

PART 1

CHAPTERS
1-6

KATHLEEN O'SHEA

Little Drifters *Kathleen's Story*

A devastating
account of a
stolen childhood



Kathleen O'Shea

Little Drifters: Part 1 of 4

«HarperCollins»

O’Shea K.

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Little Drifters can either be read as a full-length eBook or in 4 serialised eBook-only parts. This is PART 1 of 4 (Chapters 1-6 of 24). The harrowing true story of a travelling Irish family bonded by love, broken apart by life, and then betrayed by their carers in a cruel convent in Ireland. “For those who we lost along the way, I tell this story. For all the children who suffered in this terrible place. For all those I consider my brothers and sisters; the ones who died, the ones who lost their minds, the ones who drown their memories everyday in a bottle of whisky, I tell this for you. Because in the end we are all brothers and sisters – and if we don’t feel that bond of love between each other, just as human beings, then we are nothing. We are no better than the monsters that ran the convents.” Based in Ireland in the 1960s and 70s, Kathleen’s story is a story of extreme hardship, suffering and abuse. It is the story of 11 siblings, abandoned by their mother and torn from their father, incarcerated in convents and then driven apart in the cruellest ways imaginable; it is the story of their ruined childhoods and their fight for recompense. But more than that, it is a story of courage, survival and the incredible strength of sibling bonds against overwhelming adversities. Out of terrible darkness comes a remarkable story. In the tradition of Irish storytelling, Kathleen offers a mesmerising account of her family’s experience.

Содержание

	6
Dedication	8
Epigraph	9
Contents	10
Prologue	11
Chapter 1	13
Chapter 2	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	19

PART 1

KATHLEEN O'SHEA

Little Drifters
Kathleen's Story

A devastating account
of a stolen childhood

H A R P E R
element

Dedication

Little Drifters is dedicated to Grace, a very special person who was always there in my time of need. Rest in peace.

And to all the survivors in all the institutions and to all those who sadly did not make it. This is for you.

Epigraph

When we were young, wild and free
The happiest times for all to see
Had its moments of sorrow and pain
But I would live them all again
Brothers and sisters sticking together
Mother and father in all kinds of weather
Life can be cruel and often unkind
Now it's a memory engraved on my mind.
(‘Memories’, Anon.)
Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.
Without them, humanity cannot survive.
(Dalai Lama XIV)

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Prologue](#)

PART I: Bonded

[Chapter 1: The Cottage](#)

[Chapter 2: Life on the Road](#)

[Chapter 3: Harsh Reality](#)

[Chapter 4: A Birth and a Death](#)

[Chapter 5: Needles and Haystacks](#)

[Chapter 6: A New Home](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Prologue

I never had any intention of returning to St Beatrice's Orphanage. And yet here I was, standing in front of the house I had called home for five years. A home filled with misery, cruelty and abuse.

My eyes scanned the large black front door rising up from the path, the heavy wooden gates, the tree in the front garden, and I felt anger swell inside me. It was just a house. From the outside, you would never have guessed the secrets and sadness this place had hidden for so long. Now, nearly 20 years after my escape, it was no longer one of the houses run by the Sisters of Hope from St Beatrice's Convent. It was no longer Watersbridge, a home for children made wards of the state from myriad different personal tragedies. It was just an ordinary house. You might pass by this house and not look at it twice. It was just like all the others in the road – two storeys, small front garden, large Victorian windows, nothing special. And yet that's not what I saw.

I saw the children of my past in every part of the grounds, so real I felt I could reach out and touch them. So vivid, I could hear their voices. Here, on the roof, Jake squatted – keeping a watchful eye down the road for Sister Helen in case she came trundling down the road on her bicycle, ready to send up the signal to the rest of us that 'Scald Fingers' was returning. That's when we'd all scurry through the gate to the garden at the back. There, sitting on the wall, was 10-year-old Megan, her bare legs swinging and kicking against the red bricks. Jake's brother Miles clambered over the gate, one dangling leg testing the ground below before dropping into the front garden, where we loved to play, even though we weren't allowed. Six-year-old Anne, the little girl I adored, sat in the crook of the tree's branch, shouting and laughing at the children below, her pure white hair blowing around her pretty face like a halo. Shay, seven, rested on the ground, a look of fierce concentration on his face as his small, bony hands dug a hole in the earth with a twig. And scattered about, I saw others: James, Victoria, Jessica and Gina. I could picture every one of them – saw their fleeting smiles, their innocence, warmth and energy. Dead now. All of them dead.

