopped cold.

“Oh God, please no . . .” He rushed forward. I tried to pull him back as he dropped to his knees and began brushing away the debris that covered her body. “Sheila, Sheila.” Then he stopped blathering, his shoulders collapsing inward as he turned his tormented face my way,



away from the gnawed features of the woman. “I think it’s her. I can’t tell for sure. But the hair. It’s the same color as hers.”

“Who?” I gently tugged him away from the body. “Who do you think this is?”

“My sister.”