

MOUSETRAPPED

A Year and A Bit in Orlando, Florida

Smashwords Edition

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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

1. 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.

Or at least, the rest is the rest of this book.

It was *The Hot Zone* by Richard Preston, a somewhat sensationalised account of an outbreak of the Ebola virus in Reston, Virginia, in 1989. According to Preston, a highly virulent and deadly disease that just loved to liquefy internal organs and turn eyeballs into a bloody mush had reared its head 'in the shadow of the White House.'

It was actually a strain that only infected monkeys, Reston is over twenty miles from the White House and the entire incident was confined to small animal storage facility, but *still*.

Before I'd even reached the book's end, I knew I had just stumbled upon my vocation. There was no doubt about it; I simply *had* to become a virologist.

But not just any virologist, oh no. I had to be the kind that worked with viral haemorrhagic fevers in the Biosafety Level 4 laboratories of the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) in Fort Detrick, Maryland.

I would find ways to overcome the more obvious hurdles – not being an American citizen, not being in the US Army, being too squeamish to handle raw chicken – and then my dream life would be mine, just like that.

I shared my plans with anyone who would listen, and some who didn't care to.