'You all right, Mum?'

My daughter Maya interrupted my thoughts and the visions started to recede from my sight. The voices drifted away and, as they left, I felt a familiar ache inside. I hadn't spoken or moved in minutes. Maya stood at my side, concern in her voice and eyes.

'Yes. Yes, I'm fine,' I reassured her. I pulled my cardigan around me tighter, though it was a warm spring day.

'Do you want to go in?'

I glanced again at the ghosts from my past as they played, carefree and happy. So much to look forward to back then. Now their voices would always be silent.

'No.' I shook my head. 'I'd like to go now.'

I said goodbye to the children in the house and left them there – still playing, still blissfully unaware of their future. Too much pain, too much horror and torture went on in this house. I couldn't bear seeing any more of those lost children.

The fact was, I had never intended to return to Watersbridge. It was purely by chance that my daughter and I, on a trip to visit my father, had decided to pass through this town again. But as I turned away, I realised that coming back was important.

You see, I made it.

Out of so many children that passed through these doors, I was among the very few that came out alive and in sound mind. I saw myself as no more than fortunate in that regard. I have struggled myself for years to fight down the demons from my past. I was lucky to come through the other side – many others did not.

So the fact that I was here at all was a symbol of defiance against this heartless place that tried to break us, my brothers and sisters, and those we came to look upon as our family. The fact that

I came back with my own family was a sign that ultimately love won this battle for our souls, for our very survival.

But for those whom we lost along the way, I tell this story now.

For *all* the children who suffered in Catholic convent orphanages all over Ireland – the ones who died, the ones who lost their minds, the ones who drown the memories every day in a bottle of whiskey, I tell this for you. Because in the end we are all brothers and sisters – and if we don't feel that, feel the bond of love between each other just as human beings, because we *are* human beings, then we are nothing. We are no better than the monsters who ran the orphanages.

PART I

Chapter 1

The Cottage

I loved to hear the story of how my parents met. Sometimes at night, when we were all gathered around the fire, Daddy would entertain us with his music and stories.

'Tell us about meeting Mammy!' we'd beg him.

Mammy, standing by the big sink in the kitchen, would tut and shake her head: 'Sure, you've heard it a thousand times already!'

But Daddy, now flushed with the drink, didn't need encouraging. He loved to tell us stories. He'd take a long swig of his Guinness, wipe the foam from his lips, then fix us all with a roguish grin.

'I had never set eyes on your mother before,' he'd start, and we'd all smile in anticipation. 'Not before this day. I was 23, getting on with my own life, engaged to be married to a local girl. And who should turn up in our town but your mother with her mammy and sisters.'

'I was out riding my bike one day when I caught sight of her in the chip shop window. I stopped then and there, right outside the window, and looked in. Jesus, but she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life! Long golden hair, sparkling blue eyes – all of 17, she was a picture. That night I went home and I told my sister: "Mark my words, I'll marry that girl!"'

'So I called off the wedding and my parents went mental. But I didn't care. The next day I found out where your mother lived and I went to call on her. And I just came straight out with it and told her she was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen and she'd be mad not to go out with me. And naturally, she said "yes".'

'Because you're brazen as anything!' my mother interrupted him.

'And pure handsome of course!' he added, a twinkle in his eye. 'And that was that. My family went mad at me because your mother is from a travelling family and they didn't like that, which is nothing but prejudice, so we ran away together, your mother and I. The police came looking for us but there was nothing they could do. We were madly in love. I bought a ring a month later and we got married.'

'And that's how all you's lot came about!' he'd finish off, laughing and poking at us all.

It was so romantic, so beautiful, we could all picture it – our father, the tall, dark-skinned, raven-haired man, and the young, slim blonde beauty. We never got tired of hearing that story.

Even as the years went by and the harsh realities of our lives took their toll, I kept that special story locked away in my heart. I held it there, like a secret, and told it to myself over and over again. When the darkness took over and the loneliness seemed to open up a cavernous hole within me, I'd reach for that story. And then I could hear my father's voice again, coming to me through the night, reaching out to comfort me, stroke my hair and hold me close.

That was the time we were all together, I'd hear him say. That was where you came from, Kathleen. All you's lot! You were part of something very special.

