

The Woman in Me (Britney Spears)

The Woman in Me by Britney Spears is an intimate, candid memoir that offers an unfiltered look at the pop icon's life, career, and struggles. With raw honesty, Spears shares her experiences in the spotlight, her battles with fame, and the challenges of reclaiming her freedom. This deeply personal account is a must-read for fans who want to understand the woman behind the headlines and the power of resilience.

Chapter 1

The chapter dives into the roots of upbringing in the South, emphasizing traditional values of respect and silence towards parents, a stark contrast to the narrator's personal experience of expression through singing. Born in McComb, Mississippi, and raised in Kentwood, Louisiana, the narrator paints a vivid picture of a tight-knit community where life revolves around church gatherings, familial outings, and Civil War reenactments. Singing emerges as a spiritual quarantine, providing solace and an escape from mundane worries.

The narrator's childhood was swathed in the simplicity of small-town life – from attending Christian schools to sharing in communal celebrations – yet it was deeply enriched by music. An encounter with a housekeeper's gospel singing sparks a profound passion in the narrator, transforming singing into an essential mode of self-expression and connection with something greater than oneself.

The backdrop of familial history introduces a duality of tragedy and aspiration. The narrator shares the distressing story of their grandmother, Jean, who faced immense grief and ultimately took her own life, casting a shadow of sorrow and complexity over the family's legacy. This history contrasts sharply with the narrator's mother's lineage, which carries hints of elegance and sophistication from London, underscoring a conflict between the worlds of aspiration and the harsh realities of rural American life.

Early on, the narrator develops a strong sense of identity and ambition, fueled by a desire to transcend the confines of their surroundings through art and imagination. The act of singing becomes not just a way to bridge the gap between reality and fantasy but also a means to cope with the burdens of familial history and personal dreams.

The chapter weaves together themes of cultural heritage, personal tragedy, and the transformative power of music, illustrating how one's origins and family legacies can deeply influence one's journey towards self-expression and fulfillment. The narrator's journey is marked by a longing to escape into a world of dreams, underscored by a commitment to pursue singing as a pathway to freedom and discovery.

Chapter 2

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I will provide the chapter now.

2

When they got married, my parents lived in a small home in Kentwood. My

mother was no longer supported by her family, so my parents were very poor. They were young, too—my mom was twenty-one and my father was twenty-three. In 1977, they had my big brother, Bryan. When they left that first small place, they bought a little three-bedroom ranch house.

After Bryan was born, my mom went back to school to become a teacher. My dad, who worked as a welder at oil refineries—hard jobs that would last a month or sometimes three—started to drink heavily, and before too long, that was taking its toll on the family. The way my mom tells it, a couple of years into the marriage, my grandfather Barney, my mom's dad, died in a car accident, and in the aftermath, my dad went on a bender, missing Bryan's first birthday party. When Bryan was a toddler, my father got drunk at a Christmas party and went AWOL on Christmas morning. That time my mother said she'd had enough. She went to stay with Lily. That March of 1980, she filed for divorce. But June and June's new wife begged her to take him back, and she did.

For a while, apparently, everything was calm. My dad stopped welding and started a construction business. Then, after a lot of struggle, he got a gym business going, too. It was called Total Fitness and it transformed some of the men in town, including my uncles, into bodybuilders. He ran it in a detached studio space on our property, next door to the house. An endless string of muscular men streamed in and out of the gym, flexing their muscles in the mirrors under the fluorescent lights.

My dad started doing really well. In our little town he became one of the most well-off men. My family threw big backyard crawfish boils. They had crazy parties, with dancing all night long. (I've always assumed their secret ingredient for staying up all night was speed, since that was the drug of choice back then.) My mom opened a daycare center with her sister, my aunt Sandra. To cement their marriage, my parents had a second baby—me. I was born on December 2, 1981. My mother never missed an opportunity to recall that she was in excruciating labor with me for twenty-one hours.

I loved the women in my family. My aunt Sandra, who already had two sons, had a surprise baby at thirty-five: my cousin Laura Lynne. Just a few months apart, Laura Lynne and I were like twins, and we were best friends. Laura Lynne was always like a sister to me, and Sandra was a second mother. She was so proud of me and so encouraging.

And even though my grandmother Jean was gone long before I was born, I was lucky enough to know her mother, my great-grandmother Lexie Pierce. Lexie was wicked beautiful, always made up with a white, white face and red, red lipstick. She was a badass, more and more so as she got older. I was told, and had no trouble believing, that she'd been married seven times. Seven! Obviously, she disliked her son-in-law June, but after her daughter Jean died, she stuck around and took care of my father and his siblings, and then her great-grandchildren, too.

Lexie and I were very close. My most vivid and joyful memories of being a little girl are of times spent with her. We'd have sleepovers, just the two of us. At night, we'd go through her makeup cabinet. In the morning, she would make me a huge breakfast. Her best friend, who lived next door, would come over to visit and we'd listen to slow 1950s ballads from Lexie's record collection. During the day, Lexie and I would nap together. I loved nothing more than drifting off to sleep by her side, smelling her face powder and her perfume, listening as her breathing grew deep and regular.

One day, Lexie and I went to rent a movie. As we drove away from the video rental place, she ran into another car, then got stuck in a hole. We couldn't get out. A tow truck had to come rescue us. That accident scared my mother. From

then on, I wasn't allowed to hang out with my great-grandmother.

Chapter 29

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29

Los Angeles is warm and sunny all year round. Driving through the city, sometimes it's hard to remember what season it is. Everywhere you look, people are wearing sunglasses and drinking cold drinks out of straws, smiling and laughing underneath the clear blue sky. But in January 2008, winter really felt like winter, even in California, because I felt alone and cold and I was hospitalized.

I probably shouldn't admit to this, but I was hell on wheels. I was taking a lot of Adderall.

I was horrible, and I will admit to doing wrong. I was so angry about what happened with Kevin. I'd tried so hard with him. I'd given my everything.

And he'd turned on me.

I had started dating a photographer. I was completely infatuated with him.

He'd been a paparazzo, and I understood that people thought he was up to no good, but all I could see at the time was that he was chivalrous and helped me out when the others got too aggressive.

Back then I would speak up if I didn't like something—I would certainly let you know. And I wouldn't think twice about it. (If I had been hit in the face in Vegas—as happened to me in July 2023—I would've hit the person back, 100 percent.)

I was fearless.

We were always being chased by the paparazzi. The chases were really insane—sometimes they were aggressive, and sometimes they were playful, too. Many of the paps were trying to make me look bad, to get the money shot to show “Oh, she's lost and she looks crazy right now.” But sometimes they wanted me to look good, too.

One day, the photographer and I were being chased, and this was one of those moments with him that I'll never forget. We were driving fast, near the edge of a cliff, and I don't know why, but I decided to pull a 360, right there on the edge. I honestly didn't even know I could do a 360—it was completely beyond me, so I think it was God. But I stuck it; the back wheels of the car stopped on what seemed like the very edge, and if the wheels had rotated maybe three more times, we would have just gone off the cliff.

I looked at him; he looked at me.

“We could have just died,” I said.

I felt so alive.

As parents we're always telling our children, “Stay safe. Don't do this; don't do that.” But even though safety is the most important thing, I also think it's important to have awakenings and challenge ourselves to feel liberated, to be fearless and experience everything the world has to offer.

I didn't know then that the photographer was married; I had no clue that I was essentially his mistress. I only found that out after we'd broken up. I'd just thought he was a lot of fun and our time together was incredibly hot. He was ten years older than me.

Everywhere I went—and for a while I went out a lot—the paparazzi were there. And yet, for all the reports about my being out of control, I don't know that I was ever out of control in a way that warranted what came next. The truth is that I was sad, beyond sad, missing my kids when they were with Kevin.

The photographer helped me with my depression. I longed for attention, and he gave me the attention I needed. It was just a lustful relationship. My family didn't like him, but there was a lot about them I didn't like, either.

The photographer encouraged me to rebel. He let me sow my oats and he still loved me for it. He loved me unconditionally. It wasn't like my mom screaming at me for partying. He said, "Girl, go, you got it, do your thing!" He wasn't like my father, who set impossible conditions for his love.

And so, with the photographer's support, I 100 percent did my thing. And it felt radical to be that wild. That far from what everyone wanted me to be.

I talked as if I were out of my mind. I was so loud—everywhere I went, even at restaurants. People would go out to eat with me, and I would lie down on the table. It was a way of saying "Fuck you!" to any person who came my way.

I mean, I will say it: I was bad.

Or maybe I wasn't bad so much as very, very angry.

I wanted to escape. I didn't have my kids, and I needed to get away from the media and the paparazzi. I wanted to leave LA, so the photographer and I went on a trip to Mexico.

It was like I'd fled to a safe house. Everywhere else there'd be a million people outside my door. But when I left LA, even though it was for a short time, I felt far from everything. This worked—I felt better for a little while. I should have taken more advantage of it.

It seemed like my relationship with the photographer was getting more serious, and as that happened, I sensed that my family was trying to get closer to me—in a way that made me uneasy.

My mom called me one day and said, "Britney, we feel like something's going on. We hear that the cops are after you. Let's go to the beach house."

"The cops are after me?" I said. "For what?" I hadn't done anything illegal.

That I knew for sure. I'd had my moments. I'd had my wild spell. I'd been high on Adderall and acted crazy. But I didn't do anything criminal. In fact, as she knew, I'd been with girlfriends the prior two days. My mom and I had had a sleepover with my cousin Alli and two other girlfriends.

"Just come to the house!" she said. "We want to talk to you."

So I went to the house with them. The photographer met me there.

My mother was acting suspicious.

When the photographer got there, he said, "Something's up, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "Something's really o?." All of a sudden, there were helicopters going around the house.

"Is that for me?" I asked my mom. "Is this a joke?"

It wasn't a joke.

Suddenly there was a SWAT team of what seemed like twenty cops in my house.

"What the fuck did I do?" I kept shouting. "I didn't do anything!"

I know I had been acting wild but there was nothing I'd done that justified their treating me like I was a bank robber. Nothing that justified upending my entire life.

I'd later come to believe something had changed that month, since the last time I was brought to the hospital for evaluation. My father had struck up a very close friendship with Louise "Lou" Taylor, who he worshipped. She was front and center during the implementation of the conservatorship that would later allow them to control and take over my career. Lou, who had just started a new company called Tri Star Sports & Entertainment Group, was directly involved in calling the shots right before the conservatorship. At the time, she had few real clients. She basically used my name and hard work to build her company. Conservatorships, also called guardianships, are usually reserved for people with no mental capacity, people who can't do anything for themselves. But I was highly functional. I'd just done the best album of my career. I was making a lot of people a lot of money, especially my father, who I found out took a bigger salary than he paid me. He paid himself more than \$6 million while paying others close to him tens of millions more.

The thing is, you can have a conservatorship that lasts for two months and then the person gets on track and you let them control their life again, but that wasn't what my father wanted. He wanted far more.

My dad was able to set up two forms of conservatorship: what's called "conservatorship of the person" and "conservatorship of the estate." The conservator of the person is designated to control details of the conservatee's life, like where they live, what they eat, whether they can drive a car, and what they do day-to-day. Even though I begged the court to appoint literally anyone else—and I mean, anyone off the street would have been better—my father was given the job, the same man who'd made me cry if I had to get in the car with him

Chapter 45

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45

The first step toward securing my freedom was for people to begin to understand that I was still a real person—and I knew that I could do that by sharing more of my life on social media. I started trying on new clothes and modeling them on Instagram. I found it incredibly fun. Even though some people online thought it was odd, I didn't care. When you've been sexualized your whole life, it feels good to be in complete control of the wardrobe and the camera.

I tried to get back in touch with my creativity and to follow visual and music artists on Instagram. I came across a guy making trippy videos—one was just a baby-pink screen with a white tiger with pink stripes walking across it. Seeing that, I felt a natural urge to create something myself, and I started playing around with a song. At the beginning of it, I added the sound of a baby laughing. I thought it was different.

Hesam said, "Don't put a baby laughing in it!"

I listened to his advice and took it out, but a while later another account I follow posted a video with a baby laughing, and I was jealous. I should've done

that! I thought. That creepy laughing baby should've been my thing!

Artists are weird, you know?

There were so many people in the industry at that time thinking that I was out of my mind. At a certain point, I'd rather be "crazy" and able to make what I want than "a good sport" and doing what everyone tells me to do without being able to actually express myself. And on Instagram, I wanted to show that I existed.

I also found myself laughing more—transported by comedians like Amy Schumer, Kevin Hart, Sebastian Maniscalco, and Jo Koy. I developed such respect for their wit and their cleverness, how they use language to get under people's skin and to make them laugh. That's a gift. Hearing them use their voices—being so distinctively themselves—reminded me that that was something I could do, too, when I made videos on social media or even just in a caption. Humor made it possible for me not to get consumed by bitterness. I have always admired people in the entertainment industry who have a sharp wit. Laughter is the cure for everything.

People might laugh because things I post are innocent or strange, or because I can get mean when I'm talking about people who've hurt me. Maybe this has been a feminist awakening. I guess what I'm saying is that the mystery of who the real me is, is to my advantage—because nobody knows!

My kids laugh at me sometimes, and when they do it, I don't mind so much. They've always helped change my perspective on the world. Since they were little, they've always seen things differently, and they're both so creative. Sean Preston is a genius at school—he's really, really bright. Jayden has such an incredible gift with the piano; it gives me chills.

Before the pandemic, they were with me for delicious dinners two or three nights a week. They were always sharing amazing things they'd made and explaining to me what they were excited about.

"Mom, check out this painting I made!" one of them would say. I'd tell them what I saw and they'd say, "Yeah, but now, Mom, look at it like this." And I'd see even more in what they'd made. I love them for their depth and their character, their talent and their goodness.

As we entered a new decade, everything was just starting to make sense again. Then COVID hit.

For the first months of lockdown, I became even more of a homebody than I already had been. I spent days, weeks, sitting in my room, listening to self-help audiobooks, staring at the wall or making jewelry, bored out of my mind. When I'd run through a ton of self-help audiobooks, I moved on to storytelling ones, anything that turned up under the heading of "Imagination"—especially any book that had a narrator with a British accent.

Chapter 10

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I will provide the chapter now.

Justin Timberlake and I had stayed in touch after the Mickey Mouse Club and enjoyed spending time together on the NSYNC tour. Having shared that experience at such a young age gave us a shorthand. We had so much in common. We met up when I was on tour and started hanging out during the day before shows and then after shows, too. Pretty soon I realized that I was head over heels in love with him—so in love with him it was pathetic.

When he and I were anywhere in the same vicinity—his mom even said this—we were like magnets. We'd just find each other immediately and stick together. You couldn't explain the way we were together. It was weird, to be honest, how in love we were. His band, NSYNC, was what people back then called "so pimp." They were white boys, but they loved hip-hop. To me that's what separated them from the Backstreet Boys, who seemed very consciously to position themselves as a white group. NSYNC hung out with Black artists. Sometimes I thought they tried too hard to fit in. One day J and I were in New York, going to parts of town I'd never been to before. Walking our way was a guy with a huge, blinged-out medallion. He was flanked by two giant security guards.

J got all excited and said, so loud, "Oh yeah, fo shiz, fo shiz! Ginuwiiiiine! What's up, homie?"

After Ginuwine walked away, Felicia did an impression of J: "Oh yeah, fo shiz, fo shiz! Ginuwiiiiine!"

J wasn't even embarrassed. He just took it and looked at her like, Okay, fuck you, Fe.

That was the trip where he got his first necklace—a big T for Timberlake. I had a hard time being as carefree as he seemed. I couldn't help but notice that the questions he got asked by talk show hosts were different from the ones they asked me. Everyone kept making strange comments about my breasts, wanting to know whether or not I'd had plastic surgery.

Press could be uncomfortable, but at awards shows, I felt real joy. The child in me got a thrill seeing Steven Tyler from Aerosmith for the first time at the MTV Video Music Awards. I saw him coming in late, wearing something fantastic that looked like a wizard's cape. I gasped. It felt surreal to see him in person. Lenny Kravitz came in late, too. And, again, I thought, Legends! Legends everywhere I look!

I started running into Madonna all over the world. I would do shows in Germany and Italy, and we would end up performing at the same European awards shows. We'd greet each other as friends.

At one awards show, I knocked on Mariah Carey's dressing room door. She opened it and out poured the most beautiful, otherworldly light. You know how we all have ring lights now? Well, more than twenty years ago, only Mariah Carey knew about ring lights. And no, I can't say just her first name. To me she is always going to be Mariah Carey.

