

AUSSIE MUM'S HELL

JAILED FOR SIX YEARS but I was INNOCENT!



Kahlyla, me and Archer before the ordeal

Yoshe thought she was starting an exciting new career, but it was the beginning of a living nightmare

Yoshe Taylor, 50, Brisbane, Qld

I stared at the mobile phone like it was an alien. I'd never had one with such a big screen before.

When I'd left home almost six years earlier, on what I thought would be a quick business trip, I was just getting used to phones that sent pictures.

But I never imagined I'd get locked up abroad for a crime I didn't commit.

Living in the rural town of Esk, Qld, I worked as a primary school teacher.

Aged 40, I resigned and worked part-time as a tutor while I homeschooled my two gorgeous kids, Kahlyla, then 10, and Archer, six.

Single and feeling lonely, I decided to join a dating site. It wasn't long before I was matched with a handsome South African businessman named

Precious Max who lived

in Cambodia.

Aged 34, he seemed generous and kind, and even volunteered at an orphanage in the country's capital Phnom Penh.

Messages flew back and forth between us.

You're so beautiful, he told me.

I loved the attention and he made me feel special.

It's you or nothing. Just as simple as that, he messaged me.

After chatting for about two months, he asked me to come and visit him in Cambodia.

I was flattered, but was wary, having heard terrible stories about scams before.

I knew it was possible he might not even exist.

But the more we talked, the more I could feel how genuine he was.

He'd proved he was real by sending a copy of his passport, and he even paid for my flights.

So in June 2013, I booked a plane ticket to Phnom Penh, while the kids stayed with their dad, Harley.

Precious Max was charming and we had a great time, but after spending eight days together, we realised there

was no spark.

Regardless, we parted ways as great friends.

When I got back to Australia, we carried on our chats, which

had turned from flirting to business.

I told him about a plan I'd had with my cousin to buy Australian Indigenous art and wine, and export them to South-East Asia, but the idea never materialised.

'I could introduce you to my associate, Mr Chan,' he told me, explaining that Mr

Chan wanted someone to oversee a new Queensland branch of his art gallery business.

I was thrilled. It sounded right up my alley, and I'd been struggling to support my family so needed the work.

Within two months, I'd returned to Cambodia to sign contracts, with help from Precious Max.

It was a busy trip packed with business meetings.

I didn't get to meet my new boss, but Precious explained that was because Mr Chan was embarrassed

that I wouldn't understand his English.

On the way back to the airport, Precious asked if I'd take a bag full of samples home to pass on to one of Mr Chan's employees back in Brisbane.

He quickly showed me the contents – metal-plated carvings on wood.

It all looked harmless, so I agreed and didn't think much of it, giving the bag to Mr Chan's employee a day or so later at an outdoor shopping complex.

Around a month later, in September 2013, I went back to Cambodia again.

This time I was greeted by a young French woman at Phnom Penh airport.

'Miss Taylor. Hi, I'm Charlene. I'm with Mr Chan and have come to pick you up,' she smiled.

This is fantastic, I thought. I get to meet a fellow employee.

Charlene took me to my hotel, then out to a restaurant. We even had our nails done together before I signed more documents.

I was shocked to be arrested



AUSSIE
REAL
LIFE

The more we talked, the more I felt he was genuine



Precious Chineme Nwoko in custody

After three days there, Charlene gave me a backpack full of handwoven fabrics to take back to Australia for Mr Chan.

Emptying out the bag in my hotel, I checked the pockets contained nothing they shouldn't, then repacked the bag.

Better to be safe than sorry, I thought.

But when I arrived at Phnom Penh Airport to head home, I was searched.

And I was shocked when they found two kilos of

heroin sewed into the lining of the bag.

My mind was reeling.

What was going on?

I later found out the Australian Federal Police had been tracking Precious Max, whose real name was Precious Chineme Nwoko.

A 24-year-old Nigerian, he was part of an international gang trafficking drugs.

The AFP had tipped off the Cambodian authorities.

There was no Mr Chan. I'd been duped by someone

I thought I could trust.

I was terrified as officers arrested me and charged me for drug smuggling.

Thrown in a crowded and squalid jail, I felt like I was in a living nightmare.

I was allowed to make one phone call to my uncle, who was looking after my kids at the time.

'It was all a trick. I'm in big trouble. I don't know if I'm going to get home,' I cried.

Turn to read more...

I had done nothing wrong!
With no money to pay for a good lawyer, I was convicted and sentenced to 23 years in a Cambodian jail.

Nwoko was sentenced to 27 years, while his accomplice, Charlene Savarino, was sentenced to 25 years behind bars.

I was left to rot for years in the terrible conditions with no sunlight.

