



'I SPENT 18 MONTHS IN A ROYAL HAREM'

Aged 18, Jillian Lauren spent a year and a half as a member of Prince Jefri of Brunei's harem. Now 36, she looks back on how a 'nice girl from the suburbs' became a sex worker in a country she'd never even heard of

As told to Helen Whitaker

It all began when I auditioned for what I thought was a job entertaining rich businessmen in Singapore. A week later I was told I had been selected, but that the 'job' was actually an invitation to be the 'personal party guest' of Prince Jefri, the youngest brother of the Sultan of Brunei. My response was: "The prince of where?"

Looking back, it wasn't the wisest decision to get on a plane to a place I'd never heard of for some dubious employment, but my reckless side won the debate. So I told my parents I was going to work on a movie in Singapore, and flew to Brunei.

Growing up, I was a theatrical, extroverted little girl who wanted to be a star and to have adventure. Combine that with a difficult childhood and it's a recipe for disaster. I come from a conservative Jewish family and my relationship with my parents was complicated. They're loving, generous people but didn't have the right parenting tools. At times my father was violent and verbally abusive, and

'I was a hooker who felt like Cinderella, but just because there was a tremendous amount of money involved it didn't make me less of a prostitute'

The thing about doing things you never thought you'd do is that it happens gradually. It's a series of little decisions, like, 'I'm already lap dancing so what difference does being an escort make?' Every time you step over a line it takes you closer to the next boundary.

To the agency interview, I wore a crushed velvet minidress and a pair of pumps my parents had bought me to wear to temple. I had shoulder-length chestnut hair and on my index card they described me as 'an 18-year-old, curvaceous theatre student with a face like Winona Ryder'. I looked innocent – a nice girl to the core. My first job was that night, and I was nervous, but I went into survival mode and shut off my feelings as I had as a child. The client was a radio host who didn't want much skin contact and gave me a good tip.

A month later, I got the Brunei job. I learnt that Brunei was in Southeast Asia and that at the time the Sultan was the richest man in the world. I decided to go. I came clean to Sean and it meant the end of our relationship, but no-one was going to stand between me and that plane.

I travelled with two other American girls and when we arrived we were greeted by complete luxury. The enormous royal compound looked like a Florida resort as imagined by Aladdin. Eight four-bedroom guesthouses were arranged around a palace housing marble staircases, fountains, tennis courts, a swimming pool and a giant party room. The carpets were woven with gold thread and million-dollar pieces of art lined the walls. I was told all the royal brothers had informal Western nicknames and to call the prince 'Robin'. He had three wives who we never saw and there were already around 40 women of different nationalities living in the guesthouses. We were the new girls.

Robin threw parties every night and the first time I met him was that evening at the palace. He arrived at 10pm, wearing the athletic gear he'd just played squash in. It doesn't sound sexy, but he was. He was a powerful, handsome man with incredible charisma. He came in and greeted each woman. He didn't spend too long talking to me but there was a palpable presence around him, and I was attracted to him.

The Champagne-fuelled parties went on until three or four o'clock in the morning. We slept late and then spent our days by the pool, playing tennis or watching movies. Servants would bring us meals.

At the nightly parties, Robin would disappear with one of the women for around half an hour, but it was a week before I had my first sexual encounter with him. I was driven to an office building with a bedroom inside that looked like something Hugh Hefner could

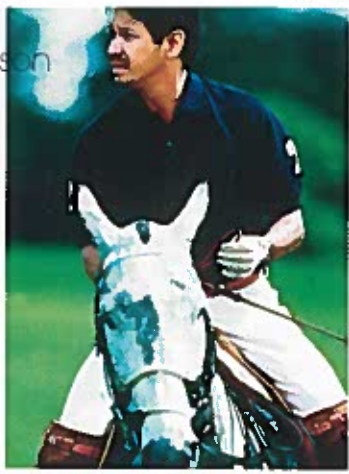
during these episodes I learnt to shut off my feelings and detach from my body – switch off so I wouldn't feel what was happening emotionally.

At school I was creative and rebellious. I wasn't in the popular clique, but I had a group of great friends. I also got good grades, so I graduated at 16 and went to theatre school in New York. However, I also had self-loathing issues. I don't think anyone chooses to do sex work if they come from a place of high self-esteem, and that was true for me. My weight fluctuated and I never thought I was pretty. In pictures of the teenage me I can now see how adorable, hopeful and brave I was, but at the time I hated myself.