I asked if we could take a photo together and tried to take one where we were standing, and she said, "No! Come stand here, darling. This is my light. This is my side. I want you to stand here so I can get my good side, girl." She kept saying that in her deep, beautiful voice: "My good side, girl. My good side, girl."

I did everything Mariah Carey told me to do and we took the photo. Of course she was completely right about everything—the photo looked incredible. I know I won an award that night, but I couldn't even tell you what it was. The perfect photo with Mariah Carey—that was the real prize.

Meanwhile, I was breaking records, becoming one of the best-selling female artists of all time. People kept calling me the Princess of Pop.

At the 2000 VMAs, I sang the Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" and then "Oops!... I Did It Again" while going from a suit and hat to a glittery bikini top and tight pants, my long hair down. Wade Robson choreographed it—he always knew how to make me look strong and feminine at the same time. During the dance breaks in the cage, I did poses that made me look girly in the middle of an aggressive performance.

Later, MTV sat me down in front of a monitor and made me watch strangers in Times Square give their opinions of my performance. Some of them said I did a good job, but an awful lot of them seemed to be focused on my having worn a skimpy outfit. They said that I was dressing "too sexy," and thereby setting a bad example for kids.

The cameras were trained on me, waiting to see how I would react to this criticism, if I would take it well or if I would cry. Did I do something wrong? I wondered. I'd just danced my heart out on the awards show. I never said I was a role model. All I wanted to do was sing and dance.

The MTV show host kept pushing. What did I think of the commenters telling me I was corrupting America's youth?

Finally, I said, "Some of them were very sweet... But I'm not the children's parents. I just gotta be me. I know there are going to be people out there—I know not everyone's gonna like me."

It shook me up. And it was my first real taste of a backlash that would last years. It felt like every time I turned on an entertainment show, yet another person was taking shots at me, saying I wasn't "authentic."

I was never quite sure what all these critics thought I was supposed to be doing—a Bob Dylan impression? I was a teenage girl from the South. I signed my name with a heart. I liked looking cute. Why did everyone treat me, even when I was a teenager, like I was dangerous?

Meanwhile, I started to notice more and more older men in the audience, and sometimes it would freak me out to see them leering at me like I was some kind of Lolita fantasy for them, especially when no one could seem to think of me as both sexy and capable, or talented and hot. If I was sexy, they seemed to think I must be stupid. If I was hot, I couldn't possibly be talented.

I wish back then I'd known the Dolly Parton joke: "I'm not offended by all the dumb blonde jokes because I know I'm not dumb. And I also know that I'm not blonde." My real hair color is black.

Trying to find ways to protect my heart from criticism and to keep the focus on what was important, I started reading religious books like the *Conversations*

Chapter 17

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17

I was happy with my new album, *In the Zone*. "Me Against the Music," featuring Madonna, was the first single of the album. The next single was "Toxic," for which I won a Grammy Award. "Toxic" was innovative as well as a

massive success, and is still one of my favorites to perform.

To promote the album, I went out with an MTV camera crew in New York City one night to film a special called *In the Zone & Out All Night*. We drove all over the city to appear at three nightclubs—Show, Splash, and Avalon. It was electrifying to see large groups of people dancing to the new songs. As has happened again and again in my career, my fans reminded me why I do what I do.

But then, one day, there was a knock on my door. When I opened it, four men just walked in right past me; I didn't recognize three of them. I'd never seen their faces before in my life.

The fourth was my father.

They proceeded to sit me down on a sofa (the same one I have to this day in my bedroom). Immediately they started peppering me with questions, questions, and more questions. I was mute: I wasn't willing to talk with anyone. I had nothing to say.

A day later I got a call from my team that I was going to speak to Diane Sawyer... and on that same sofa. Because of what had happened with Justin, and everything I'd been through, I felt like I was no longer able to communicate with the world. I had a dark cloud over my head; I was traumatized.

I'd often retreated to my apartment to be alone; now I was being forced to speak to Diane Sawyer there and cry in front of the entire nation.

It was completely humiliating. I wasn't told what the questions would be ahead of time, and it turned out they were 100 percent embarrassing. I was too vulnerable then, too sensitive, to do this type of interview. She asked things like, "He's going on television and saying you broke his heart. You did something that caused him so much pain. So much suffering. What did you do?"

I didn't want to share anything private with the world. I didn't owe the media details of my breakup. I shouldn't have been forced to speak on national TV, forced to cry in front of this stranger, a woman who was relentlessly going after me with harsh question after harsh question. Instead, I felt like I had been exploited, set up in front of the whole world.

That interview was a breaking point for me internally—a switch had been flipped. I felt something dark come over my body. I felt myself turning, almost like a werewolf, into a Bad Person.

I honestly feel like that moment in my life should have been a time for growing—and not sharing everything with the world. It would have been the better way to heal.

But I had no choice. It seemed like nobody really cared how I felt.

Back home in Louisiana again for the holidays, I invited some friends over. We were trying to hang out in the guesthouse I'd built behind the main house—and my mother got annoyed with us for being noisy. Suddenly, it hit me that I had enough money that we did not have to stay in Louisiana. I booked us a trip to Las Vegas for New Year's Eve and some friends from my tour joined us.

We cut loose at the Palms Casino Resort and drank—a lot. I'll admit that we got phenomenally stupid. I will also say that this was one time when I almost felt overwhelmed having that much freedom in Sin City. I was this little girl who had worked so much, and then all of a sudden the schedule was blank for a few days, and so: Hello, alcohol!

Paris Hilton showed up at the casino to hang out and have some drinks.

Before I knew it, we got on top of tables, took our shoes off, and ran through the whole club like fairy-dusted idiots. No one got hurt, and I had the best time with Paris—we were just playing, and we still do every time we get together. I wasn't rude to anybody. It was just innocent fun. Most people will probably

judge, and now you can't do things like that because people will all whip their cameras out. But back then, that time in Vegas, we just acted silly. Having already been under so much media scrutiny, I wasn't interested in causing trouble—it was about feeling free and enjoying what I had been working so hard to achieve.

As a twentysomething will do after a few drinks, I wound up in bed with one of my old friends—a childhood friend who I'd known forever. The third night we were there together, he and I got shitfaced. I don't even remember that night at all, but from what I've pieced together, he and I lounged around the hotel room and stayed up late watching movies—Mona Lisa Smile and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre—then had the brilliant idea of going to A Little White Chapel at three thirty in the morning. When we got there, another couple was getting married, so we had to wait. Yes—we waited in line to get married. People have asked me if I loved him. To be clear: he and I were not in love. I was just honestly very drunk—and probably, in a more general sense at that time in my life, very bored.

The next day, my whole family flew out to Vegas. They showed up and stared at me with these eyes of such fury. I looked around. “What happened last night?” I asked. “Did I kill someone?”

“You got married!” they said, as if that might be somehow worse.

“We were just having fun,” I said.

But my mom and dad took it so seriously.

“We have to get this annulled,” they said. They made way too big of a deal out of innocent fun. Everybody has a different perspective on it, but I didn't take it that seriously. I thought a goof-around Vegas wedding was something people might do as a joke. Then my family came and acted like I'd started World War III. I cried the whole rest of the time I was in Las Vegas.

“I'm guilty!” I said. “I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have gotten married.”

We signed all the documents they told us to sign. The marriage lasted forty-five hours. I thought it was strange they got so involved so quickly and so decisively—without my even having time to quite regret what I'd done.

Chapter 39

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39

Before the conservatorship, my friend and agent, Cade, would call me up and say we should go on a road trip, and I'd be in the car before he was done telling me where we were going. If I wanted the volume cranked up at one of my shows, I'd politely make sure the sound guy turned it up. If you pissed me off, everybody would know about it. I was a little badass. But in Vegas I just smiled and nodded and did the same show again and again like a windup doll.

The only thing that kept me going was knowing that I'd have two vacations with my kids, as I did every year. But the year that Glory came out, I had to tour instead, which meant I wasn't allowed to go on vacation; I had to take the kids

on tour with me, which wasn't fun for anyone. So the following year, I really needed those vacations. One night in the quick-change area before a show, my team came in and I nagged it for them: "Hey," I said, "I just wanted to give you a heads-up. I really need those vacations this year."

Tradition is so important to me. Me and my kids' favorite thing to do was to go to Maui and get a boat and just head out into the ocean. It's for my mental health, honestly.

"If there's a large amount of money," my team said, "we'll go and do, like, two tour shows, and then you can come back and have the whole summer off."

"Great!" I said. "We're on the same page."

A few months went by. Vegas was finally coming to an end in December 2017. I was so relieved. I'd done hundreds of shows.

As I was in my dressing room changing in between acts, someone from my team said, "Hey, yeah, so you are going on tour this year after Vegas ends. We can't just end in Vegas. We have to end it on tour this summer."

"That wasn't the deal," I said. "I told you, I'm taking the kids to Maui."

Chapter 32

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I will provide the chapter now.

32

On the rare occasion that I went out—like to my agent and friend Cade's house for a dinner party—the security team would sweep through the house before I arrived to make sure there was no alcohol or any drugs, even Tylenol, there. No one at the party was allowed to drink until I left. The other guests were all very good sports about it, but I sensed that the second I left was when the real party started.

When someone wanted to date me, the security team who answered to my father would run a background check on him, make him sign an NDA, and even have him submit to a blood test. (And my father said I couldn't see the photographer I had been dating ever again, too.)

Before a date, Robin would tell the man my medical and sexual history. To be clear: this was before the first date. The whole thing was humiliating, and I know the insanity of this system kept me from finding basic companionship, having a fun night out, or making new friends—let alone falling in love.

Thinking back on the way my father was raised by June and the way I was brought up by him, I had known from the jump that it would be an actual nightmare to have him in charge. The thought of my father taking over any aspect of my life had filled me with fear. But taking over everything? It was just the worst thing that could possibly ever happen to my music, my career, and my sanity.

Pretty quickly, I called the weird-ass lawyer the court had appointed for me and asked him for help. Incredibly, he was all I really had—even though I hadn't chosen him. I had been told that I couldn't hire anyone new, because my lawyer had to be court-approved. Much later, I would come to find out that was

bullshit: I didn't know for thirteen years that I could've gotten my own lawyer. I felt that the court-appointed lawyer didn't seem eager to help me understand what was going on, or to fight for my rights.

My mother, who is best friends with the governor of Louisiana, could have put me on the phone with him, and he would have told me I could get my own lawyer. But she kept it a secret; instead, she got a lawyer for herself just so she could get on fighting with my dad, like she did when I was younger.

At various times I pushed back, especially when my father took away access to my cell phone. I would be smuggled a private phone and try to break free. But they always caught me.

And here's the sad, honest truth: after everything I had been through, I didn't have a lot of fight left in me. I was tired, and I was scared, too. After being held down on a gurney, I knew they could restrain my body any time they wanted to. They could've tried to kill me, I thought. I started to wonder if they did want to kill me.

So when my father said, "I call the shots," I thought, This is too much for me. But I didn't see a way out. So I felt my spirit retreat, and I went on autopilot. If I play along, surely they'll see how good I am and they will let me go.

And so I went along with it.

After I'd married Kevin and had my kids, Felicia was still there a little bit; I had always adored her, but once I stopped touring and started working less, we fell out of touch. There was some talk of Felicia's coming back on board for the Circus Tour, but somehow I never did have her as my assistant again. I later learned that my dad told her I didn't want her to work for me anymore. But I never said that. If I had known she wanted to do something for me, I never would have told her no. Without my knowledge, my father was keeping her from me.

I never saw some of my really close friends ever again—still haven't, to this day. It made me shut down psychologically even more than I had before.

My parents had some old friends from home come visit me to make me feel better.

"No, thanks," I said.

I mean, I loved them to death, but they had kids now, and they'd moved on with their lives. Their coming to see me felt more like sympathy than like a social call. Help is good, but not if it's not asked for. Not if it doesn't feel like it's a choice.

It's difficult for me to revisit this darkest chapter of my life and to think about what might have been different if I'd pushed back harder then. I don't at all like to think about that, not whatsoever. I can't afford to, honestly. I've been through too much.

And, when the conservatorship happened, it was true that I had been partying. My body couldn't physically take that anymore. It was time to calm down. But I went from partying a lot to being a total monk. Under the conservatorship, I didn't do anything.

One day I was with the photographer, driving my car fast, living so much.

And then all of a sudden I was alone, doing nothing at all, not even always allowed access to my own cell phone. It was night and day.

In my old life I'd had freedom: the freedom to make my own decisions, to set my own agenda, to wake up and decide how I wanted to spend the day. Even the hard days were my hard days. Once I gave up the fight, in my new life, I would wake up each morning and ask one question: "What are we doing?"

And then I would do what I was told.

When I was alone at night, I would try to find inspiration in beautiful or

transporting music, movies, books—anything to help blot out the horror of this arrangement. Just as I had when I was a little girl, I'd look for other worlds to escape into.

It seemed like every request went through my father and Robin. They decided where I went and with who. Under Robin's direction, security guards handed me prepackaged envelopes of meds and watched me take them. They put parental controls on my iPhone. Everything was scrutinized and controlled. Everything.

I would go to sleep early. And then I would wake up and do what they told me again. And again. And again. It was like Groundhog Day.

I did that for thirteen years.

If you're asking why I went along with it, there's one very good reason. I did it for my kids.

Because I played by the rules, I was reunited with my boys.

It was an ecstatic experience getting to hold them again. When they fell asleep next to me that first night we had back together, I felt whole for the first time in months. I just stared at them sleeping and felt so, so lucky.

To see them as much as possible, I did everything I could to appease Kevin. I paid his legal bills, plus child support, plus thousands more a month so the kids could come along with me on the Circus Tour. Within the same short period of time, I appeared on Good Morning America, did the Christmas-tree lighting in Los Angeles, shot a segment for Ellen, and toured through Europe and Australia. But again, the question was nagging at me—if I was so sick that I couldn't make my own decisions, why did they think it was fine for me to be out there smiling and waving and singing and dancing in a million time zones a week?

I'll tell you one good reason.

The Circus Tour grossed more than \$130 million.

Lou Taylor's company, Tri Star, got 5 percent. And I learned, after the conservatorship, that even when I was on hiatus in 2019 and money wasn't coming in, my father paid them an extra minimum "flat fee," so they were paid hundreds of thousands of dollars more.

My father got a percentage, too, plus, throughout the conservatorship, about \$16,000 a month, more than he'd ever made before. He profited heavily from the conservatorship, becoming a multimillionaire.

My freedom in exchange for naps with my children—it was a trade I was willing to make. There is nothing I love more—nothing more important to me

Chapter 19

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I will provide the chapter now.

19

Two things about being pregnant: I loved sex and I loved food. Both of those things were absolutely amazing throughout both of my pregnancies.

Other than that, I can't say there was much that brought me any pleasure. I

was just so mean. You did not want to hear from me those whole two years. I did not want to be around almost anyone at all. I was hateful. I didn't want anyone, not even my mom, to come near me. I was a real mama bear. America's sweetheart and the meanest woman alive.

I was protective over Jamie Lynn, too. After she complained to me about a costar of hers on her TV show, I showed up on the set to have words with the actress. What I must have looked like, hugely pregnant, yelling at a teenage (and, I would later learn, innocent) girl, "Are you spreading rumors about my sister?" (To that young actress: I'm sorry.)

When I was pregnant, I wanted everyone to stay away: Stand back! There's a baby here!

It's true what they say—when you have a baby, no one can prepare you. It's a miracle. You're creating another body. You grow up saying: "That person's pregnant." "That person had a baby." But when you actually experience it yourself, it's overwhelming. It was such a spiritual experience—such an incredibly powerful bond.

My mother had always talked about how painful childbirth was. She never let me forget that she'd been in many hours of agonizing labor with me. I mean, everybody's different. Some women have an easy time of it. I was terrified of giving birth naturally. When the doctor offered me a C-section, I was so relieved. Sean Preston was born on September 14, 2005. Right away you could tell he was just a sweet, kind little boy.

Then, three months later, I got pregnant again. I was thrilled that I'd have two kids so close in age. Still, it was hard on my body, and there was a lot of sadness and loneliness in that time. I felt like so much of the world was against me.

The main danger I had to watch out for was the aggression of the paparazzi. If I stayed out of the public eye, surely, eventually, I thought, the photographers would leave me alone. But whether I was sitting at home or trying to go to a store, photographers found me. Every day, and all night, they were there, waiting for me to come out.

What no one in the media seemed to realize was that I was hard on myself as it was. I could be wild, but at heart, I was always a people-pleaser. Even at my lowest, I cared what people thought. I grew up in the South, where manners are so important. I still, to this day, regardless of their age, call men "sir" and women "ma'am." Just on the level of civility, it was incredibly painful to be treated with such disregard—such disgust.