By the time I was born my parents had already been together a long while and we were a large family, getting larger every year. I was just three but I can still remember the cottage we lived in, the hills, the river nearby and all the lush green fields where beets, spuds and cabbages were harvested according to the seasons.

The cottage sat pretty on an isolated hilltop, surrounded by wide-open countryside with a beautiful river running past the foot of the hill. Our nearest neighbour was about two miles away, a farmer who owned most of the surrounding fields. You could see horses and cows grazing within stone walls that defined the field boundaries. These walls stretched for miles, gliding up and down the hill, following the contours of the land. Groups of trees dotted the landscape, and there was a

stream and a woodland close by, adding charm and tranquillity to the place. It was such an idyllic setting and, for us, the younger children, it was an adventure playground.

The cottage itself was built from local stone and was a single storey with a slate roof. It wasn't big, especially for 10 of us, but we muddled along. There were three bedrooms. The older children – Claire, 14, Bridget, 13, Aidan, 12, and 11-year-old Liam – shared a room, and the younger ones – Brian, five, Tara, four, Kathleen (that's me), and our youngest brother Colin, two – occupied the other bedroom. Our parents were in the third bedroom. Later my sisters Libby and Lucy and brother Riley would come along, making 11 of us kids in total.

Each one of us was either dark like my father Donal, or blonde like my mother Marion – we looked like a salt and pepper family! Tara had long dark hair, I was fair, Colin was dark, Brian was blond, Bridget dark, Claire blonde and the older boys both dark like my father.

Our mother kept the cottage neat and tidy as best as she could. Most mornings she put out a plate of sliced soda bread and a pot of tea on the wooden table in the parlour, where we all helped ourselves when we got up. We had a small parlour with a log-burning stove. Pots and pans hung around the stove on big metal hooks attached to the walls. The wooden table was under the window and we'd sit, watching her washing away with the laundries, squeezing and flapping the sheets loose before hanging them on the rope that was tied to two nearby trees.

Of course we all tried to help as best we could. In a family so large, everyone has a job, no matter how small. Water needed to be carried in buckets from the nearby river. Mammy would bring us to the riverbank where she'd find a safe spot and show us what to do.

'Now mind where you put your feet down,' she'd warn. 'Be careful you don't fall in the water.'

She'd scoop up the water and lift the bucket, moving away from the river's edge.

'Don't dip the bucket too deep,' she'd instruct. 'There'll be too much water and it'll be too heavy for you lot to lift it up. Just put it half way in.'

She'd let us do it ourselves as it always required a handful of us to make a few trips to fill up the big barrel. Usually it fell to Brian, Tara and myself as the older ones were with my father, working on the farm. But as the buckets grew heavier with each trip we'd set to squabbling, and by the time we got to the barrel we'd usually have spilt half the water on the ground.

That wasn't our only job. We also had animals to tend to – some horses, a goat and a few dogs. My mother had a way with the animals; she was ever so gentle with them. Ginny the goat was a kid when my mother got her. Now she was a milking goat with just one horn as the other was snapped off during a fight with one of the dogs.

When my mother needed milk, she'd just walk up to Ginny and say: 'Come on now, Gin Gin. Come to Mammy.' And Ginny would come straight to her.

'Stand nice and still now,' my mother spoke gently, and Ginny would obey.

Then my mother would sit herself down on a stool, plant a bucket under her and support one of Ginny's back legs.

She milked and talked at the same time, praising Ginny like mad: 'Thank you, Gin. That's a grand bucket of milk there!'

My two favourite horses was a piebald we called Polly, who pulled the cart, and a big mare we simply called Big Mare. They were very gentle creatures. We played under the horse's bellies and in between their legs and they never once hurt us. The greyhound and the Alsatian were used for breeding and their puppies sold off for the extra cash, but Floss, a black and white sheepdog, was my father's favourite and his constant companion. He went everywhere with Daddy.

As our mother was always busy, we were left to our own devices for the rest of the day. We kept ourselves occupied playing with the animals or on the grounds. My mother would call on us occasionally from inside the cottage, checking we hadn't strayed too far.

In the evenings us younger ones got to spend time with Claire and Bridget. They were so loving and motherly to us that Tara and me jealously fought for their attention, trying to outdo each other to be closest to them.

'Bridget, can I do your hair to see if there are any nits?' I'd ask.