Unlike in Australia, you need to pay for everything yourself in prison, so I could barely afford to eat – only having a meal every two to three days. I lost so much weight, I was barely recognisable.

I thought of my kids constantly. I was heartbroken and worried they'd never forgive me.

I knew their dad would be doing his best, but I wanted to be with them desperately.

Eventually, an Australian lawyer heard about my case and offered to help.

After nearly six years, and on my second appeal, I was set free after the judge ruled I was completely innocent.

I was shocked when I learned of two other victims also duped by Precious, who'd been arrested in Australia but had the cases against them quickly dropped.

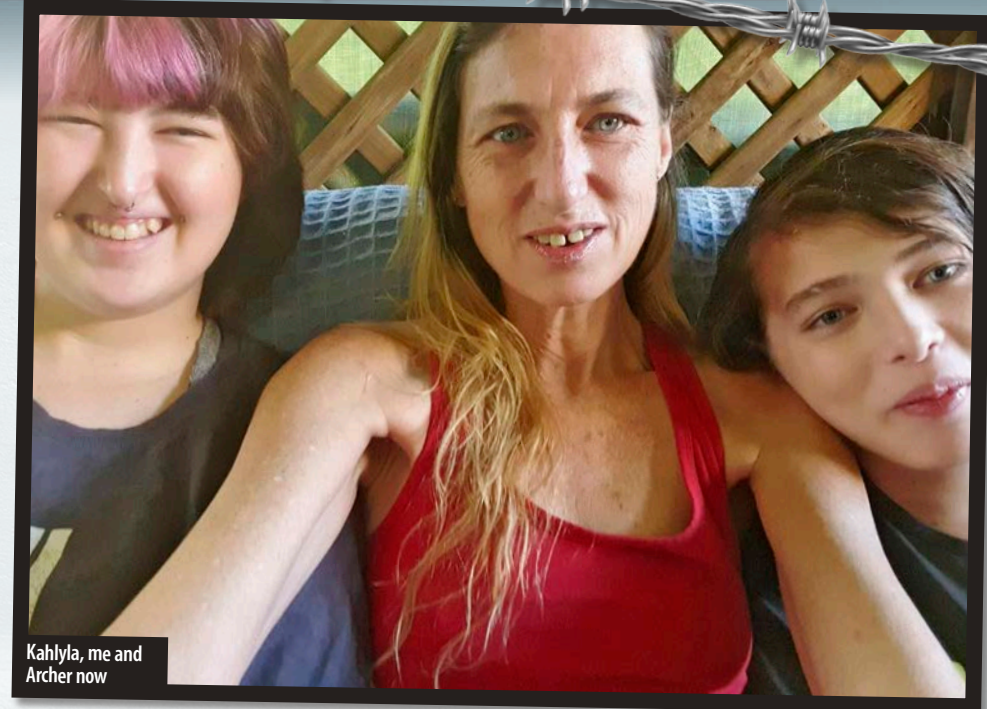
But that message had never been passed on to authorities in Cambodia, where I'd languished in jail for years.

In May 2019, I finally set foot back on Australian soil.

As Kahlyla, then 15, and Archer, 11, ran into my arms, I finally felt at peace.

But I was petrified about my future and how I'd provide for them, having returned with just the clothes on my back and no money.

My brother had been forced to sell my house to



Kahlyla, me and Archer now

pay off the mortgage and other household debts.

While the kids stayed with their dad, for the first eight months back in Queensland, I lived out of a second-hand car my friend had bought me.

My friend Deborah then gave me a place to stay and it's a good job too.

In a cruel twist of fate, while we were watching TV one night, my parked car was hit by a drunk driver.

I couldn't believe it.

Deborah doesn't have much space, so

I live in her garage, but it's a roof over my head and I am eternally grateful.

Nevertheless, I've struggled to adapt to modern life again. Technology has changed so much that I found it baffling, and had no idea how to use a smartphone.

I suffered horrible post-traumatic stress disorder and flashbacks to my life in prison.

In jail over there, you're living in your own head for such a long time. I had no-one to talk to.

Now, everything is moving at such a fast pace.

While I'd love to go back to teaching, I know I wouldn't be able to cope with my PTSD.

The stress of the last nine years has taken a huge toll, but now I'm focusing on getting better.

I'm finding ways to cope such as art therapy and psychotherapy, and I'm slowly writing a book.

I'm lucky that independent mental health charity The Break has helped guide me

on the right path.

I'm proud that I survived my Cambodian prison ordeal, and now I want a brighter future for me and my family.

If my story can save even one other person from being scammed, I'll be really happy.

I might have been duped, but I won't be beaten. ●

As my kids
ran into my
arms, I finally
felt at peace

Have you been
scammed?
Tell us at
thatslife@aremedia.com.au

I want to warn
others about scams