Everything I did with the babies was chronicled. When I drove off to escape the paparazzi with Sean Preston on my lap, that was taken as proof that I was uncut. I got cornered by the paparazzi with him at the Malibu Country Mart, too—they kept on taking my picture as, trapped, I held him and cried.

As I was trying to get out of a building and into a car in New York, pregnant with Jayden James and carrying Sean Preston, I was swarmed by photographers. I was told I had to get into the car on the other side, so I said, "Oh," and made my way through another thousand camera shutters and shouts of "Britney! Britney!" to get in there.

If you watch the video and don't just look at the still photos, you can see that while carrying a cup of water in one hand and my baby in the other arm, my heel turned and I almost went down—but I didn't fall. And in catching myself, I didn't drop either the water or the baby—who, by the way, was completely unfazed.

"This is why I need a gun," I said to the camera, which probably didn't go over that well. But I was at my wits' end. The magazines seemed to love nothing

Chapter 36

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I will provide the chapter now.

36

One thing that brought me solace and hope during the time when I was in Vegas was teaching dance to kids at a studio once a month, and I loved it. I taught a group of forty kids. Then back in LA, not far from my house, I taught once every two months.

That was one of the most fun things in my life. It was nice to be in a room with kids who had no judgment. In the conservatorship, people were always judging everything I did. The joy and trust of kids the age of the ones I taught—between 7 and 12—is contagious. Their energy is so sweet. They want to learn. I find it 100 percent healing to be around children.

One day there, I did a turn and accidentally bonked a tiny little girl in the head with my hand.

“Baby! I am so sorry!” I said.

I felt so bad that I got on my knees in front of her. I pulled a ring off my finger, one of my favorite rings, and gave it to her while begging her forgiveness.

“Miss Britney, it's none!” she said. “You didn't even hurt me.”

I wanted to do anything I could to let her know that I cared if she was in pain and that I would do whatever it took to make it up to her.

Looking up at her from my knees on the dance studio floor, I thought, Wait a minute. Why are the people who are charged—by the state—with my care not half as interested in my well-being as I am in this little girl's?

I decided to make a push to get out of the conservatorship. I went to court in 2014 and mentioned my father's alcoholism and erratic behavior, asking that they drug-test him. After all, he was controlling my money and my life. But my case didn't go anywhere. The judge just didn't listen.

What followed was a cloak-and-dagger effort to get my own lawyer. I even mentioned the conservatorship on a talk show in 2016, but somehow, that part of the interview didn't make it to the air. Huh. How interesting.

That feeling of being trapped contributed to the collapse of my romantic life. After a stupid fight, Charlie and I got so prideful that we stopped speaking to each other. It was the dumbest thing. I couldn't bring myself to talk to him, and he had too much pride to talk to me.

That's when I started working with two great songwriters, Julia Michaels and Justin Tranter. We'd sit and write everything together. I had passion about it. It was the one thing in the thirteen years of the conservatorship that I really put my heart into. I worked hard on the songs, which gave me confidence. You know when you're good at something and can feel it? You start doing something and think, I got this? Writing that album gave me my confidence back.

When it was done, I played it for my sons.

“What should I name the album?” I asked. My kids are really smart about music.

“Just name it Glory,” Sean Preston said.

And so I did. Seeing the kids so proud of that album meant a lot to me—I

thought, I'm proud of this, too! It was a feeling I hadn't had in a long time. I released the video for "Make Me," and I went on the 2016 VMAs to perform in support of it for the first time since 2007.

The first time I saw Hesam Asghari on the set of my video for "Slumber Party," I knew I wanted him in my life immediately. I was instantly smitten. The chemistry with us in the beginning was insane. We couldn't keep our hands off each other. He called me his lioness.

Right away, the tabloids started to say that he was cheating on me. We'd been dating two weeks! We stayed with each other. I started to feel my spark returning. Then my dad decided he had to send me to treatment again because I'd snuck my over-the-counter energy supplements. He thought that I had a problem, but he showed mercy and said I could be an outpatient there so long as I'd go four times a week to Alcoholics Anonymous.

At first, I resisted, but the women I met there began to inspire me. I'd listen to them telling their stories and I'd think, These women are brilliant. Their stories were actually very, very profound. I found a human connection in those meetings that I'd never found anywhere before in my life. And so at the beginning, I really liked it. But some of the girls didn't always show up. They could pick and choose meetings they wanted to go to. I had no choice in the matter. Friends I met there might only go twice a week, or they'd go to a morning meeting one day and an evening meeting the next day. I wasn't allowed to switch it up at all.

I had the same meetings at the same time every week, no matter what.

After an exhausting run of shows, I came home, and my sons, my assistant, my mom, and my dad were there.

"Time for your meeting," my dad said.

"Is there a way I can just stay home right now and watch a movie with the boys? I never missed one meeting," I said.

I had never watched a movie with my kids at home in Vegas. I thought we could pop popcorn and have a nice time together.

"No, you have to go," he said.

I looked at my mom, hoping she would stand up for me, but she looked away.

At that moment, I started to feel like I was in a cult and my father was the cult leader. They were treating me like I was beholden to him.

But I was so good, I thought, reflecting on how hard I'd worked in those shows. I wasn't good, I was great. It was a line that would run through my mind repeatedly over the next couple years when I thought about the ways in which I had not just met but exceeded the expectations that had been set for me—and how unfair it was that I still wasn't free.

Chapter 30

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I will provide the chapter now.

wrote about watching her beautiful daughter shaving off her hair and wondering how that was possible. She said that I used to be “the happiest little girl in the world.”

When I made the wrong move, it was like my mother wasn't concerned. She would share my every mistake on television, promoting her book.

She wrote it trading on my name and talking about her parenting of me and my brother and sister at a time when all three of us kids were basket cases. Jamie Lynn was a pregnant teenager. Bryan was struggling to find his place in the world and still convinced he was letting our father down. And I was in full meltdown.

When the book came out, she appeared on every morning show to promote it. I would turn on the TV to see B-roll of my videos and my shaved head flashing on the screen. My mother was telling Meredith Vieira on the Today show that she'd spent hours wondering how things went so wrong with me. On another show, the audience clapped when she said my sister was pregnant at sixteen. That was classy as shit, apparently, because she was still with the father! Yes, how wonderful—she was married to her husband and having a baby at seventeen. They're still together! Great! It doesn't matter that she's a child having a child!

I was in one of the darkest times in my life, and my mom was telling the audience, “Oh yeah, and here's... Britney.”

And every show was plastering images of me with my shaved head on the screen.

Chapter 9

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9

The label came to me with a concept for the “... Baby One More Time” video in which I would play a futuristic astronaut. The mock-up I saw had me looking like a Power Ranger. That image didn't resonate with me, and I had a feeling my audience wouldn't relate to it, either. I told the executives at the label that I thought people would want to see my friends and me sitting at school, bored, and then as soon as the bell rang, boom—we'd start dancing.

The way the choreographer had us moving was so smooth. It helped that most of the dancers were from New York City. In the pop dance world, there are two camps. Most people will say that LA dancers are better. No disrespect to them, but my spirit has always liked New York dancers best—they have more heart. We rehearsed at Broadway Dance Center, where I'd taken classes as a kid, so I was comfortable there. When Jive Records executive Barry Weiss came to the studio, I turned it on for him. In that moment, I showed him what I was capable of.

The director for the video, Nigel Dick, was open to my ideas. In addition to the school bell cuing the start of the dancing, I added that it was important that there be cute boys. And I thought we should wear school uniforms to make it

seem more exciting when we started dancing outside in our casual clothes. We even got to cast Miss Fe as my teacher. I found it hilarious to see her in nerdy glasses and frumpy teacher clothes.

Making that video was the most fun part of doing that first album.

That's probably the moment in my life when I had the most passion for music. I was unknown, and I had nothing to lose if I messed up. There is so much freedom in being anonymous. I could look out at a crowd who'd never seen me before and think, You don't know who I am yet. It was kind of liberating that I didn't really have to care if I made mistakes.

For me, performing wasn't about posing and smiling. Onstage, I was like a basketball player driving down the court. I had ball sense, street sense. I was fearless. I knew when to take my shots.

Starting in the summer, Jive sent me on a mall tour—to something like twenty-six malls! Doing that form of promotion is not much fun. No one knew who I was yet. I had to try to sell myself to people who weren't that interested.

My demeanor was innocent—and it wasn't an act. I didn't know what I was doing. I'd just say, "Yeah, hi! My song's really good! You've got to check it out!"

Before the video came out, not a lot of people knew what I looked like. But by the end of September, the song was on the radio. I was sixteen when, on October 23, 1998, the "... Baby One More Time" single hit stores. The next month the video premiered, and suddenly I was getting recognized everywhere I went. On January 12, 1999, the album came out and sold over ten million copies very quickly. I debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 chart in the US. I became the first woman to debut with a number one single and album at the same time. I was so happy. And I could feel my life start to open up. I didn't have to perform in malls anymore.

Things were moving fast. I toured with NSYNC, including my old Mickey Mouse Club friend Justin Timberlake, in tour buses. I was always with my dancers or Felicia or one of my two managers, Larry Rudolph and Johnny Wright. I acquired a security guard named Big Rob, who was unbelievably sweet to me.

I became a regular on MTV's Total Request Live. Rolling Stone sent David LaChapelle to Louisiana to shoot me for the April cover story "Inside the Heart, Mind & Bedroom of a Teen Dream." When the magazine came out, the photos were controversial because the cover shot of me in my underwear holding a Teletubby played up how young I was. My mother seemed concerned, but I knew that I wanted to work with David LaChapelle again.

Chapter 44

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44

When I finally returned to my home and my dogs and my kids, I was ecstatic.

Guess who wanted to come visit me the first week I was back? My family.

"We're so proud of you, Britney!" my dad said. "You did it! Now we all want

to come and stay with you.” But by this point, I could fully see through his bullshit. I knew what he was really saying was: “I can’t wait to see your money—I mean, you!”

And so they came—my father, my mom, and my sister, with her daughters, Maddie and Ivey.

I was a shell of myself. I was still on lithium, which made my sense of time really hazy. And I was scared. It crossed my mind that they were only visiting to finish off what they’d started a few months earlier, to kill me for real. If that sounds paranoid, consider all the things I’d been through up until this point—the ways in which they had deceived and institutionalized me.

And so I played the game. If I’m nice to them, they won’t ever try to kill me again, I thought.

For three and a half months, I’d had barely a hug from anybody.

It makes me want to cry, how strong my little heart had to be.

But my family walked into my house like nothing had happened. Like I hadn’t just endured an almost unbearable trauma in that place. “Oh, hey girl, what you doing?” Jamie Lynn said, sounding chipper.

She and my mother and the girls were always hanging around in my kitchen. Jamie Lynn had scheduled all these TV show meetings when she was in Los Angeles. My dad would go with her to the meetings in Hollywood, and she’d come back loud and happy. “What’s up, boys?” she’d shout, walking into the kitchen and seeing my sons.

She’d really found her mojo. I was happy for her. At the same time, I didn’t particularly want to be around it just then.

“Oh my God, I have this really great idea for me and you!” she’d say after coming back from yet another meeting as I leaned, practically comatose, against the countertop. “Get this—a sister talk show!” Every time she spoke, it was a new scheme. A sitcom! A rom-com!

She talked for what felt like hours at a time while I looked at the floor and listened. And the phrase echoing around my head was What the fuck is going on? Once my family left my house after that terrible visit, I started to really feel what I’d been through. And I was left with nothing but a blind rage. They’d punished me. For what? For supporting them since I was a child?

How had I managed not to kill myself in that place, put myself out of my misery like you’d shoot a lame horse? I believe that almost anyone else in my situation would have.

Thinking about how close I came to doing just that, I wept. Then something happened to knock me out of my stupor.

That August, my father was arguing with Sean Preston, who was thirteen at the time. My son went to lock himself in a bedroom to end the fight, and my dad broke down the door and shook him. Kevin filed a police report, and my father was barred from seeing the kids.

I knew I had to summon one more round of strength, to fight one last time. It had been such a long road. Of finding faith and losing it again. Of being pushed down and getting back up. Of chasing freedom only for it to slip right out of my grasp.

If I was strong enough to survive everything I’d survived, I could take a chance and ask for just a little bit more from God. I was going to ask, with every bit of my motherfucking blood and skin, for the end of the conservatorship. Because I didn’t want those people running my life anymore. I didn’t even want them in my goddamn kitchen.

I didn’t want them to have the power to keep me from my children or from my house or from my dogs or from my car ever, ever again.

Chapter 46

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46

The court-appointed lawyer who had been with me for thirteen years had never been much help, but during the pandemic, I started to wonder whether maybe I could use him to my advantage. With a prayerlike consistency, I began to speak to him twice a week, just to meditate on my options. Was he working for me, or for my father and Lou?

While he talked around the issue, I'd think, You don't seem to believe in what I know: I know where I'm going with this. I'm going all the way to end it. I can tell you're not going to get this done.

Finally, I hit a turning point. There was honestly no more that he could do for me. I had to take control.

I had stayed quiet publicly about the whole thing, but I was praying in my head for it to end. I mean real prayer...

So on the night of June 22, 2021, from my home in California, I called 911 to report my father for conservatorship abuse.

The time between when I started pushing hard to end the conservatorship and when it finally ended was a rough period in limbo. I didn't know how things would turn out. Meanwhile, I couldn't say no to my dad or make my own way yet, and it felt like every day there was another documentary about me on yet another streaming service. This was what was going on when I learned that my sister would be coming out with a book.

I was still under my father's control. I couldn't say anything to defend myself.

I wanted to explode.

Chapter 21

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21

Right around Sean Preston's first birthday, on September 12, 2006, Jayden James came along. He was such a happy kid right from birth.

Once I'd had both the boys, I felt so light—so light it was almost like I was a bird or a feather, like I could float away.

My body felt incredible to me. Is this what it's like to be a thirteen-year-old again? I thought. I didn't have a belly anymore.

One of my friends came over and said, "Wow, you look so skinny!"

“Well, I’ve been pregnant for two years straight,” I said.

After the babies, I felt like a completely different person. It was confusing.

On one hand, I suddenly fit into my clothes again. When I tried things on they looked good! Loving clothes again was a revelation. I thought, Holy shit! My body!

On the other hand, I’d been so happy feeling these babies protected inside me. I got a little depressed once I was no longer keeping them safe inside my body. They seemed so vulnerable out in the world of jockeying paparazzi and tabloids. I wanted them back inside me so the world couldn’t get at them.

“Why is Britney so camera-shy with Jayden?” one headline read.

Kevin and I had gotten better at hiding the kids after Jayden was born, so much so that people were wondering why no pictures of him had been released. I think if anyone had thought about that question for a second, they could have come up with some guesses. But no one was really asking the question. They just kept acting like I owed it to them to let the men who kept trying to catch me looking fat take photos of my infant sons.

After each birth, one of the first things I had to do was look out the window to count the number of enemy combatants in the parking lot. They just seemed to multiply every time I checked. There were always more cars than seemed safe. To see that many men gathering to shoot photos of my babies—it made my blood run cold. With a whole lot of money in photo royalties on the line, it was their mission to get pictures of the boys at any cost.

And my boys—they were so tiny. It was my job to keep them safe. I worried that the flashing lights and the shouting would scare them. Kevin and I had to devise strategies to cover them with blankets while making sure they could still breathe. Even without a blanket over me, I barely could.

I didn’t have much interest in doing press that year, but I did one interview, with Matt Lauer for Dateline. He said that people were asking questions about me, including: “Is Britney a bad mom?” He never said who was asking them. Everyone, apparently. And he asked me what I thought it would take for the paparazzi to leave me alone. I wished he’d ask them—so whatever it was, I could do exactly that.

Luckily, my home was a safe haven. Our relationship was in trouble, but Kevin and I had built an incredible house in Los Angeles, right beside Mel Gibson’s house. Sandy from Grease lived nearby, too. I’d see her and call out, “Hi, Olivia Newton-John! How are you, Olivia Newton-John?”

For us, it was a dream house. There was a slide that went into the pool. There was a sandbox, full of toys, so the kids could build sandcastles. We had a miniature playhouse with steps and a ladder and a miniature porch. And we just kept adding on to it.

I didn’t like the wooden floors so I added marble everywhere—and, of course, it had to be white marble.

The interior designer was completely against it. He said, “Marble floors are super slippery and hard if you fall down.”

“I want marble!” I shouted. “I need marble.”