Bridget would lie down and put her head on top of my lap.

I'd part her hair carefully with my fingers and move her head around and then exclaim: 'Bridget, don't move! I found a load of nits! Don't worry, I killed them all for you!'

Then I'd click my two thumbnails and push down on her head making a sound like I was squashing the nits.

'Did you hear that, Bridget?'

'Yes, baby, kill them all.'

I'd be at it for ages, all the while Bridget praising me like mad, knowing perfectly well that she didn't have any nits, and I got the attention that I wanted.

We had no electricity in the cottage so our only light was from candles and the open fire in the parlour, where we'd gather and sit out the evening listening to our father's stories or his playing on the harmonica or accordion. He could play any tune even though he never learned how to read music. He'd have us dancing and singing along with a medley of old Irish folk songs, his feet tapping the floor, always in tempo. And he'd tell great stories too – sending us into howling fits of laughter. But always, always my favourite was the story of how they met.

My father was a tall, strapping, handsome man with jet black hair, swept back on his head like a film star. He always looked smart, dressed in suits and shirts, working away from home a lot in different villages or towns. He was a jack of all trades, trying his hand at anything from building to roadwork, farming and breeding horses.

Before he lost touch with his family, my grandmother, Daddy's mammy, would come to see us and tell us stories about my father as a lad.

'He was the Madman of Borneo, your daddy,' she'd cackle. 'They called him that because he was wild as anything. A real live wire. He would often be heard coming into town, shouting his head off, standing up on the horse and cart with the reins in his hands, his shirt sleeves rolled up, galloping as hard as he could, grinning, laughing, pure brazen without a care in the world. Everyone had to jump out of his way or risk being flattened to the ground!'

At the weekends, my father took Bridget and Claire to the village pub where they were paid to perform as a trio. For my sisters, it was the highlight of their week and they'd dress themselves up to the nines, putting on make-up and doing their hair.

'We want to come! We want to come!' Tara and I would beg my father.

'No, babas, you're too young. I'll take you when you're a bit older,' he'd console us.

I was always so envious, watching my sisters dolling themselves up, getting ready for the night out. The two of them, so beautiful, always attracted the attention of the boys in the village, who bought them drinks all night long. My father loved it too, knocking back Guinness and whiskey and chatting away to all the locals. My mother waited up all night for him to come back and always used to tell us he could talk the ears off anyone.

Since our only means of transport was the horse and cart, if we wanted to get anywhere we'd have to walk. It was three miles along a narrow winding road to the village, which had a grocery shop, church, garage and three pubs.

If we had a bit of money the four of us – Brian, Tara, myself and Colin – would walk into the village to buy our favourite sweets: Bull's Eyes and Silvermints. We knew all the routes so we'd take shortcuts through the fields and woods, often straying to climb up a tree to get a better view of the birds or some nestling chicks. Then we'd head to the hay barn, which was along the way, and have a wonderful time climbing the stacks of hay, pushing and throwing each other off. We found it hilarious. We'd get winded and bruised sometimes but we'd get up and get on with it.

When we got tired of the hay barn, we'd walk on to the village, always keeping an eye on anything we could turn into play.

Having had our sweets, we'd pop in and out of the pubs. We loved chatting with the old folks and the locals, people we knew, the ones that called us 'Donal's kids'. They would often get us a packet of crisps or a bottle of lemonade. We made sure we headed home before it got too dark to see where we were going but more importantly we wanted to avoid 'the headless horseman by the big tree'. We'd been repeatedly warned of this ghost by the elders and weren't that keen to see it in the flesh!

My mother had just finished giving us a bath one day after we came home soaking and muddy from a downpour.

'Empty out the bath and stay out of my sight,' she commanded as she raced towards the kitchen to prepare the dinner.

We were draining the bath water when we saw the school bus pull up and stop at the end of the narrow road. I saw Aidan and Liam walking up the hill together and Claire and Bridget lagging behind. The boys greeted us with a tap on the head as they walked in the door but Bridget dragged in behind them, not looking at all happy.

Bridget had big green eyes and her hair flowed in big waves down her back. The sun highlighted the different shades of auburn that ran through her hair. My mother called her Sophia Loren because she had beautiful high cheek-bones. She was so gentle and kind we all adored her. Bridget scooped me in her arms and gave me a big hug. But as she put me down her eyes crinkled and she sighed.

