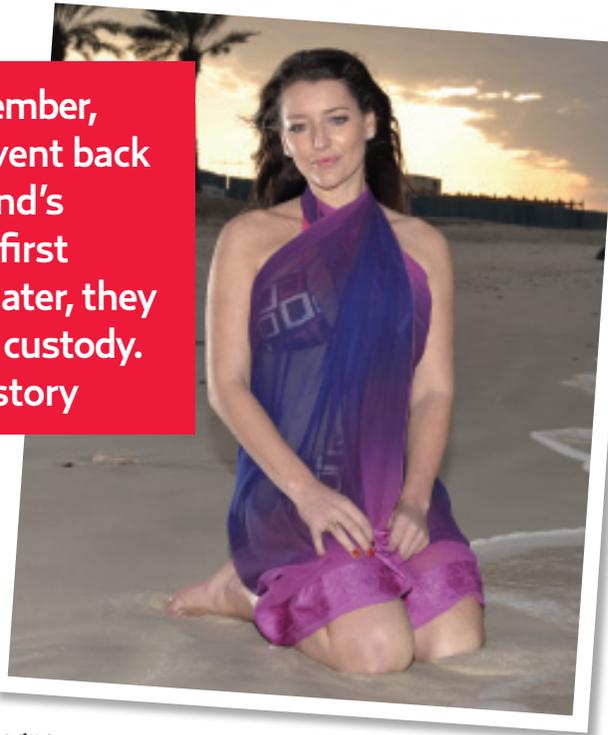


# 'I Spent Christmas In A Rotting Dubai Prison Cell'

One night last December, Danielle Spencer went back to her new boyfriend's apartment for the first time. A few hours later, they were both in police custody. Here she tells her story



THE NIGHT I MET TOBY BEGAN like any other night out in Dubai. It was a Tuesday and I'd met a girlfriend for dinner before heading to the bar. Bars in Dubai are usually outdoors, with a pool, amazing views, day-beds and free-flowing champagne. This one was no exception.

I was at the bar when Toby and I first locked eyes. He was very cute, with scruffy blonde hair, and he came over and offered to buy me a drink. As we chatted about our jobs – his in banking, mine in yacht sales – I realised how much fun I was having.

I'd moved to Dubai with an ex seven years earlier, having grown up in Hull. Life in the Middle East was amazing – tax-free salaries, yachts, restaurants, domestic help and constant sun. I knew about the Sharia laws prohibiting alcohol (except at

hotels) and sex outside marriage but in the ex-pat community it was accepted that, as long as you were discreet, everything would be fine. Because we shared an apartment, my boyfriend and I told people we were married and wore fake wedding rings (as did many ex-pats). Although the relationship broke down after four years, I stayed on, and had been single for 18 months when I met Toby.

Over the next week we exchanged flirty texts and emails, meeting twice for drinks. Then, one night, we went back to his place, where, after a few drinks, we started kissing and went into his bedroom. We were naked

when I suddenly heard a female voice. At first I thought it was the TV, but then I looked up to see a woman standing in the room. After that, everything happened really fast. Suddenly, the woman was on top of me, pummeling me. Shocked, I took a moment to react, curling into a ball to protect myself until Toby pulled her away.

I ran to the bathroom and locked myself in. Sitting on the edge of the bath, my heart raced. Outside I could hear Toby trying to soothe her, calling her 'Priscilla'. Before I could process this, I heard her say, 'I'm getting a knife and

I'm going to kill her.' Seconds later, she started stabbing at the bathroom door. Terrified, I shouted at Toby to call the police.

When they arrived, I emerged to see the woman sobbing and telling the police that Toby and I had tried to attack her. Toby just laughed. He explained that Priscilla was his ex and that we didn't want to press charges. Relief flowed through me: the whole crazy evening was over. But, instead, more police arrived, and began collecting sheets and lifting fingerprints. We were all told to come to the police station to *{continued}*

## First Person

sign forms. Until then, I'd never considered the dangers of asking Toby to call the police. But as we sat there, I began to feel anxious: I had been caught, undressed, in a man's apartment in a Muslim country where such behaviour was illegal. I'm not exactly sure when it sank in that it was unlikely I would be going home that night. But in the early hours of the morning, Toby and I began calling friends for advice – all the time hoping we wouldn't need it, that this wasn't actually happening to us.