It was my home and my nest. It was fucking beautiful. But I think I knew then that I’d become weird.

I’d had these two kids back-to-back. My hormones were all over the place. I was meaner than hell and so bossy. It was such a big deal for me to have kids. In trying to make our home perfect, I had gone over the top. I look back now and think, God, that was bad. I’m sorry, contractors. I think I cared too much.

I had an artist come in and paint murals in the boys’ rooms: fantastical paintings of little boys on the moon. I just went all out.

It was my dream to have children and raise them in the coziest environment I could create. To me they were perfect, beautiful, everything I'd ever wanted. I wanted to give them the world—the whole solar system.

I began to suspect that I was a bit overprotective when I wouldn't let my mom hold Jayden for the first two months. Even after that, I'd let her hold him for five minutes and that was it. I had to have him back in my arms. That's too much. I know that now. I shouldn't have been that controlling.

Again, I think what happened when I first saw them after they'd been born was similar to what happened to me after the breakup with Justin: It was that Benjamin Button thing. I aged backward. Honestly, as a new mother, it was as if some part of me became the baby. One part of me was a very demanding grown woman yelling about white marble, while another part of me was suddenly very childlike.

Kids are so healing in one way. They make you less judgmental. Here they are, so innocent and so dependent on you. You realize everyone was a baby once, so fragile and so helpless. In another way, for me, having kids was psychologically very complicated. It had happened when Jamie Lynn was born, too. I loved her so much and was so empathic that I became her in this strange way. When she was three, some part of me became three, too.

I've heard that this sometimes happens to parents—especially if you have trauma from your childhood. When your kids get to be the age you were when you were dealing with something rough, you relive it emotionally.

Unfortunately, there wasn't the same conversation about mental health back then that there is now. I hope any new mothers reading this who are having a hard time will get help early and will channel their feelings into something more healing than white marble floors. Because I now know that I was displaying just about every symptom of perinatal depression: sadness, anxiety, fatigue. Once the babies were born, I added on my confusion and obsession about the babies' safety, which was ratcheting up the more media attention was on us. Being a new mom is challenging enough without trying to do everything under a microscope.

Chapter 41

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I will provide the chapter now.

41

As the holidays approached, I was feeling pretty good. Aside from my fear that my father was plotting something, I felt strong and inspired by the women I'd met in AA. In addition to being brilliant, they had so much common sense, and I'd learned a lot from them about how to be an adult woman navigating the world with honesty and bravery.

For my birthday, Hesam took me somewhere special. I started making holiday plans, but my father insisted that he would be taking the boys for Christmas. If I wanted to see them, I'd have to see my father, too. When I pushed back, my father said, "The boys don't want to be with you this year. They're

coming home to Louisiana with me and your mom, and that's that."

"This is news to me," I said, "but if they'd really rather be in Louisiana that week, I guess that's okay."

The Vegas show hadn't been canceled yet. I was hiring new dancers and going over the routines. At a rehearsal one day, I'd been working with all the dancers—both new and old—when one of the dancers who'd been with the show the past four years did a move for us all. I winced when I saw it; it looked really challenging. "I don't want to do that one," I said. "It's too hard."

It didn't seem like a big deal to me, but suddenly my team and the directors disappeared into a room and shut the door. I got the feeling that I had done something horribly wrong, but I didn't understand how not wanting to do one move in a routine could qualify as that. I mean, I was almost 26 years older than I'd been when the first residency started; my body had changed, too. What difference did it make if we changed it up?

We'd all been having fun, from what I could tell. I have social anxiety, so if there's anything to feel uncomfortable about, I usually feel it first. But that day all seemed well. I was laughing and talking to the dancers. Some of the new ones could do gainers, meaning a standing back tuck going forward. They were amazing! I asked if I could learn it, and one of them offered to spot me on it. All of which is to say: We were playing and communicating. Nothing was going wrong. But the way my team had behaved made me worried something was up. A day later in therapy, my doctor confronted me.

"We found energy supplements in your purse," he said. The energy supplements gave me a sense of confidence and energy, and you didn't need a prescription for them. He knew that I had been taking them during my shows in Vegas, but now he made a big deal out of it.

"We feel like you're doing way worse things behind our backs," he said. "And we don't feel like you're doing well in rehearsals. You're giving everyone a hard time."

"Is this a joke?" I said.

Instantly, I was furious. I had tried so hard. My work ethic was strong.

"We're going to be sending you to a facility," the therapist said. "And before you go to this place, over Christmas break, we're going to have a woman come to run psychological tests on you."

A shady doctor—who I'd seen on TV and instinctively hated—came to my house against my will, sat me down, and tested my cognitive abilities for hours. My father told me that this doctor had concluded that I'd bombed the tests: "She said you failed. Now you have to go to the mental health facility. There's something severely wrong with you. But don't worry—we found you a small rehab program in Beverly Hills. It will only cost you sixty thousand dollars a month."

As I gathered my stuff, crying, I asked how long I should pack for, how long they'd make me stay there. But I was told there was no way to know. "Maybe a month. Maybe two months. Maybe three months. It all depends on how well you do and how well you demonstrate your capabilities." The program was supposedly a "luxury" rehab that had created a special program for me, so I'd be alone and wouldn't have to interact with other people.

Chapter 25

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25

Everything everyone says about becoming a parent was true for me. My boys gave my life meaning. I was shocked by how much pure and instant love I felt for those tiny creatures.

And yet, becoming a mother while under so much pressure at home and out in the world was also much, much harder than I expected it would be.

Cut off from my friends, I started to get weird. I know you're supposed to focus only on being a mother at those times, but it was hard for me to sit down and play with them each day, to put being a mother first. I felt so confused. All I had known my whole life was being exposed on every level. I didn't know where to go or what to do. Was I supposed to go home to Louisiana, get a house with a wall around it, and hide?

What I can see now but couldn't see then is that every part of normal life had been stripped from me—going out in public without becoming a headline, making normal mistakes as a new mother of two babies, feeling like I could trust the people around me. I had no freedom and yet also no security. At the same time I was also suffering, I now know, from severe postpartum depression. I'll admit it, I felt that I couldn't live if things didn't get better.

All these other people were doing their thing, but I was being watched from every corner. Justin and Kevin were able to have all the sex and smoke all the weed in the world and no one said one word to them. I came home from a night at the clubs and my own mother tore into me. It made me scared to do anything. My family made me feel paralyzed.

I gravitated toward anyone who would step in and act as a buffer between me and them, especially people who would take me out partying and get me temporarily distracted from all the surveillance I was under. Not all of these people were great in the long run, but at the time I was desperate for anyone who seemed to want to help me in any way and who seemed like they had the ability to keep my parents at bay.

As part of his bid for full custody, Kevin tried to convince everyone that I was completely out of control. He started to say I shouldn't have my kids anymore—at all.

When he said that, I remember thinking in my head, Surely, this is a joke. This is just for the tabloids. When you read about married celebrities fighting, you never really know what's real. I always assume that a lot of what you hear are stories being fed to the papers as part of some ploy to get the upper hand in a custody battle. So I kept waiting for him to bring the boys back to me after he took them. He not only wouldn't bring them back to me, he wouldn't let me see them for weeks on end.

In January 2007, my aunt Sandra died after a long and brutal struggle with ovarian cancer. She was like my second mother. By Aunt Sandra's grave at the funeral, I cried harder than I ever had.

Working felt unthinkable to me. A popular director called me during that time about a project he was working on. "I have a role for you to play," he said. "It's a really dark role."

I said no because I thought it wouldn't be emotionally healthy for me. But I wonder if just knowing about the part, subconsciously I went there in my head—imagined what it would be like to be her.

On the inside, I'd felt a cloud of darkness for a long time. On the outside, though, I'd tried to keep looking the way people wanted me to, keep acting the way they wanted me to—sweet and pretty all the time. But the veneer had been so worn away by this point that there was nothing left. I was a raw nerve.

In February, after not getting to see the boys for weeks and weeks, completely beside myself with grief, I went to plead to see them. Kevin wouldn't let me in. I

Chapter 28

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28

One day in early January 2008, I had the boys, and at the end of the visit a security guard who used to work for me and now worked for Kevin came to pick them up.

First he put Preston in the car. When he came to get Jayden, the thought hit me: I may never see my boys again. Given how things had been going with my custody case, I'd become terrified that I wouldn't get the kids again if I gave them back.

I ran into the bathroom with Jayden and locked the door—I just couldn't let him go. I didn't want anyone taking my baby. A friend was there and came to the bathroom door and told me the security guard would wait. I held Jayden and cried so hard. But no one was giving me extra time. Before I knew what was happening, a SWAT team in black suits burst through the bathroom door as if I'd hurt someone. The only thing I was guilty of was feeling desperate to keep my own children for a few more hours and to get some assurance that I wasn't going to lose them for good. I looked at my friend and just said, "But you said he would wait..."

Once they'd taken Jayden from me, they tied me onto a gurney and took me to the hospital.

The hospital let me go before the end of a seventy-two-hour hold. But the damage was already done. And it didn't help that the paparazzi were getting worse in their hounding of me.

A new custody hearing was held and I was told that now—because I'd been so scared to lose the kids that I'd panicked—I would be allowed to see them even less.

Chapter 15

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15

To get my confidence back, in September 2002 I went to Milan to visit Donatella Versace. That trip invigorated me—it reminded me that there was still fun to be had in the world. We drank amazing wine and ate amazing food. Donatella was a dynamic host. I was hoping things would turn around a little bit from that point.

She had invited me to Italy to attend one of her runway shows. Donatella dressed me in a beautiful sparkly rainbow dress. I was supposed to sing but I really didn't feel like it, so after I did a little bit of posing, Donatella said we could take it easy. She played my cover of Joan Jett's "I Love Rock 'n' Roll," I said hi to the models, and we were done.

Then it was time to party. Donatella is known for her lavish parties, and this one was no exception. I remember seeing Lenny Kravitz there, all these cool people. That party was really the first thing I did to put myself out there a bit after the breakup with Justin—on my own, innocent.

During the party I noticed a guy and I remember thinking he was so cute. He looked like he was probably Brazilian: dark hair, handsome, smoking a blunt—your typical bad boy. He was nothing like the LA actor types I'd known—he was more like a real man, the kind of man you have a one-night stand with. He was just sex.

When I first noticed him, he was only talking to these two girls, but I could tell he wanted to talk to me.

Eventually we started talking, and I decided I'd like to have drinks with him at my hotel. We headed to my car, but during the drive, he did something that just turned me off—honestly, I can't even remember what it was. But it was one little thing that really irritated me, so I told the driver to pull over, and without saying a word, I kicked the guy out on the side of the road and left him there.

Now that I'm a mom, I'd never do anything like that—I'd be more like "I'll drop you off at this place at this time..." But back then, at twenty years of age, it was pure instinct. I'd made a bad mistake letting this stranger inside my car, and I kicked him out.

Soon after my return, Justin was preparing to release his solo album *Justified*. On 20/20 he played an unreleased song for Barbara Walters called "Don't Go (Horrible Woman)" that seemed to be about me: "I thought our love was so strong. I guess I was dead wrong. But to look at it positively, hey girl, at least you gave me a song about another Horrible Woman."

Less than a month later, he released the video for his song "Cry Me a River," in which a woman who looks like me cheats on him and he wanders around sad in the rain. In the news media, I was described as a harlot who'd broken the heart of America's golden boy. The truth: I was comatose in Louisiana, and he was happily running around Hollywood.

May I just say that on his explosive album and in all the press that surrounded it, Justin neglected to mention the several times he'd cheated on me?

There's always been more leeway in Hollywood for men than for women.

And I see how men are encouraged to talk trash about women in order to become famous and powerful. But I was shattered.

The thought of my betraying him gave the album more angst, gave it a purpose: shit-talking an unfaithful woman. The hip-hop world of that era loved

a storyline with the theme “Fuck you, bitch!” Getting revenge on women for perceived disrespect was all the rage at the time. Eminem’s violent revenge song “Kim” was huge. The only problem with the narrative was that, in our case, it wasn’t like that.

“Cry Me a River” did very well. Everyone felt very sorry for him. And it shamed me.

I felt there was no way at the time to tell my side of the story. I couldn’t explain, because I knew no one would take my side once Justin had convinced the world of his version.

I don’t think Justin realized the power he had in shaming me. I don’t think he understands to this day.

After “Cry Me a River” came out, anywhere I went, I could get booed. I would go to clubs and I would hear boos. Once I went to a Lakers game with my little sister and one of my brother’s friends, and the whole place, the whole arena, booed me.

Justin told everyone that he and I had had a sexual relationship, which some people have pointed out depicted me as not only a cheating slut but also a liar and hypocrite. Given that I had so many teenage fans, my managers and press people had long tried to portray me as an eternal virgin—never mind that Justin and I had been living together, and I’d been having sex since I was fourteen. Was I mad at being “outed” by him as sexually active? No. To be honest with you, I liked that Justin said that. Why did my managers work so hard to claim I was some kind of young-girl virgin even into my twenties? Whose business was it if I’d had sex or not?

I’d appreciated it when Oprah told me on her show that my sexuality was no one else’s business, and that when it came to virginity, “you don’t need a world announcement if you change your mind.”

Yes, as a teenager I played into that portrayal, because everyone was making such a big deal out of it. But if you think about it, it was pretty stupid for people to describe my body in that way, for them to point to me and say, “Look! A virgin!” It’s nobody’s business at all. And it took the focus off me as a musician and performer. I worked so hard on my music and on my stage shows. But all some reporters could think of to ask me was whether or not my breasts were real (they were, actually) and whether or not my hymen was intact.

The way Justin admitted to everyone that we’d had a sexual relationship broke the ice and made it so that I never had to come out myself as a non-virgin. His talking about our having had sex never bothered me at all, and I’ve defended him to people who criticized him for doing it. “That’s so rude!” people have said about his talking about me sexually. But I liked it. What I heard when he said that was “She’s a woman. No, she’s not a virgin. Shut up.”

As a child, I’d always had a guilty conscience, a lot of shame, a sense that my family thought I was just plain bad. The sadness and the loneliness that would hit me felt like my fault somehow, like I deserved unhappiness and bad luck. I knew the truth of our relationship was nothing like how it was being portrayed, but I still imagined that if I was suffering, I must have deserved it. Along the line, surely I’d done bad things. I believe in karma, and so when bad things happen, I imagine that it’s just the law of karma catching up with me.

I’ve always been almost disturbingly empathic. What people are feeling in Nebraska, I can subconsciously feel even though I’m thousands of miles away. Sometimes women’s periods sync up; I feel like my emotions are always syncing up with those around me. I don’t know what hippie word you want to use for it—cosmic consciousness, intuition, psychic connection. All I know is that, 100 percent, I can feel the energy of other people. I can’t help but take it in.

At this point, you might be saying to yourself, “Oh my God, is she really going to talk about this New Age stu??”

Only for one more minute.

Because the point is, I was so sensitive, and I was so young, and I was still reeling from the abortion and the breakup; I didn’t handle things well. Justin framed our time together with me as the bad guy, and I believed it, so ever since then, I’ve felt like I’m under a sort of curse.

And yet, I also started to hope that if that were true, if I had so much bad karma, it might be up to me—as an adult, as a woman—to reverse my luck, to bring myself good fortune.

I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I escaped to Arizona with a girlfriend. That girlfriend happened to have been dating Justin’s best friend, and we’d all broken up around the same time, so we’d decided to take a road trip to get away from all of it. We found each other and decided that we would leave it all behind.

Given what she’d been through, my friend was heartbroken, too, so we talked a lot, beside ourselves with grief and loneliness, and I was grateful for her friendship.

Chapter 4

In this chapter, the narrator unfolds the complexities of living with a father whose life was deteriorating due to heavy drinking and the resultant financial troubles. The father's alcoholism not only impacted his businesses but also deeply affected his family life, leading to extreme mood swings that left the narrator fearful, especially during car rides where the father would mutter unintelligibly to himself. This behavior reflects a man lost in his struggles, hinting at the deeper issue of self-medication as a coping mechanism for the abuses he endured from his own father, June. This cycle of abuse and high expectations affected not only the narrator but also their sibling, Bryan, who suffered under the weight of their father's demands to excel in sports - a reflection of the father's own traumatic upbringing.

The narrator yearns for a semblance of unconditional love from their father, a wish that remains unfulfilled amidst the familial turmoil. The father's relationship with Bryan is particularly strained, mirroring the harsh upbringing he himself faced under June's rigid expectations. Furthermore, the father's erratic behavior extends to the treatment of the narrator's mother, manifesting in bouts of absence from home which, paradoxically, the narrator found to be a relief. This absence, however, did not quell the nightly arguments between the parents, leaving the children as silent witnesses to the discord, struggling under the weight of an environment marked by unchecked alcoholism and the ripple effects of familial abuse.

