



In this month's instalment of RSVP's Real Life Stories, we chat to Delia O'Callaghan from Cork, who shares her unique and interesting story, which provided the inspiration for her brand new book.

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When Cork woman Delia O'Callaghan flew home from America in 2009 for her sister's wedding, little did she know of the terrifying ordeal which lay ahead of her on her return journey back to the States. Having spent 15 years as an illegal alien living the American dream, her plan to sneak back in over the Mexican border saw it turn into a nightmare which would completely turn her life upside down.

Picture the scene: a group of illegal immigrants, chained together, are being led into custody in the dead Mexican heat. They are dressed in modest attire, clutching their rosary beads and plastic bags filled with what little possessions they brought to sneak across the border to America- all, except one, that is. Indeed, dressed immaculately in her long, flowing dress and high heels, dragging a set of designer Louis Vuitton luggage behind her, glamorous Irishwoman Delia O'Callaghan stands out from the line-up like a sore thumb.

This is the stuff that books and movies are made from, which is exactly what Delia thought, even as she was being led away to begin her 27-day prison sentence for trying to sneak back into the States, having lived there for 15 years as an illegal alien. So much so, in fact, that what started out as scribbles on the back of prison medical forms during her month-long prison stint went on to become the raw materials of her first novel, *Honeysuckle to Handcuffs*.

While Delia has given her book a fictional spin, *Honeysuckle to Handcuffs* charts all of the breathtaking highs of her fifteen years spent living the American dream, to the rock-bottom lows of being refused re-entry to the States after a trip home to Ireland, her arrest and imprisonment for trying to sneak in through the Mexican border, and the subsequent heartbreak of being banned from returning to the country where she had built her life, her relationships and her business for the fifteen years previous.

From her glamorous job as a Personal Assistant, planning parties and managing the properties of wealthy Bostonians, to tales of sipping cocktails in some of the most exclusive bars, toting designer handbags; it is not hard to see why Delia was so devastated at being forced to turn her back on such an enviable lifestyle.

Although now, four years on, Delia is finally able to find some comic relief from the situation, it was a very different story at the time. Recalling the “horrific” moment when she was stopped and arrested, Delia reveals that it was the realisation that her American dream was over that hit her the hardest, and was the most difficult part of the ordeal to come to terms with.

“It's over four years now, and it did affect me awfully, and it still does,” says Delia. “I

Delia enjoying the Florida Keys before her incarceration

didn't get to say goodbye to my friends, I had to move everything over the phone - it was very tough.”

Despite admitting that she had always lived in fear of her illegal status coming to light during her various trips back home over the years, Delia explains that she was completely unprepared for what happened next: “I thought, ‘Ok, I'll be arrested, I'll be sent home; this will last a day, two days max.’”

Little did she know what lay ahead. After getting caught by border police, she went on to spend a week in the confines of a cold, damp prison camp, with her family and friends back home having no clue of her whereabouts or circumstances. Indeed, it was wasn't until after she had been transferred to the San Diego Correctional Facility and handed her prisoner's jumpsuit, two-and-a-half weeks in, that Delia even knew when she was going to be released.

When that day eventually arrived and she learned that she had been banned from re-entering the States for five years, there was a whole new deal with a new ordeal: ripping her idyllic American life at the seams and starting over again in her native Ireland. “It was a very low point in my life,” Delia reflects sombrely. “I had to move all my stuff back, I had to get rid of my business. It was very upsetting.”

It may come as a surprise to learn then, that Delia's novel is in fact, a comedy, something which, despite the trauma of her ordeal, she says was always on the cards. “It had to be a comedy,” laughs Delia, as she draws up one particular experience of prison life where she was forced to wash the only pair of clothes she had - which she had worn for a full week - while wrapped in a bed sheet. “I couldn't write it in a sad tone because there were jokes just thrown in everywhere. It's kind of self-deprecating but it's a bit of fun.”

Indeed, for those who are expecting Delia to sob her heart out for 400 pages, they are very much mistaken. *Honeysuckle to Handcuffs* interchanges between all of the various stages of Delia's American life, from her arrival to the States at the age of 25, to her jet-set lifestyle working for a high profile political family, all the way to prison life with a foul-mouthed drug-trafficking cell mate - and with a healthy dose of romance, glamour and Irish wit thrown in for good measure.

Now Delia, who currently works as a general operator with EMC, says that while she is uncertain as to what twists and turns lie ahead, she is looking forward to a fresh start. “Being stopped is still very raw, but now it's time to move on,” she says, although she does admit that she is hopeful of returning to her beloved Boston for a visit when her ban is up in May. Having been selected as a finalist in the inaugural Irish Writers' Centre Novel Fair competition for *Honeysuckle to Handcuffs* and already working on a second novel, one thing which is certain is that Delia's future looks bright and, given her track record, it will be eventual!

Words: Jane Haynes