'What's wrong, Bridget?' I asked, concerned.

'Nothing, baby, just got a bit of a sore head,' Bridget replied as her hands reached up to massage her temples. She didn't look at all well. 'I think I'm going to bed and sleep it off and hope the headache will go away,' she added.

That night we all ate dinner together as usual, tea and bread with half a boiled egg each, except Bridget didn't join us because she was still asleep. We weren't long into the meal when we heard a loud bang from the bedroom. We all jumped, startled, and my father raced towards the loud noise, with a few of us tagging along out of curiosity. There was a terrible stench and we could see smoke seeping through from under the bedroom door. Daddy quickly opened the door and thick smoke belled out – the room was on fire!

'Get away! Get out of here! All of you – get out of the house!' my father shouted frantically as he rushed in, pulling Bridget out of the bedroom.

'Aidan, Liam – get the water and blankets!' he yelled again, panic now rising in his voice.

The rest of us gathered outside the cottage, sheer terror in everyone's faces, all our eyes transfixed on the door as we waited anxiously for our father, Aidan and Liam to come out.

It seemed like a lifetime when eventually they emerged from the house, blackened, dirtied and pure exhausted from their efforts tackling the fire. My father was still shaking. Somehow they had managed to keep the fire under control and confined to one bedroom.

We found out later Bridget had switched on the transistor radio before she went to bed and placed the candle on top of the radio. The candle had melted down into the radio and caused it to explode, starting a fire which quickly spread from the curtains to the clothing strewn all over the bedroom. The room was blackened by the smoke and it smelled so foul nobody could sleep there.

Now we were crammed into the two remaining rooms, and the scuffling between us kids was getting more frequent. My father could have easily fixed up the room as he was quite handy but he suffered with nerves and paranoia. To him, the fire was a bad omen.

So one morning, just as we were tucking into our breakfast, Daddy came striding in with a huge grin on his face.

'Hey, lads, you won't believe what I've got!' he announced. 'We'll all be moving soon. You lot gonna love this. I've found us a grand new home and if you'll quieten down I'll show it to you.'

We all looked at each other, puzzled.

'You better not be joking around now, Donal,' Mammy warned him.

He smiled and gave her a wink: 'How about we go outside and have a look then?'

'You can't leave a whole house outside!' Brian scoffed and we all fell about giggling. The thought was so hilarious. A new house! Outside?

Our father led the way out of the cottage and, to our amazement, parked outside the cottage were two brightly coloured wagons with two horses pulling on one wagon and Big Mare pulling the other one. They were shaped like barrels and had been hand-painted with all the colours of the rainbow. They looked so pretty.

'There'll be plenty of room – that thing is 13 foot long and there's two double bunk beds where we can all sleep,' Daddy said confidently as we all ran around, touching and exploring our new homes.

In each wagon there was a small wood-burning stove with a little chimney poking out the roof and a tiny cupboard to store pots and pans. Daddy lifted Brian onto one of the horses and he was so thrilled, he tried to buck and shove the horse to make it move.

Tara and me laughed and screamed as we chased each other in and out of the wagons.

'I'll have my family and my home with me when I go to work,' our father said proudly.

Only Claire seemed apprehensive.

'I don't want people to be calling us gypsies or tinkers. I'd be too embarrassed,' she objected. A teenager already, Claire had long blonde hair and was small and petite. She liked the nicer things in life and she cared what people thought of her.

'Ah, don't be worrying about that,' Daddy replied, putting a reassuring arm around her small shoulder. 'If anyone has anything to say, I'll kick the shite out of them!'

Chapter 2

Life on the Road

'Come on, children, let's get a move on,' my father yelled. 'We want to get there before it gets too late. On the wagon now!'

Finally, the day came for us to move out of the cottage and onto the open road. We packed and transferred all our belongings into the wagons, which didn't take long as we didn't have that much.

I took a long last look at the cottage – I was sad to leave it behind but at the same time I was stirred up by the excitement of our new life and all the adventures to come.

It was the start of our life on the road!

My father moved around the wagons and cart, checking that everything was in place, giving it a final inspection, tucking and pulling, making sure that the horses were safely strapped in before he was ready to hit the road.

He lifted Colin up into the wagon. Brian, Tara and myself climbed in, then he hauled himself up at the front, reaching for the reins. My mother was already there, and next to her was Floss, seated in prime position between my parents.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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