This chapter paints a portrait of a family caught in the cycle of abuse and addiction, where the hope for love and stability remains elusive. The father’s struggle with alcoholism and the painful legacy of his upbringing under June create a somber atmosphere, overshadowing the basic need for parental love and acceptance.

Chapter 7

From the moment I landed the role on **The Mickey Mouse Club**, life became a whirlwind of dance rehearsals, singing lessons, acting classes, and recording sessions, squeezed in between schooling. The cast quickly formed cliques based on our shared dressing rooms, with Christina Aguilera and Nikki DeLoach among my closest companions, and I looked up to older members like Keri Russell, Ryan Gosling, and the heartthrob Tony Lucca. Amidst this, I developed a special connection with Justin Timberlake.

Our days on set in Orlando's Disney World were an amalgamation of hard work and exhilarating play, a true kid's paradise. However, the joy was momentarily dimmed when we received news of my grandmother Lily's tragic passing. Unable to afford the journey back home, Justin Timberlake's mother generously covered our travel costs, embodying the familial bond that had formed among us.

Amidst these profound experiences, my youthful crushes and first romantic encounters unfolded, marking moments of innocent excitement and discovery, including a memorable kiss from Justin to the tune of Janet Jackson, reminiscent of my first romantic thrill in third grade.

The year and a half on the show concluded, leaving me at a crossroads between pursuing my budding career in entertainment and returning to a semblance of normalcy in Kentwood, Louisiana. I chose the latter, craving the ordinary teenage experiences I had missed, from school activities to sneaking cigarettes and the occasional drink with my mom—a stark contrast to the hidden hedonism I found with friends.

These formative experiences paved the way for my eventual return to performance, spurred on by my mother's guidance and connections. Through a mix of defiant independence, youthful indiscretions, and a deep-seated love for the stage, my journey was marked by a continual oscillation between the desire for a normal life and the allure of the limelight.

Chapter 12

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12

When I think back on that time, I was truly living the dream, living my dream. My tours took me all over the world. One of my happiest moments on tour was playing the music festival Rock in Rio 3, in January 2001.

In Brazil, I felt liberated, like a child in some ways—a woman and a child all in one. I was fearless at that point, filled with a rush and a drive.

At night my dancers—there were eight of them, two girls, the rest guys—and I went skinny-dipping in the ocean, singing and dancing and laughing with each other. We talked for hours under the moon. It was so beautiful. Exhausted, we headed into the steam rooms, where we talked some more.

I was able to be a little bit sinful then—skinny-dipping, staying up talking all night—nothing over the top. It was a taste of rebellion, and freedom, but I was just having fun and being a nineteen-year-old.

The Dream Within a Dream Tour, right after my album Britney came out in the fall of 2001, was my fourth tour and one of my favorites. Every night onstage, I battled a mirror version of myself, which felt like it was probably a metaphor for something. But that mirror act was just one song. There was also "ying! And an Egyptian barge! And a jungle! Lasers! Snow!

Wade Robson directed and choreographed it, and I give great credit to the people who put it together. I thought it was well conceived. Wade had this concept of the show as reflecting a new, more mature phase in my life. The set and costumes were so clever. When someone knew just how to style me, I was always grateful.

They were shrewd about how they presented me as a star, and I know that I

owe them. The way they captured me showed they respected me as an artist. The minds behind that tour were brilliant. It was by far my best tour.

It was what we all had hoped for. I had worked so hard to get to that point.

I'd done mall tours before Baby was released, then the Baby tour was the first time I got to see a lot of people out there in the crowd. I remember feeling like, Oh, wow, I'm somebody now. Then Oops! was a little bit bigger, so by the time I did the Dream Within a Dream Tour, it was all magic.

By the spring of 2002, I had hosted SNL twice, playing a butter churn girl at a colonial reenactment museum opposite Jimmy Fallon and Rachel Dratch and then playing Barbie's little sister, Skipper, opposite Amy Poehler as Barbie. I was the youngest person to host and perform as the musical guest in the same episode.

Around that time, I was asked if I'd like to be in a movie musical. I wasn't sure I wanted to act again after Crossroads, but I was tempted by this one. It was Chicago.

Executives involved in the production came to a venue where I was performing and asked if I wanted to do it. I'd turned down three or four movies, because I was in my moment with the stage show. I didn't want to be distracted from music. I was happy doing what I was doing.

But I look back now and I think, when it came to Chicago, I should've done it. I had power back then; I wish I'd used it more thoughtfully, been more rebellious. Chicago would have been fun. It's all dance pieces—my favorite kind: prissy, girly follies, Pussycat Doll-like, serve-o?-your-corset moves. I wish I'd taken that offer.

I would have gotten to play a villain who kills a man, and sings and dances while doing it, too.

I probably could have found ways, gotten training, to keep from becoming a Chicago character the way I had with Lucy in Crossroads. I wish I'd tried something different. If only I'd been brave enough not to stay in my safe zone, done more things that weren't just within what I knew. But I was committed to not rocking the boat, and to not complaining even when something upset me. In my personal life, I was so happy. Justin and I lived together in Orlando. We shared a gorgeous, airy two-story house with a tile roof and a swimming pool out back. Even though we were both working a lot, we'd make time to be home together as often as we could. I always came back every few months so Justin and I could be together for two weeks, sometimes even two months, at a time. That was our home base.

One week, when Jamie Lynn was young, my family flew out to see us. We all went to FAO Schwarz at Pointe Orlando. They closed down the whole store for us. My sister got a miniature convertible car that had actual doors that opened. It was in between a real car and a go-kart. Somehow we got it back to Kentwood, and she drove it around the neighborhood until she outgrew it.

That child in that car was unlike anything else—this adorable little girl, driving around in a miniature red Mercedes. It was the cutest thing you could've ever seen in your entire life. I swear to God, the vision was unbelievable.

That's how we all were with Jamie Lynn: You see it, you like it, you want it, you got it. As far as I could tell, her world was the Ariana Grande song "7 Rings" come to life. (When I was growing up, we didn't have any money. My prized possessions were my Madame Alexander dolls. There were dozens to choose from. Their eyelids went up and down, and they all had names. Some were fictional characters or historical figures—like Scarlett O'Hara or Queen Elizabeth. I had the girls from Little Women. When I got my fifteenth doll, you would've thought I'd hit the lottery!)

That was a good time in my life. I was so in love with Justin, just smitten. I don't know if when you're younger love's a different thing, but what Justin and I had was special. He wouldn't even have to say anything or do anything for me to feel close to him.

In the South, moms love to round up the kids and say, "Listen, we're going to go to church today, and we're all going to color-coordinate." That's what I did when Justin and I attended the 2001 American Music Awards, which I cohosted with LL Cool J. I still can't believe that Justin was going to wear denim and I said, "We should match! Let's do denim-on-denim!"

At first, honestly, I thought it was a joke. I didn't think my stylist was actually going to do it, and I never thought Justin was going to do it with me. But they both went all in.

The stylist brought Justin's all-denim outfit, including a denim hat to match his denim jacket and denim pants. When he put it on, I thought, Whoa! I guess we're really doing this!

Justin and I were always going to events together. We had so much fun doing the Teen Choice Awards, and we often color-coordinated our outfits. But with the matching denim, we blew it up. That night my corset had me sucked in so tight under my denim gown, I was about to fall over.

I get that it was tacky, but it was also pretty great in its way, and I am always happy to see it parodied as a Halloween costume. I've heard Justin get flak for the look. On one podcast where they were teasing him about it, he said, "You do a lot of things when you're young and in love." And that's exactly right. We were giddy, and those outfits reflected that.

There were a couple of times during our relationship when I knew Justin had cheated on me. Especially because I was so infatuated and so in love, I let it go, even though the tabloids seemed determined to rub my face in it. When NSYNC went to London in 2000, photographers caught him with one of the girls from All Saints in a car. But I never said anything. At the time we'd only been together for a year.

Another time, we were in Vegas, and one of my dancers who'd been hanging out with him told me he'd gestured toward a girl and said, "Yeah, man, I hit that last night." I don't want to say who he was talking about because she's actually very popular and she's married with kids now. I don't want her to feel bad. My friend was shocked and believed Justin was only saying it because he was high and felt like bragging. There were rumors about him with various dancers and groupies. I let it all go, but clearly, he'd slept around. It was one of those things where you know but you just don't say anything.

So I did, too. Not a lot—one time, with Wade Robson. We were out one night and we went to a Spanish bar. We danced and danced. I made out with him that night.

I was loyal to Justin for years, only had eyes for him with that one exception, which I admitted to him. That night was chalked up to something that will happen when you're as young as we were, and Justin and I moved past it and stayed together. I thought we were going to be together forever. I hoped we would be.

At one point when we were dating, I became pregnant with Justin's baby. It was a surprise, but for me it wasn't a tragedy. I loved Justin so much. I always expected us to have a family together one day. This would just be much earlier than I'd anticipated. Besides, what was done was done.

But Justin definitely wasn't happy about the pregnancy. He said we weren't ready to have a baby in our lives, that we were way too young.

I could understand. I mean, I kind of understood. If he didn't want to

become a father, I didn't feel like I had much of a choice. I wouldn't want to push him into something he didn't want. Our relationship was too important to me. And so I'm sure people will hate me for this, but I agreed not to have the baby.

Abortion was something I never could have imagined choosing for myself, but given the circumstances, that is what we did.

I don't know if that was the right decision. If it had been left up to me alone, I never would have done it. And yet Justin was so sure that he didn't want to be a father.

We also decided on something that in retrospect wound up being, in my view, wrong, and that was that I should not go to a doctor or to a hospital to have the abortion. It was important that no one find out about the pregnancy or the abortion, which meant doing everything at home.

We didn't even tell my family. The only person who knew besides Justin and me was Felicia, who was always on hand to help me. I was told, "It might hurt a little bit, but you'll be fine."

On the appointed day, with only Felicia and Justin there, I took the little pills.

Soon I started having excruciating cramps. I went into the bathroom and stayed

Chapter 47

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47

"Ms. Spears? You may feel free to address me."

The voice crackled through the phone. I was in my living room. It was an ordinary summer afternoon in Los Angeles.

On June 23, 2021, I was finally due to address a Los Angeles probate court on the subject of the conservatorship. And I knew the world was listening. I had been practicing this for days, but now that the moment was here, the stakes felt overwhelming. Not least because I knew, since I'd asked for this hearing to be open to the public, that millions of people would be listening to my voice as soon as I was done speaking.

My voice. It was everywhere, all over the world—on the radio, on television, on the internet—but there were so many parts of me that had been suppressed. My voice had been used for me, and against me, so many times that I was afraid nobody would recognize it now if I spoke freely. What if they called me crazy? What if they said I was lying? What if I said the wrong thing and it all went sideways? I had written so many versions of this statement. I'd tried a million ways to get it right, to say what I needed to say, but now, in the moment, I was so nervous.

And then, through the fear, I remembered that there were still things I could hold on to: My desire for people to understand what I'd been through. My faith that all this could change. My belief that I had a right to experience joy. My knowledge that I deserved my freedom.

This sense, deeply felt and profound, that the woman in me was still strong

enough to fight for what was right.

I looked up at Hesam, who was seated on the couch next to me. He squeezed my hand.

And so, for the first time in what felt like forever, I began to tell my story.

I said to the judge, "I've lied and told the whole world I'm okay and I'm happy. It's a lie. I thought that maybe if I just said that enough, maybe I might become happy, because I've been in denial... But now I'm telling you the truth, okay? I'm not happy. I can't sleep. I'm so angry it's insane. And I'm depressed. I cry every day."

I went on to say, "I don't even drink alcohol. I should drink alcohol, considering what they put my heart through."

I said, "I wish I could stay with you on the phone forever, because when I get off the phone with you, all of a sudden all I hear are these nos. And then all of a sudden I feel ganged up on and I feel bullied, and I feel left out, and alone. And I'm tired of feeling alone. I deserve to have the same rights as anybody does, by having a child, a family, any of those things, and more so. And that's all I wanted to say to you. And thank you so much for letting me speak to you today."

I barely breathed. It was the first chance I'd gotten to speak publicly in so long and a million things had come pouring out. I waited to hear how the judge would respond. I hoped I'd get some indication of where her head was at.

"I just want to tell you that I certainly am sensitive to everything that you said and how you're feeling," she said. "I know that it took a lot of courage for you to say everything you have to say today, and I want to let you know that the court does appreciate your coming on the line and sharing how you're feeling."

That made me feel a sense of relief, like I'd finally been listened to after thirteen years.

I have always worked so hard. I put up with being held down for a long time. But when my family put me in that facility, they took it too far.

I was treated like a criminal. And they made me think I deserved that. They made me forget my self-worth and my value.

Of all the things they did, I will say that the worst was to make me question my faith. I never had strict ideas about religion. I just knew there was something bigger than me. Under their control, I stopped believing in God for a while. But then, when it came time to end the conservatorship, I realized one thing: You

Chapter 35

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35

I loved the dry heat of Las Vegas. I loved the way everyone believed in luck and the dream. I had always enjoyed it there, even back when Paris Hilton and I were kicking off our shoes and running through casinos. But that felt like a lifetime ago.

My residency started right after Christmas in 2013. The boys were seven and eight. In the beginning, it was a great gig.

Being onstage in Vegas was thrilling at first. And no one let me forget that my residency was a landmark deal for the Strip. I was told my show drew young people back to Sin City and changed the landscape of entertainment in Las Vegas for a new generation.

The fans gave me so much energy. I became great at doing the show. I got so much confidence, and for a while, everything was good—as good as it could be when I was so tightly controlled. I started dating a TV producer named Charlie Ebersol. To me, he seemed like marriage material: He took great care of himself. His family was close. I loved him.

Charlie worked out every day, taking pre-workout supplements and a whole bunch of vitamins. He shared his nutrition research with me and started giving me energy supplements.

My father didn't like that. He knew what I ate; he even knew when I would go to the bathroom. So when I started taking energy supplements, he saw that I had more energy onstage and that I was in better shape than I had been. It seemed obvious that Charlie's regimens were a good thing for me. But I believe my father started to think that I had a problem with those energy supplements, even though they were over-the-counter, not prescription. So he told me I had to get off them, and he sent me to rehab.

He got to say where I went and when. And going to rehab meant that I didn't get to see my kids for a whole month. The only consolation was that I knew it was just for a month and I'd be done.

The place he chose for me was in Malibu. That month, for hours a day, we had to do boxing and other exercises outside, because there was no gym.

A lot of people at the facility were serious drug addicts. I was scared to be there by myself. At least I was allowed to have a security guard, who I'd have lunch with every day.

I found it difficult to accept that my dad was selling himself as this amazing guy and devoted grandfather when he was throwing me away, putting me against my will into a place with crack and heroin addicts. I'll just say it—he was horrible.

When I got out, I started doing shows again in Vegas like nothing had happened. Part of that was because my father told me I had to get back out there, and part of it was because I was still so nice, so eager to please, so desperate to do the right thing and be a good girl.

No matter what I did, my dad was there watching. I couldn't drive a car.

Everybody who came to my trailer had to sign waivers. Everything was very, very safe—so safe I couldn't breathe.

And no matter how much I dieted and exercised, my father was always telling me I was fat. He put me on a strict diet. The irony was that we had a butler—an extravagance—and I would beg him for real food. "Sir," I would plead, "can you please sneak a hamburger or ice cream to me?"

"Ma'am, I'm sorry," he would say, "I have strict orders from your father."

So for two years, I ate almost nothing but chicken and canned vegetables.

Two years is a long time to not be able to eat what you want, especially when it's your body and your work and your soul making the money that everyone's living off of. Two years of asking for french fries and being told no. I found it so degrading.

A strict diet you've put yourself on is bad enough. But when someone is depriving you of food you want, that makes it worse. I felt like my body wasn't mine anymore. I would go to the gym and feel so out of my mind with this trainer telling me to do things with my body, I felt cold inside. I felt scared. I'll be honest, I was fucking miserable.

And it didn't even work. The diet had the opposite effect of what my father wanted. I gained weight. Even though I wasn't eating as much, he made me feel so ugly and like I wasn't good enough. Maybe that's because of the power of your thoughts: whatever you think you are, you become. I was so beaten down by all of it that I just surrendered. My mom seemed to go along with my dad's plan for me.