I dropped out of college and started waitressing at a strip club and then moved on to lap dancing. Six months later I met Sean, an artist with dark hair and doe eyes. Before him, I'd had trysts but never a real boyfriend. He was a super guy and didn't mind that I was stripping. When a friend suggested escorting as a way to make more money I decided not to tell him.

PRETTY WOMAN

Opposite Jillian Lauren in 1995, three years after she started working for Prince Jefri.



A NEW DAY
Above, from left
Prince Jefri, a.k.a.
Robin, in 1997;
Jilian with her
husband Scott
Shriner and their
adopted son Tariku.

only fantasize about, and we had unprotected sex. I had fears about HIV/AIDS and other STDs, but I just couldn't find the voice to say, 'This is not okay with me.' It was the height of the epidemic and I had friends who were dying of HIV/AIDS in New York, but I shoved my panic aside. Afterwards, he jumped out of bed and I was driven back to the palace.

I'd been there a couple of weeks when I realized what I was really part of. I was tipped off by some 19th-century Orientalist paintings of concubines and their servants lounging next to a harem bath. It occurred to me that although the word was never mentioned, we weren't really party guests and we weren't really prostitutes. It was this whole other thing – a modern-day harem.

There was an informal hierarchy. Robin had a favourite, but the next spots were up for grabs and this was a source of competition and backstabbing among the women. For a while I became Robin's second favourite. He played mind games and would test me by showing me attention and then ignoring me, but other times it felt like he was my boyfriend. In private I saw little cracks of humanity that softened my heart. On a trip to Malaysia I discovered he had insomnia and realized how ultimately unhappy he was. As someone who had always been restless, I recognized a kinship with him on that level. It worked both ways; we had a genuine fondness for each other and at the time I believed I was in love with him.

Life in Brunei was decadent. Robin gave us diamond jewellery and Rolexes, and as his second-favourite girlfriend I was sent on a mad shopping spree in Singapore. I went to every designer store, spending thousands of dollars on dresses without trying them on. A bodyguard followed me around with a Louis Vuitton sack full of cash, and in 12 hours I spent more than the down payment on my house. It was both exhilarating and disgusting. I was a hooker who felt like Cinderella, but just because there was a tremendous amount of money involved it didn't make me less of a prostitute. If you're going to parties that you wouldn't otherwise be going to, and you wind up sleeping with the guy who throws the parties, and then leave with an envelope of cash, you're a prostitute.

After a few months it became oppressive. There was surveillance everywhere, even the bathrooms; while I was by no means a captive, I was terrifically bored. Plus, mentally and emotionally, it's not good to be constantly comparing yourself to other women.

The ultimate prize was to become Robin's fourth wife or get pregnant because it meant security for life. I wouldn't have wanted a life like that; I valued my freedom. So when I had a pregnancy scare, everything crumbled and I decided to leave.

I went back to New York with an envelope stuffed with cash, four suitcases of designer clothes and over \$100 000 (R720 000) worth of jewellery. I lasted six months before making a mess of my personal life and retreating to Brunei, a place where at least I understood the rules. But during this second trip, I finally realized that Brunei would never be the answer. I left again and never went back.

Today my life couldn't be more different. I'm married, I have a two-year-old child and a career as a writer. I rarely go out, instead spending time with my family. I've always been completely open about my past and told my husband [Weezer bassist Scott Shriner] about it on our first date. I would never have written about my experiences without his incredible encouragement; my husband has been my book's biggest champion. My parents' reaction, however, has been the opposite. They're very hurt and upset.

Since my time in the harem I've followed Robin's exploits with interest [in the Nineties he was accused of embezzling \$14.8-billion (R106-billion) from the Brunei government]. Part of the reason I wrote my book was to convey the complexity of my experience. Sex workers can be overly simplified: either they're financially downtrodden and have hearts of gold or they're morally depraved – usually neither is true.

I made conscious choices and was never a victim, but I know that some of the subtler aspects of sex work were damaging to me. For example, after detaching from my emotions for all those years I still find it difficult to be present in my own body. I believe I was lucky to come out of the experience with my health and sanity. I now accept that everything I've done is a part of me. And I'm at peace with that. **mc**

Some Girls: My Life in a Harem by Jilian Lauren (Plume) is available at Kalahari.net for about R150.

