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She is currently working on a novel, daydreaming of a US Green Card and drinking way too much coffee.

She wants to be a NASA astronaut when she grows up.

Visit her blog at **www.catherineryanhoward.com**.

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Although this is a work of non-fiction some names have been changed by the author.

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CATHERINE RYAN HOWARD

MOUSETRAPPED

A Year and A Bit in Orlando, Florida

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Prologue: Labor Day 9

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MOUSETRAPPED

Prologue

LABOR DAY

On the night of September 4th, 2006, I was at home in Cork, Ireland, utterly unable to sleep.

Across the room, my enormous purple suitcase was packed to the zips with summer clothes, anti-frizz hair products and bottles of sunscreen. Leaning against it, my carry-on bag. This held my computer, my journal, two books, twice as many magazines as I could feasibly read during an eight-hour flight, and a fetching pair of fluffy pink slipper socks. Stuffed into an envelope were my passport, my US visa documents and proof of my imminent employment in a Walt Disney World hotel. Photocopies were hidden in various other places; I was taking no chances with the Department of Homeland Security.

The alarm clock was set for five, allowing plenty of time for me to get up, get caffeinated, get my hair straightened and get to the airport, only a five minute drive from my home. My first flight would take me to London Gatwick, the second all the way to Orlando, Florida.

I'd got the job offer in May; it had been a long, impatient wait riddled with excitement. I had never even been to Florida before and I couldn't wait to see the

sunshine, palm trees and long, sandy beaches that my *Rough Guide* promised would be there in abundance.

But it wasn't only anticipation that was keeping me awake.

Just before I went to bed, I made the mistake of reading my horoscope for the coming week online. It predicted that on Wednesday - my first full day in Orlando - I would learn something that would 'change everything' and that for the next month I'd be spending a lot of time at home on my own.

Say *what* now?

The following evening I would land in Orlando with one suitcase and no place to live, knowing just one other soul on the entire continent - my cousin David would be 900 miles to the north in Towson, Maryland. Yet I was convinced that it would be mere days before a smiling, suntanned and inexplicably skinnier me would be skipping around Magic Kingdom, wearing a Tinkerbell T-shirt and towing behind me a gaggle of new, fun friends. Someone would think to snap a candid photo of our happy faces which, later, I'd place in a Mickey Mouse-shaped frame and hang somewhere prominent, a reminder of the darned fantastic time I'd had in the happiest place on earth.

I thought that building a whole new life for yourself in a foreign land thousands of miles from home would be just like preparing a Pot Noodle: easy and instant.

Of course, it didn't work out that way.

Unbeknownst to me, I was about to be whacked across the face with a cold, wet fish called Reality. For the first time in my life I'd struggle on a daily basis. It would be months before I'd set as much as a toe in Magic Kingdom and, worst of all, that stupid horoscope would be proven to have been exactly right.

Lucky for you, as this would have been a ceaselessly boring book otherwise.

PART I

An Irish Girl in a Disney World

One

THE CALL OF THE MOUSE

Once upon a time, in a land that could be far, far away from you depending on your current geographical location, there lived a little girl who believed that the best way to stand out from the crowd was to dream big - to dream *specific* - and not to let a little thing called reality get in the way.

Our story begins in the week before Christmas, nineteen hundred and ninety-five.

I was dutifully following my parents around on a last minute shopping trip when somewhere among the pungent deodorant gift sets and the festive biscuit tins comprised mainly of varieties that people didn't care to eat, I spotted an interesting paperback.

It had a quote on the cover from Mr. Stephen King who claimed that the book was 'the most horrifying true story' he had ever read. The previous summer I had laboured my way through King's *The Stand* and had been sufficiently terrorised by it to now conclude that this book must indeed be truly horrifying. So I picked up a copy and initiated Operation Nag Dad. He (eventually) agreed to buy it for me and the rest is history.