It was always incredible to me that so many people felt so comfortable talking about my body. It had started when I was young. Whether it was strangers in the media or within my own family, people seemed to experience my body as public property: something they could police, control, criticize, or use as a weapon. My body was strong enough to carry two children and agile enough to execute every choreographed move perfectly onstage. And now here I was, having every calorie recorded so people could continue to get rich off my body.

No one else but me seemed to find it outrageous that my father would set all these rules for me and then go out and drink Jack and Cokes. My friends would visit and get their nails done at spas and drink fancy champagne. I was never allowed into spas. My family would stay in Destin, a pretty beach town in Florida, at a ridiculously beautiful condo that I bought for them and eat good-tasting food every night while I was starving and working.

Meanwhile, my sister was turning her nose up at every gift I'd given the family.

I called my mom one day in Louisiana and said, "What are you doing this weekend?"

"Oh, the girls and I are going to Destin tomorrow," she said. Jamie Lynn had said so many times that she never went there, that it was one more of those ridiculous things I'd bought the family that she'd never wanted, and it turned out my mom went there every weekend with Jamie Lynn's two daughters.

I used to love buying my family houses and cars. But there came a point when they started to take things for granted, and the family didn't realize that those things were possible because I'm an artist. And because of how they treated me, for years I lost touch with my creativity.

Chapter 11

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11

There was hardly any time to rehearse. I only had a week to get ready. I was performing at the 2001 Super Bowl halftime show alongside Aerosmith, Mary J. Blige, Nelly, and NSYNC. Justin and the rest of his band had special gloves that shot fountains of sparks! I sang "Walk This Way" wearing a sexy version of a football uniform, with shiny silver pants, a crop shirt, and an athletic sock on one of my arms. I was brought to Steven Tyler's trailer to meet him right before the show, and his energy was incredible: he was such an idol to me. When we finished, the stadium lit up with fireworks.

The halftime show was just one of the seemingly endless good things

happening for me. I landed the “most powerful woman” spot on the Forbes list of most powerful celebrities—the following year I’d be number one overall. I learned that tabloids were making so much money off photos of me, I was almost single-handedly keeping some magazines in business. And I was starting to get amazing offers.

At the 2001 MTV Video Music Awards that September, the plan was for me to sing “I’m a Slave 4 U,” and we decided I would use a snake as a prop. It’s become an iconic moment in VMAs history, but it was even more terrifying than it appeared.

The first time I saw the snake was when they brought it to a little back room of the Metropolitan Opera House in Manhattan, where we would be doing the show. The girl who handed it over was even smaller than me—she looked so young, and she was very tiny, with blond hair. I couldn’t believe they didn’t have some big guy in charge—I remember thinking, You’re letting us two little munchkins handle this huge snake...?

But there we were, and there was no going back: she lifted up the snake and put it over my head and around me. To be honest, I was a little scared—that snake was a huge animal, yellow and white, crinkly, gross-looking. It was okay because the girl who gave it to me was right there, plus a snake handler and a bunch of other people.

Everything changed, though, when I actually had to do the song onstage with the snake. Onstage I’m in performance mode: I’m in a costume, and there’s nobody else there but me. Once again the little munchkin came to me and handed me that huge snake, and all I knew was to look down, because I felt if I looked up and caught its eye, it would kill me.

In my head I was saying, Just perform, just use your legs and perform. But what nobody knows is that as I was singing, the snake brought its head right around to my face, right up to me, and started hissing at me. You didn’t see that shot on the TV, but in real life? I was thinking, Are you fucking serious right now? The fucking goddamn snake’s tongue is flicking out at me. Right. Now. Finally, I got to the part where I handed it back, thank God.

The next night at Madison Square Garden in New York City, just days before September 11, I performed a duet of “The Way You Make Me Feel” with Michael Jackson to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of his solo career. In my heels, I prowled all over that stage. The audience went crazy. At one point it felt like the whole crowd of twenty thousand was singing along with us.

Pepsi hired me to do commercials for them. In “The Joy of Pepsi,” I started out as a delivery driver and then wound up in a huge dance number. In “Now and Then,” I got to wear cute outfits from various eras. For the eighties section, I got made up as Robert Palmer for a version of “Simply Irresistible.” I was in hair and makeup for four hours, and they still didn’t quite manage to make me convincing as a man. But in the seventies part, I loved dancing at the drive-in. I had Betty Boop hair. Working in all those different genres, I was amazed at how intelligently done those commercials were.

The first movie I did was *Crossroads*, written by Shonda Rhimes and directed by Tamra Davis. We had filmed it in March 2001, around the same time I was recording the album *Britney*. In the film, I was playing a “good girl” named Lucy Wagner. The experience wasn’t easy for me. My problem wasn’t with anyone involved in the production but with what acting did to my mind. I think I started Method acting—only I didn’t know how to break out of my character. I really became this other person. Some people do Method acting, but they’re usually aware of the fact that they’re doing it. But I didn’t have any separation at all.

This is embarrassing to say, but it's like a cloud or something came over me and I just became this girl named Lucy. When the camera came on, I was her, and then I couldn't tell the difference between when the camera was on and when it wasn't. I know that seems stupid, but it's the truth. I took it that seriously. I took it seriously to the point where Justin said, "Why are you walking like that? Who are you?"

All I can say is it's a good thing Lucy was a sweet girl writing poems about how she was "not a girl, not yet a woman," and not a serial killer.

I ended up walking differently, carrying myself differently, talking differently.

I was someone else for months while I filmed *Crossroads*. Still to this day, I bet the girls I shot that movie with think, She's a little... quirky. If they thought that, they were right.

I was a baby, just like the character. I should've played myself on camera. But I was so eager to do a good job that I kept trying to go deep with this character. I had been me my whole life, and I wanted to try something different! I should have said to myself, It's a teen road movie. It's not that deep. Honestly, just have a good time.

After the movie wrapped, one of my girlfriends from a club in LA came to visit me. We went to CVS. I swear to God, I walked into the store, and as I talked to her while we shopped, I finally came back to myself. When I came outside again I was cured of the spell that movie had cast. It was so strange. My little spirit showed back up in my body. That trip to buy makeup with a friend was like waving some magic wand.

Then I was pissed.

I thought, Oh my God, what have I been doing the past few months? Who was I?

Chapter 3

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3

"Ms. Lynne! Ms. Lynne!" the boy shouted. He was out of breath, panting at our front door. "You have to come! Come now!"

One day when I was four, I was in the living room of our house, sitting on the couch with my mom on one side and my friend Cindy on the other.

Kentwood was like a town in a soap opera—there was always drama. Cindy was chattering away to my mom about the latest scandal while I was listening in, trying to follow along, when the door burst open. The boy's facial expression was enough for me to know something terrifying had happened. My heart dropped.

My mother and I started running. The road had just been repaved and I was barefoot, running on the hot black tar.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" I yelped with every step. I looked down at my feet and saw the tar sticking to them.

Finally, we arrived at the field where my brother, Bryan, had been playing

with his neighbor friends. They had been trying to mow down some tall grass with their four-wheelers. This seemed like a fantastic idea to them because they were idiots. Inevitably, they couldn't see one another through the tall grass and had a head-on collision.

I must have seen everything, heard Bryan hollering in pain, my mother screaming in fear, but I don't remember any of it. I think God made me black out so I wouldn't remember the pain and panic, or the sight of my brother's crushed body.

A helicopter airlifted him to the hospital.

When I visited Bryan days later, he was in a full body cast. From what I could see, he'd broken nearly every bone in his body. And the detail that drove it all home for me, as a kid, was that he had to pee through a hole in the cast.

The other thing I couldn't help but notice was that the whole room was full of toys. My parents were so grateful he'd survived and they felt so bad for him that during his recovery, every day was Christmas. My mom catered to my brother because of guilt. She still defers to him to this day. It's funny how one split second can change a family's dynamics forever.

The accident made me much closer to my brother. Our bond was formed out of my sincere, genuine recognition of his pain. Once he came home from the hospital, I wouldn't leave his side. I slept beside him every night. He couldn't sleep in his own bed because he still had the full body cast. So he had a special bed, and they had to set up a little mattress for me at the foot of it. Sometimes I'd climb into his bed and just hold him.

Once the cast came off, I continued to share a bed with him for years. Even as a very little girl, I knew that—between the accident and how hard our dad was on him—my brother had a difficult life. I wanted to bring him comfort.

Finally, after years of this, my mom told me, "Britney, now you're almost in the sixth grade. You need to start sleeping by yourself!"

I said no.

I was such a baby—I did not want to sleep by myself. But she insisted, and finally I had to give in.

Once I started to stay in my own room, I came to enjoy having my own space, but I remained extremely close to my brother. He loved me. And I loved him so much—for him I felt the most endearing, protective love. I didn't want him ever to be hurt. I'd seen him suffer too much already.

As my brother got better, we became heavily involved with the community.

Since it was a small town of just a couple thousand people, everyone came out to support the three main parades a year—Mardi Gras, Fourth of July, Christmas.

The whole town looked forward to them. The streets would be lined with people smiling, waving, leaving behind the drama of their lives for a day to have fun watching their neighbors slowly wander by on Highway 38.

One year, a bunch of us kids decided to decorate a golf cart and put it in the Mardi Gras parade. There were probably eight kids in that golf cart—way too many, obviously. There were three on the bench seat, a couple standing on the

Chapter 42

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42

The doctors took me away from my kids and my dogs and my house. I couldn't go outside. I couldn't drive a car. I had to give blood weekly. I couldn't take a bath in private. I couldn't shut the door to my room. I was watched, even when I was changing. I had to go to sleep at nine p.m. They supervised me watching TV, from eight to nine o'clock, in bed.

I had to be up every morning at eight. I had endless meetings every day.

For several hours a day, I sat in a chair receiving mandatory therapy. I spent the time in between meetings staring out the window, watching cars pull up and drive away, so many cars bringing so many therapists and security guards, doctors, and nurses. What I think did the most damage to me was watching all those people coming and going while I was prevented from leaving.

I was told that everything that was happening was for my own good. But I felt abandoned in that place, and while every-one kept saying they were there to help me, I never could understand what my family wanted from me. I did everything I was supposed to do. My kids would come for an hour on the weekends. But if I didn't do what I was "supposed to do" during the week, I wouldn't be allowed to see them.

One of the only people who called me was Cade. I've always felt safe and yet also a sense of danger with Cade. The most entertaining call I had the whole time was his FaceTiming me from a hospital in Texas to tell me about how he'd gotten bitten by a scorpion in his bed—in his bed. His leg blew up to the size of a basketball, no joke.

"Are you serious right now?" I said, looking at his swollen leg on my phone. It was unbelievably bad. Thinking about Cade's poor leg gave me one of the only true distractions from what I was dealing with, and I'll always be grateful to him and that Texas scorpion.

The therapists questioned me for hours and what seemed like every day, seven days a week.

For years I'd been on Prozac, but in the hospital they took me abruptly off it and put me on lithium, a dangerous drug that I did not want or need and that makes you extremely slow and lethargic. I felt my concept of time morph, and I grew disoriented. On lithium, I didn't know where I was or even who I was sometimes. My brain wasn't working the way it used to. It wasn't lost on me that lithium was the drug my grandmother Jean, who later committed suicide, had been put on in Mandeville.

Meanwhile, my security team that I'd been with for so long acted like I was a criminal.

When it was time for blood draws, the tech drawing my blood would be flanked by the nurse, a security guard, and my assistant.

Was I a cannibal? Was I a bank robber? Was I a wild animal? Why was I treated as though I were about to burn the place down and murder them all?

They checked my blood pressure three times a day, like I was an eighty-year-old woman. And they'd take their time. Make me sit down. Get the cuffs. Slowly attach it. Slowly pump it up... Three times a day. To feel sane, I needed to move around. Movement was my life as a dancer. I thrived on it. I needed it and craved it. But they kept me in that chair for ages. I began to feel like I was being ritually tortured.

I felt anxious in my feet and in my heart and in my brain. I could never burn

o? that energy.

You know how when your body is moving you're reminded that you're alive? That's all I wanted. And I couldn't move, which meant I began to wonder if I might actually already be half-dead. I felt ruined.

My ass grew bigger from sitting in a chair for hours a day—so much so that none of my shorts fit anymore. I became estranged from my own body. I had terrible nightmares where I was running through a forest—dreams that felt so real. Please wake up, please wake up, please wake up—I don't want it to be real, this is just a dream, I would think.

If the idea of my being in that place was to heal, that was not the effect. I began to imagine myself as a bird without wings. You know how, when you're a child, sometimes you run around with your arms outstretched, and with the wind moving over your arms, for a second you feel like you're flying? That was what I wanted to feel. Instead, every day it felt like I was sinking into the earth. I did the program by myself for two months in Beverly Hills. It was hell, like being in my very own horror movie. I watch scary movies. I've seen *The Conjuring*. I'm not scared of anything after those months at that treatment center. Seriously, I'm not scared of anything now.

I'm probably the least fearful woman alive at this point, but it doesn't make me feel strong; it makes me sad. I shouldn't be this strong. Those months made me too tough. I miss my days of being what in Kentwood we used to call a sass ass. That time in the hospital took away my sassiness. In so many ways, it broke my spirit.

After two months in one building, I was moved to another run by the same people, and at this one I wasn't alone. Even though I used to prefer being by myself, after two months in what felt like solitary confinement and on lithium, it was honestly so much better to be around other patients. We were together all day. At night, each of us was left alone in an individual room—the doors made a pow sound as they shut.

My first week, one of the other patients came to my room and said, "Why are you screaming so loud?"

"Huh? I'm not screaming," I said.

"We all hear you. You're screaming so loud."

I looked around my room. "I don't even have music playing," I said.

I later learned that she sometimes heard things other people didn't hear, but that freaked me out.

A very pretty girl arrived and became instantly popular. It felt like high school, where she was the cheerleader and I was the demoralized nerd. She skipped all of the meetings.

Chapter 33

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for the sake of my sons, but being in it was really hard. I knew there was something more inside me, but I felt it dimming every day. Over time, the fire inside me burned out. The light went out of my eyes. I know that my fans could see it, although they didn't understand the full scope of what had happened, because I was so tightly controlled.

I have a lot of compassion for the woman I was before I was put into the conservatorship, when I was recording *Blackout*. Even though I was being described as so rebellious and such a wild girl, all my best work was accomplished during that time. All in all, though, it was a terrible time. I had my two little babies and there was always a fight around my trying to see them.

I look back now and I think that if I'd been wise, I wouldn't have done anything but focus on my life at home, as hard as it was.

At the time Kevin would say, "Well, if you meet me this weekend, we'll have a two-hour meeting and we'll do this and that and I might let you see the boys a little bit more." Everything was almost like a deal with the devil for me to get what I wanted.

I was rebelling, yes, but I can see now that there's a reason why people go through rebellious times. And you have to let people go through them. I'm not saying that I was right to spiral, but I think to hinder someone's spirit to that degree and to put them down that much, to the point where they no longer feel like themselves—I don't think that's healthy, either. We, as people, have to test the world. You have to test your boundaries, to find out who you are, how you want to live.

Other people—and by other people, I mean men—were afforded that freedom. Male rockers were rolling in late to awards shows and we thought it made them cooler. Male pop stars were sleeping with lots of women and that was awesome. Kevin was leaving me alone with two babies when he wanted to go smoke pot and record a rap song, "Popozão," slang for big ass in Portuguese. Then he took them away from me, and he had *Details* magazine calling him Dad of the Year. A paparazzo who stalked and tormented me for months sued me for \$230,000 for running over his foot with my car one time when I was trying to escape from him. We settled and I had to give him a lot of money.

When Justin cheated on me and then acted sexy, it was seen as cute. But when I wore a sparkly bodysuit, I had Diane Sawyer making me cry on national television, MTV making me listen to people criticizing my costumes, and a governor's wife saying she wanted to shoot me.

I'd been eyeballed so much growing up. I'd been looked up and down, had people telling me what they thought of my body, since I was a teenager. Shaving my head and acting out were my ways of pushing back. But under the conservatorship I was made to understand that those days were now over. I had to grow my hair out and get back into shape. I had to go to bed early and take whatever medication they told me to take.

If I thought getting criticized about my body in the press was bad, it hurt even more from my own father. He repeatedly told me I looked fat and that I was going to have to do something about it. So every day I would put on my sweats and I would go to the gym. I would do little bits of creative stuff here and there, but my heart wasn't in it anymore. As far as my passion for singing and dancing, it was almost a joke at that point.

Feeling like you're never good enough is a soul-crushing state of being for a child. He'd drummed that message into me as a girl, and even after I'd accomplished so much, he was continuing to do that to me.