I was texting my sister when we were told we were being charged with assault, unmarried sex and alcohol consumption, and would be taken to jail. We were herded into a police van and told not to speak. I told myself this would all be sorted out soon. After all, Toby and I hadn't even had sex – and it was Christmas in three days.

By 6am I felt tired and helpless. Toby was led away to the men's section and Priscilla and I were taken to a long, 12-foot-wide underground room where 70 women of all ages, some with babies, sat around on stained, torn mattresses. Clothes hung everywhere and there were no windows. It was stifling hot and stank from a hole-in-the-ground toilet in the corner.

Priscilla and I crept towards a space in one corner, and sat on the concrete floor, avoiding eye contact with anyone. We tried to convince ourselves we'd be free soon. Incredibly, we were so tired that we somehow fell asleep.

I spent the next few days waiting for someone to tell us it had all been a mistake. To fill in time, we explored the cramped room, with its rotting shower, and slept and talked quietly. I discovered that Priscilla was from



Priscilla and Danielle, days after they were freed from jail

Brazil and, although Toby hadn't mentioned her, had only split from him recently. Any animosity ebbed away. After all, we only had each other.

Christmas Day was awful. I tried not to think about what my family would be doing. I still hadn't contacted them, hoping I'd be free any day. But finally, on January 2nd, I rang Mum.

When I heard her speak I broke down. 'What's happened?' she asked, panic rising in her voice as I cried harder. She promised to get on a plane.

I had several visitors; a woman from the British Embassy, a prosecutor and, after Christmas, three friends, including Jenny, who just held my hands between hers as I sobbed hysterically. 'Breathe,' she told me. When the five-minute visit was over, I felt bereft.

After that I gave up hope that we'd be released at any moment. I also stopped worrying that I had probably lost my job and, having failed to pay my rent, my villa. Losing my glamorous life in Dubai was no longer the worst-case scenario. Losing a chunk of my life inside this room was.

I replayed that night at Toby's over and over, veering from anger at myself for becoming complacent about Muslim laws, to anger at the Dubai authorities for punishing us

for activities that every other ex-pat was doing too.

By mid-January I was lethargic and depressed. I'd stopped using the shower or brushing my teeth. My hair became lank and greasy. Half-remembered stories about foreigners trapped inside overseas jails tormented me and I worried that if I did receive a trial, it wouldn't be fair. Ten years ago, I'd worked as a dancer in a club, purely to make money to travel. Would that be used against me?

In late January came the news that we were being set free. But elation was swiftly followed by crushing dis-

**'I spent days lying on my mattress crying. I wondered if I was going crazy'**

appointment when we were told it was a mistake. I spent the next four days lying on my mattress crying. The other

women, who we had made friends with, fluttered around me with worried expressions, but I hardly noticed. I wondered if I was going crazy.

Then, after 32 days, a guard announced, 'Danielle and Priscilla *afrage*', which means 'free' in Arabic. Toby had arranged a lawyer and secured bail. Dazed, I could hardly take it in. Seeing Toby for the first time, standing in the prison office, was surreal. It took months to sort out the legal details, but I eventually received one month's jail sentence for unmarried sex (which I'd already served). We were all deported, but I couldn't get out of there fast enough.

I felt anxious right until I got on the plane. As we took off, I didn't even glance at the beaches below that had once dazzled me. Toby, Priscilla and I have since lost touch and I've recently moved to LA. It has everything Dubai had – the bars, the lifestyle – but also offers freedom, something I'll never take for granted again.

**'I heard her say, "I'm getting a knife and I'm going to kill her"'**

worrying that I had