You ruined me as a person, I wanted to tell my father. Now you're making me work for you. I'll do it, but I'll be damned if I'll put my heart into it.

Chapter 37

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37

As performers, we girls have our hair. That's the real thing guys want to see. They love to see the long hair move. They want you to thrash it. If your hair's moving, they can believe you're having a good time.

In the most demoralizing moments of my Las Vegas residency, I wore tight wigs, and I'd dance in a way where I wouldn't move a hair on my head. Everyone who was making money off me wanted me to move my hair, and I knew it—and so I did everything but that.

When I look back, I realize how much of myself I withheld onstage, how much by trying to punish the people who held me captive I punished everyone else, too—including my loyal fans, including myself. But now I know why I'd been sleepwalking through so much of the past thirteen years. I was traumatized. By holding back onstage, I was trying to rebel in some way, even if I was the only one who knew that was what was happening. And so I didn't toss my hair or flirt. I did the moves and I sang the notes, but I didn't put the fire behind it that I had in the past. Toning down my energy onstage was my own version of a factory slowdown.

As an artist, I didn't feel able to reach the sense of freedom that I'd had before. And that's what we have as artists—that freedom is who we are and what we do. I wasn't free under the conservatorship. I wanted to be a woman in the world. Under the conservatorship, I wasn't able to be a woman at all.

It was different, though, with Glory. As the Glory singles rolled out, I started getting more passionate about my performances. I started to wear high heels again. When I wasn't trying so hard and I just let myself elevate as a star onstage, that's when it came across the most powerfully. And that's when I could really feel the audiences lifting me up.

Promoting Glory, I began to feel better about myself. That third year in Vegas I got a little bit of fire back. I started to appreciate the dazzle of performing in Sin City every night, and the spontaneity of feeling alive in front of an audience. Even though I might not have been doing my best onstage, there were pieces of me that began to awaken again. I was able to tap back into that connection between a performer and an audience.

I have trouble explaining to people who haven't been onstage what it's like to sense that current between your physical body and the bodies of other human beings in a space. The only metaphor that really works is electricity. You feel electric. The energy runs out of you and into the crowd and then back into you in a loop. For such a long time, I'd had to be on autopilot: the only current I could access was whatever was inside of me that kept me moving.

Slowly, I began to believe in my capabilities again. For a while I didn't tell anyone. I kept it a secret. Just as I escaped into my dreams to get away from the chaos of my parents when I was a little girl, in Las Vegas, now as an adult but with less freedom than I'd had as a child, I began to escape into a new dream—freedom from my family and a return to being the artist I knew I had in me.

Everything began to seem possible. Hesam and I became so close that we started to talk about having a baby together. But I was in my thirties, so I knew that time was running out.

At the beginning of the conservatorship I was overwhelmed with doctor appointments. Doctor after doctor after doctor—probably twelve doctors a week—coming to my home. And yet, my father wouldn't let me go to the doctor when I asked for an appointment to get my IUD removed.

When the conservatorship happened, everything became controlled, with security guards everywhere. My whole life changed in a way that might have been safer for me physically but was absolutely horrible for my sense of joy and

Chapter 8

In Chapter 8, the narrator, a young and aspiring singer, recounts her unexpected encounter with Clive Calder, the founder of Jive Records. Entering Calder's impressive three-story office and meeting his teacup terrier, the narrator feels as though she has stepped into a parallel universe where her dreams are given a new dimension of possibility. Calder's South African accent and welcoming demeanor immediately make her feel at ease, igniting a sense of connection and destiny. Despite not having recorded anything yet, this meeting marks the beginning of her journey into the music industry.

Upon being signed to Jive Records at fifteen, the narrator, along with her family friend Felicia Culotta, relocates to New York to begin recording in New Jersey with producer and songwriter Eric Foster White. Despite her lack of understanding of the industry's workings, her passion for singing and dancing drives her forward. She undergoes months of intensive recording sessions in an underground booth, isolating herself to focus on her music.

A humorous and humbling moment occurs when she accidentally runs into a screen door at a barbecue, highlighting the grounding experiences amidst her rising fame. This period also features her collaborations with prestigious producers such as Max Martin, indicating the start of her successful music career. The chapter emphasizes themes of youthful enthusiasm, the surreal nature of achieving one's dreams, and the naivety and determination of a young artist at the onset of her journey in the music industry. The narrator's experiences of forming pivotal relationships, enduring embarrassing moments, and working tirelessly showcase her evolving personal and professional life, leading up to the anticipation of her first album's completion.

Chapter 48

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48

I had been lied to for the past thirteen years. The whole world knew I needed a new lawyer, and finally I realized the same thing. It was time to take back control of my own life.

I reached out to my social media team and to my friend Cade for help finding one. This is when I got Mathew Rosengart on board, and he was amazing. A

prominent former federal prosecutor now with a major law firm, he had a number of famous clients like Steven Spielberg and Keanu Reeves, and a lot of experience with high-profile, challenging cases. We spoke several times on the phone and then met in early July in my pool house. Once Mathew was in my corner, I felt that I was getting closer to the end. Something had to happen. It couldn't stay at a standstill. But of course, because it was the legal system, we had to do a lot of waiting and strategizing.

He was appalled that I'd been denied my own lawyer for so long. He said even vicious criminals get to pick their own lawyers, and he said he hated bullying. I was glad, because I saw my father and Lou and Robin as bullies and I wanted them out of my life.

Mathew said he would go to court and file a motion to remove my dad as conservator first, and then, after that, it would be easier to try to terminate the entire conservatorship. Just a few weeks later, on July 26, he filed to eliminate my father from that role. After a big court hearing on September 29, my father was suspended as my conservator. It was all over the news before Mathew could even call me after court.

I felt relief sweep over me. The man who had scared me as a child and ruled over me as an adult, who had done more than anyone to undermine my self-confidence, was no longer in control of my life.

At that point, with my father eliminated, Mathew told me we had momentum, and he petitioned for the end of the conservatorship altogether. I was at a resort in Tahiti in November when Mathew called me with the news that I was no longer under a conservatorship. He'd told me when I left for the trip that one day soon I'd be able to wake up for the first time in thirteen years a free woman. Still, I couldn't believe it when he called me as soon as he came out of the court hearing and told me it was done. I was free.

Even though it was his strategy that had gotten us the victory, he told me that I deserved the credit for what had happened. He said that by giving my testimony, I'd freed myself and probably also helped other people in unfair conservatorships. After having my father take credit for everything I did for so long, it meant everything to have this man tell me that I'd made the difference in my own life.

And now, finally, it was my own life.

Being controlled made me so angry on behalf of anyone who doesn't have the right to determine their own fate.

"I'm just grateful, honestly, for each day... I'm not here to be a victim," I said on Instagram after the conservatorship was terminated. "I lived with victims my whole life as a child. That's why I got out of my house. And worked for twenty years and worked my ass off... Hopefully, my story will make an impact and make some changes in the corrupt system."

In the months since that phone call, I've been trying to rebuild my life day by day. I'm trying to learn how to take care of myself, and to have some fun, too. On vacation in Cancún, I got to do something I'd loved years earlier—Jet Skiing. The last time I'd Jet Skied before that had been in Miami with the boys, when I went too fast because I was trying to keep up with them. Those kids are borderline dangerous on a Jet Ski! They go extremely fast and do jumps. Riding over the waves after them, I was hitting hard—boom, boom, boom—and falling down, wiping out and hurting my arm.

Not wanting to repeat that experience, in May 2022 I got my assistant to drive me instead. It's way better when someone drives you, I've found. This time I could feel the power of the engine, I could enjoy being out on the clear blue water, and I could go exactly the speed I wanted to.

That's the kind of thing I'm doing now—trying to have fun and trying to be kind to myself, to take things at my own pace. And, for the first time in a long time, allowing myself to trust again.

Every day, I put music on. When I walk around my house singing, I feel completely free, completely at ease, completely happy. Whether I sound perfect or not, I don't even care. Singing makes me feel confident and strong the same way exercise does, or prayer. (Remember: your tongue is your sword.) Anything that gets your heart rate up is good. Music is that, plus a connection to God. That's where my heart is.

When I had full-time access to a studio in Malibu, I loved going there regularly. One day I created six songs. Music is at its purest for me when I'm doing it for myself. I thought I might get a studio again someday and just play around, but for some time I hadn't been thinking about recording.

I changed my mind about that when I got invited to record a song with an artist I've admired my entire life: Sir Elton John. He's one of my all-time favorite performers. I'd met him at an Oscars party about a decade ago and we got along so well. And now here he was reaching out with the sweetest video message, asking if I would be interested in collaborating on one of his most iconic songs. "Hold Me Closer" would be a modernized duet version of his hit "Tiny Dancer," with bits of a couple of his other songs, too.

I was so honored. Like me, Elton John has been through so much, so publicly. It's given him incredible compassion. What a beautiful man on all levels.

To make the collaboration even more meaningful: as a child, I listened to "Tiny Dancer" in the car in Louisiana as I rode to and from my dance and gymnastics classes.

Sir Elton was kind and made me feel so comfortable. Once we'd worked out a date to record the song, I headed over to the producer's home studio in Beverly Hills.

The studio was in the basement of the house. I had never seen a setup like it: it was a completely open studio with guitars, pianos, soundboards, and music equipment all set out. I was nervous because it would be the first time the world had heard my singing voice on something new in six years, but I believed in the song and in myself, so I went for it.

I stood in front of the microphone, sped up the tempo, and began to sing.

After a few hours, we were done. I had recorded a duet with one of my favorite artists on one of my favorite songs. I was excited, anxious, and emotional in the weeks leading up to the release.

Before the conservatorship, I would go onstage and everyone would look to me for the signal that it was time to start the show. I'd hold up my index finger to say, "Let's go." Under the conservatorship, I always had to wait for everyone else. I was told, "We'll let you know when we're ready." I didn't feel like they treated me as if I had any value. I hated it.

I'd been taught through the conservatorship to feel almost too fragile, too scared. That's the price I paid under the conservatorship. They took a lot of my womanhood, my sword, my core, my voice, the ability to say "Fuck you." And I know that sounds bad, but there is something crucial about this. Don't underestimate your power.

"Hold Me Closer" debuted on August 26, 2022. By August 27, we were number one in forty countries. My first number one and my longest-charting single in almost ten years. And on my own terms. Fully in control. Fans said that on the track I sounded amazing. Sharing your work with the world is terrifying. But in my experience, it is always worthwhile. Recording "Hold Me Closer" and

putting it out into the world was a fantastic experience. It didn't feel good—it felt great.

Pushing forward in my music career is not my focus at the moment. Right now it's time for me to try to get my spiritual life in order, to pay attention to the little things, to slow down. It's time for me not to be someone who other people want; it's time to actually find myself.

As I've gotten older, I like my alone time. Being an entertainer was great, but over the last few years my passion to entertain in front of a live audience has lessened. I do it for myself now. I feel God more when I'm alone.

I'm no saint, but I do know God.

I have a lot of soul-searching to do. It's going to be a process. I'm already enjoying it. Change is good. Hesam and I always pray together. I look up to him—his consistency with working out and being a good man and being healthy and taking care of me and helping me learn how we can take care of each other. He's such an inspiration and I'm grateful. The timing of the end of the conservatorship was perfect for our relationship; we were able to establish a new life together, without limitations, and get married. Our wedding was a beautiful celebration of how much we'd been through together and how deeply we wished for each other's happiness.

The day the conservatorship ended, I was left with so many emotions: shock, relief, elation, sadness, joy.

I felt betrayed by my father and, sadly, by the rest of my family, too. My sister and I should have found comfort in each other, but unfortunately that hasn't been the case. As I was fighting the conservatorship and receiving a lot of press attention, she was writing a book capitalizing on it. She rushed out salacious stories about me, many of them hurtful and outrageous. I was really let down. Shouldn't sisters be able to confess their fear or vulnerability to each other without that later being used as evidence of instability?

I couldn't help but feel that she wasn't aware of what I'd been through. It appeared that she thought it had been easy for me because so much fame had come to me so young, and that she blamed me for my success and everything that came with it.

Jamie Lynn clearly suffered in our family home, too. She grew up a child of divorce, which I did not. It seems that she didn't get a lot of parenting, and I know it was hard to try to sing and act and make her own way in the world in the shadow of a sibling who got not only most of the family's attention but a lot of the world's. My heart goes out to her for all those reasons.

But I don't think she fully understands just how desperately poor we were before she was born. Because of the money I brought to the family, she wasn't helpless in the face of our father, like my mother and I were back in the 1980s. When you have nothing, that pain gets intensified by your inability to escape. My mom and I had to witness the ugliness and the violence without believing that there was anywhere else to go.

She will always be my sister, and I love her and her beautiful family. I wish the absolute best for them. She's been through a lot, including teen pregnancy, divorce, and her daughter's near-fatal accident. She's spoken about the pain of growing up in my shadow. I'm working to feel more compassion than anger toward her and toward everyone who I feel has wronged me. It's not easy.

I've had dreams in which June tells me he knows he hurt my father, who then hurt me. I felt his love and that he'd changed on the other side. I hope that one day I will be able to feel better about the rest of my family, too.

My anger has been manifesting itself physically, especially with migraine headaches.

When I get them, I don't want to go to the doctor because being sent to one doctor after another all those years gave me a phobia about them. And so I take care of things myself. When it comes to the migraines, I don't like to talk about them because I'm superstitious that if I do, they'll bother me more.

When I have one, I can't go into the light and I can't move. I stay very still in the dark. Any light makes my head throb and makes me feel like I'm going to pass out—it's that painful. I have to sleep for a day and a half. Until recently, I'd never had a headache in my whole life. My brother used to complain about his headaches and I thought he was exaggerating how bad they were. Now I'm sorry I ever said anything to doubt him.

For me, a migraine is worse than a stomach virus. At least with a bug you can still think straight. Your head can help you figure out what you want to do, what movies you want to watch. But when you have a migraine you can't do anything because your brain is gone. Migraines are just one part of the physical and emotional damage I have now that I'm out of the conservatorship. I don't think my family understands the real damage that they did.

For thirteen years, I wasn't allowed to eat what I wanted, to drive, to spend my money how I wanted, to drink alcohol or even coffee.

Chapter 5

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5

I was quiet and small, but when I sang I came alive, and I had taken enough gymnastics classes to be able to move well. When I was five, I entered a local dance competition. My talent was a dance routine done wearing a top hat and twirling a cane. I won. Then my mother started taking me around to contests all over the region. In old photos and videos, I'm wearing the most ridiculous things. In my third-grade musical, I wore a baggy purple T-shirt with a huge purple bow on top of my head that made me look like a Christmas present. It was absolutely horrible.

I worked my way through the talent circuit, winning a regional contest in Baton Rouge. Before too long, my parents set their sights on bigger opportunities than what we could accomplish picking up prizes in school gymnasiums. When they saw an advertisement in the newspaper for an open call for The All New Mickey Mouse Club, they suggested we go. We drove eight hours to Atlanta. There were more than two thousand kids there. I had to stand out—especially once we learned, after we arrived, that they were only looking for kids over the age of ten.

When the casting director, a man named Matt Casella, asked me how old I was, I opened my mouth to say "Eight," then remembered the age-ten cutoff and said: "Nine!" He looked at me skeptically.

For my audition, I sang "Sweet Georgia Brown" while doing a dance routine, adding in some gymnastics tips.

They narrowed the group of thousands from across the country down to a

handful of kids, including a beautiful girl from California a few years older than me named Keri Russell.

A girl from Pennsylvania named Christina Aguilera and I were told we hadn't made the cut but that we were talented. Matt said we could probably get on the show once we were a little older and more experienced. He told my mom that he thought we should go to New York City to work. He recommended we look up an agent he liked who helped young performers get started in the theater.

We didn't go right away. Instead, for about six months, I stayed in Louisiana, and I went to work, waiting tables at Lexie's seafood restaurant, Granny's Seafood and Deli, to help out.

The restaurant had a terrible, ?shy smell. Still, the food was amazing—unbelievably good. And it became the new hangout for all the kids. The deli's back room was where my brother and all his friends would get drunk in high school. Meanwhile, out on the ?oor, at age nine, I was cleaning shell?sh and serving plates of food while doing my prissy dancing in my cute little out?ts.

My mom sent footage of me to the agent Matt had recommended, Nancy Carson. In the video, I was singing "Shine On, Harvest Moon." It worked: she asked us to come to New York and meet with her.

After I sang for Nancy in her o?ce twenty stories up in a building in Midtown Manhattan, we got back on the Amtrak and headed home. I had been o?cially signed by a talent agency.

Not long after we got back to Louisiana, my little sister, Jamie Lynn, was born. Laura Lynne and I spent hours playing with her in the playhouse like she was another one of our dolls.

A few days after she came home with the baby, I was getting ready for a dance competition when my mother started acting strangely. She was hand-sewing a rip in my costume, but while working the needle and thread she just up and threw the costume away. She didn't seem to know what she was doing. The costume was a piece of shit, frankly, but I needed it to compete.

"Mama! Why did you throw my costume away?" I said.

Then all of a sudden there was blood. Blood everywhere.

Chapter 22

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22

Those ?rst few months after Jayden came home were a blur. I got a dog. Felicia came in and out of my life.

While I was pregnant with Jayden, I'd dyed my hair black. Trying to get it blond again, I turned it purple. I had to go to a beauty salon to have them completely strip my hair and make it a realistic shade of brown. It took forever to get it right. Nearly everything in my life felt like that. To say the least, there was some chaos: the breakup with J and going on the rough Onyx tour, marrying someone who no one seemed to think was a good match, and then trying to be a good mother inside of a marriage that was collapsing in real time.

And yet, I always felt so happy and creative in the studio. Recording for *Blackout*, I felt so much freedom. Working with amazing producers, I got to play. A producer named Nate Hills, who recorded under the name Danja, was more into dance and EDM than pop; he introduced me to new sounds and I got to stretch my voice in different ways.

I loved that no one was overthinking things and that I got to say what I liked and didn't like. I knew exactly what I wanted, and I loved so much of what was offered to me. Coming into the studio and hearing these incredible sounds and getting to put down a vocal on them was fun. Despite my reputation at the time, I was focused and excited to work when I came in. It was what was going on outside the studio that was so upsetting.

The paparazzi were like an army of zombies trying to get in every second. They tried to scale the walls and take pictures through windows. Trying to enter and exit a building felt like being part of a military operation. It was terrifying. My A&R rep, Teresa LaBarbera Whites, who was a mother, too, did what she could to help. She put a baby swing at one of our studios, which I thought was a really sweet gesture.

The album was a kind of battle cry. After years of being meticulous, trying to please my mom and my dad, it was my time to say "Fuck you." I quit doing business the way I always had before. I started doing videos on the street myself. I would go into bars with a friend, and the friend would just bring a camera, and that's how we shot "Gimme More."

To be clear, I'm not saying I'm proud of it. "Gimme More" is by far the worst video I've ever shot in my life. I don't like it at all—it's so tacky. It looks like we only spent three thousand dollars to shoot it. And yet, even though it was bad, it worked for what it was. And the more I started going and doing things myself, the more interesting people started noticing and wanting to work with me. I wound up randomly finding really good people, just by word of mouth.

Blackout was one of the easiest and most satisfying albums I ever made. It came together really fast. I would go into the studio, be in there for thirty minutes, and leave. That wasn't by design—it had to be fast. If I stayed in one place for too long, the paparazzi outside would multiply like I was a cornered Pac-Man being chased by ghosts. My survival mechanism was to get in and get out of studios as fast as possible.

When I recorded "Hot as Ice," I walked into the studio and there were six gigantic guys in the room with me, sitting there. That was probably one of the most spiritual recording moments of my life, being with all those guys quietly listening as I sang. My voice went the highest it had ever gone. I sang it two times through and left. I didn't even have to try.

If making *Blackout* felt good, life was still tearing at me from every different direction. From one minute to the next, everything was so extreme. I needed to have more self-worth and value than I was able to conjure back then. And yet, even though it was a very hard time in just about every other way, artistically it was great. Something about where I was in my head made me a better artist. I felt an exciting rush making the *Blackout* album. I was able to work in the best studios. It was a wild time.

Chapter 38

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38

That third year in Vegas, I felt something within me that I hadn't felt in a really, really long time. I felt strong. I knew I had to do something.

Once I started to return to myself, my body, my heart, my physicality, and my spiritual self couldn't take the conservatorship any longer. There came a point when my little heart said, I'm not going to stand for this.

For so long, my parents had convinced me that I was the bad one, the crazy one, and it worked completely in their favor. It hurt my spirit. They put my ?re out. I undervalued myself for a decade. But inside, I was screaming about their bullshit. You have to understand the helplessness in that—the helplessness and the anger.

After my shows, it made me so mad to see my family drinking and having a great time when I wasn't even allowed a sip of Jack and Coke. In the public eye, I know I looked like a star onstage—I had cute tights on and high heels—but why the fuck couldn't I sin in Sin City?

As I became stronger and entered a new phase of my womanhood, I started to look around for examples of how to wield power in a positive way. Reese Witherspoon was a great example to me. She's sweet and she's nice, and she's very smart.

Once you start to see yourself that way—as not just someone who exists to make everyone else happy but someone who deserves to make their wishes known—that changes everything. When I started to think that I could be, like Reese, someone who was nice but also strong, it changed my perspective on who I was.

If no one is used to you being assertive, they get very freaked out when you start speaking your mind. I felt myself turning into their worst fear. I was a queen now, and starting to speak up. I imagined them bowing down to me. I felt my power surging back.

I knew how to carry myself. I'd become strong, enduring that kind of schedule. I really had no choice but to be strong, and I think audiences perceived that. It speaks volumes when you demand respect. It changes everything. And so when I heard my conservators trying to tell me, once again, that I was stupid if I tried to turn down a performance or ?nd a way to give myself some more time o?, I felt myself revolt. I thought, If you guys are trying to trick me into feeling bad for saying no, I'm not going to fall for it again.

The residency was set to end December 31, 2017. I couldn't wait. For one thing, I was so sick of doing the same show week after week for years. I kept begging for a remix or a new number—anything to break up the monotony.

I'd started to lose the joy in performing that I'd felt when I was younger. I no longer had the pure, raw love of singing that I'd had as a teenager. Now other people were telling me what to sing and when. No one seemed to care about what I wanted. The message I kept getting was that their minds mattered; my mind was to be ignored. I was just there to perform for them, to make them money.

It was such a waste. And as a performer who had always taken so much pride

in her musicianship, I can't stress enough how mad I was that they wouldn't even let me change up my show. We had weeks in between each set of shows in Vegas. So much fucking time was wasted. I wanted to remix my songs for my fans and give them something new and exciting. When I wanted to perform my favorite songs, like "Change Your Mind" or "Get Naked," they wouldn't let me. It felt like they wanted to embarrass me rather than let me give my fans the best possible performance every night, which they deserved. Instead, I had to do the same show week in and week out: the same routines, the same songs, the same arrangements. I'd been doing this same kind of show for a long time. I was desperate to change it up, to give my wonderful, loyal fans a new and electrifying experience. But all I heard was "no."

It was so lazy it was actually odd. I worried about what my fans would think of me. I wished I could communicate that I wanted to give them so much more. I loved to go to studios for hours at a time and do my own remixes with an engineer. But they said, "We can't put remixes in because of the time code of the show. We would have to redo the whole thing." I said, "Redo it!" I'm known for bringing new things to the table, but they always said no.

When I pushed, the best they could offer me, they said, was to play one of my new songs in the background while I was changing.

They acted like they were doing me a huge favor by playing my favorite new song while I was underground frantically taking costumes on and off.

It was embarrassing because I know the business. I knew it was totally possible for us to change up the show. My father was in charge, and it wasn't a priority for him. That meant that the people who would need to make it happen just wouldn't do it. Singing such old versions of songs made my body feel old. I craved new sounds, new movement. I feel now that it might have scared them for me to actually be the star. Instead, my dad was in charge of the star. Me.

When I did the videos for the singles from *Glory*, I felt so light and so free. *Glory* reminded me what it felt like to perform new material and how much I needed it. When I was told I'd be receiving the first-ever Radio Disney Icon Award the year after *Glory* came out, I thought, This is great! I'll take the boys and wear a cute black dress, and it will be a lot of fun.

Well, as I sat in the audience seeing a medley of my songs performed, I had so many feelings. By the time Jamie Lynn made a surprise appearance to do a bit of "Till the World Ends" and to hand me my award, I was a ball of emotion.

The whole time I was watching the show, I kept flashing back to the concert special I'd done for *In the Zone*. It was a remixed ABC special. I had rehearsed for a week and sung several new songs. They shot me so beautifully. I felt like a kid.

Frankly, it's some of my best work. There was a Cabaret vibe to a sultry rendition of "... Baby One More Time," and then for "Everytime" I wore a pretty white dress. It was just really, really beautiful. It had felt so incredible to

Chapter 14

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Even though the last thing I wanted to do was perform, I still had tour dates left in my contract, so I went back out to finish them. All I wanted was to get off the road: To have days and nights all to myself. To walk out onto the Santa Monica Pier and breathe in the salt air, listen to the rattle of the roller coaster, stare out at the ocean. Instead, every day was a grind. Load in. Load out. Sound check. Photo shoot. Asking, "What town are we even in?"

I'd loved the Dream Within a Dream Tour when it started, but it had become a slog. I was tired in mind and body. I wanted to shut it all down. I had begun fantasizing about opening a little shop in Venice Beach with Felicia and quitting show business completely. With the gift of hindsight, I can see that I hadn't given myself enough time to heal from the breakup with Justin.

In late July 2002, at the very end of the tour, we headed south to do a show in Mexico City. But getting there was almost a disaster.

We were traveling in vans, and once we'd crossed the border, we came to a sudden halt. We'd been stopped by a bunch of guys holding the biggest guns I'd ever seen. I was terrified; it felt like we were being ambushed. It just didn't make sense to me, but all I knew was we were surrounded by these angry-looking men. Everyone in my van was so tense; I had security with me, but who knew what was going to happen. After what felt like forever, there seemed to be some kind of peace talks happening—it was like in a movie. It's still a mystery to me what actually happened, but in the end, we were allowed to carry on, and we got to play to fifty thousand people (though the second show, on the following day, had to be canceled halfway through because of a massive thunderstorm).

That thunderstorm-canceled show was the last date of the Dream Within a Dream Tour, but when I told people after finishing the tour that I wanted to rest, everyone seemed nervous. When you're successful at something, there's a lot of pressure to keep right on doing it, even if you're not enjoying it anymore. And, as I would quickly find out, you really can't go home again.

I did an interview with People magazine back in Louisiana, for reasons that seemed ridiculous to me: I wasn't promoting anything, but my team thought I should show that I was doing well and "just taking a little break."

The photographer shot me outside, and then inside with the dogs and my mom on the couch. They had me empty out my purse to reveal that I wasn't carrying drugs or cigarettes: all they found was Juicy Fruit gum, vanilla perfume, mints, and a little bottle of St. John's wort. "My daughter is doing beautifully," my mom told the reporter confidently. "She's never, ever been close to a breakdown."

Part of what made that period of time so difficult is that Justin's family had been the only real, loving family I had. For holidays, the only family I would go to was his. I knew his grandmother and his grandfather, and I loved them so much. I thought of them as home. My mom would come out and visit us every once in a while, but she's not who I went home to, ever.

My mom was trying to recover from her divorce from my dad, which she'd finally gone through with; depressed and self-medicating, she could barely get up off the couch. My dad was nowhere to be found. And my little sister—well, when I tell you she was a total bitch, I'm not exaggerating.

I had always been the worker bee. While I was doing my thing on the road with Felicia, I hadn't been paying attention to what was happening in Kentwood. But when I came home, I saw how things had changed. My mom would serve Jamie Lynn while she watched TV, bringing her little chocolate milkshakes. It was clear that girl ruled the roost.

Meanwhile, it was like I was a ghost child. I can remember walking into the

room and feeling like no one even saw me. Jamie Lynn only saw the TV. My mother, who at one time had been the person I was closest to in the world, was on another planet.

Chapter 40

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40

I could hear the screams already. Hundreds of people had gathered outside. It was an October day in 2018, and there was a huge crowd outside the new Park MGM hotel in Las Vegas. Superfans were dressed in matching clothes and waving flags emblazoned with the letter B. Dancers onstage were wearing T-shirts that said BRITNEY. Announcers were livestreaming, hyping up their followers. Laser lights were flashing. A giant screen was showing scenes from my videos. Dance music blasted. A parade went by with marchers loudly singing lyrics like "My loneliness is killing me!"

The lights went down.

Mario Lopez, who was there to host the event, said into the mic, "We are here to welcome the new queen of Vegas..."

Dramatic music started—a riff from "Toxic." Crazy lights flashed on the Park MGM so it looked like the building was pulsing. Cue a medley of other songs and projections of a rocket ship, a helicopter, a circus big top, and a snake in the Garden of Eden. Fire blasted up from fire pits around the stage! I rose from the floor on a hydraulic lift, waving and smiling in a tight little black dress with star cutouts and tassels, my hair super long and blond.

"... Ladies and gentlemen," Mario Lopez continued, "Britney Spears!"

I walked down the stairs in my high heels to "Work Bitch" and signed a few autographs for fans. But then I did something unexpected.

I walked past the cameras.

I kept walking until I got into an SUV and left.

I said nothing. I did not perform. If you were watching, you were probably wondering: What just happened?

Chapter 43

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43

The hardest part was that I believed that, in front of the doctors or visitors, I had

to pretend the whole time I was okay. If I became ?ustered, it was taken as evidence that I wasn't improving. If I got upset and asserted myself, I was out of control and crazy.

It reminded me of what I'd always heard about the way they'd test to see if someone was a witch in the olden days. They'd throw the woman into a pond. If she ?oated, she was a witch and would be killed. If she sank, she was innocent, and, oh well. She was dead either way, but I guess they ?gured it was still good to know what kind of woman she'd been.

After a couple of months, I called my father to beg him to let me go home. He said, "I'm sorry, the judge is going to have to ?gure out what she's going to do with you. It's up to the doctors right now. I can't help you at all. I'm giving you to the doctors and I can't help you."

The strange part is, before they put me in that place, my dad had sent me a pearl necklace and a beautiful handwritten card for Christmas. I asked myself, Why is he doing this? Who is he?

What hurt me most was that for years he'd been saying in front of the cameras—whether it was when I did the "Work Bitch" video or when the conservatorship ?rst started and we did the Circus Tour—that he was all about me and the boys.

"That's my baby girl!" he'd say right into the camera. "I love her so much." I was stuck in a trailer with Lou's weird-ass lackey Robin, who I'd grown to hate, while he talked about what a great dad he was to anyone who would listen. But now, when I was refusing to do the new Vegas residency, when I was pushing back on tours, was I still his beloved baby girl?

Apparently not.

A lawyer would later say, "Your dad could've totally put a stop to all that. He could've told the doctors, no, this is too much, let's let my daughter go home." But he didn't.

I called my mom to ask her why everyone was acting like I was so dangerous. "Well, I don't know, I don't know, I don't know..." she would say.

I also texted my sister when I was in that place and asked her to get me out. "Stop ?ghting it," she texted back. "There's nothing you can do about it, so stop ?ghting it."

Along with the rest of them, she kept acting like I was a threat in some way. This will sound crazy, but I'll say it again because it's the truth: I thought they were going to try to kill me.

I didn't understand how Jamie Lynn and our father had developed such a good relationship. She knew I was reaching out to her for help and that he was dogging me. I felt like she should have taken my side.

One of my girlfriends who helped me change clothes every night in the underground changing room during my Vegas run later said, "Britney, I had three or four nightmares when you were at that center. I would wake up in the middle of the night. I had dreams that you killed yourself in that place. And I dreamed that Robin, the lady who was your so-called nice assistant, called me and said proudly, 'Yeah, she died in the place.' " My friend said she worried about me the whole time.

Several weeks into my stay, I was struggling to stay hopeful when one of the nurses, the only one who was real as hell, called me over to her computer.

"Look at this," she said.

I peered at her computer and tried to make sense of what I was seeing. It was women on a talk show talking about me and the conservatorship. One was wearing a #FreeBritney T-shirt. The nurse showed me clips of other things, too—fans saying they were trying to ?gure out if I was being held somewhere

against my will, talking about how much my music meant to them and how they hated to think I was suffering now. They wanted to help.

Chapter 49

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49

I've started to experience the riches of being an adult woman for the first time in many years. I feel like I've been underwater for so long, only rarely swimming up to the surface to gasp for air and a little food. When I regained my freedom, that was my cue to step out onto dry land—and, any time I want, to take vacations, sip a cocktail, drive my car, go to a resort, or stare out at the ocean.

I've been taking it a day at a time and trying to be thankful for the little things. I'm thankful that my father is not in my life. I don't have to be scared of him anymore. If I gain weight, it's a relief to know that no one is going to be there shouting at me, "You need to pick it up!" I get to eat chocolate again. As soon as my father was no longer around, making me eat what he wanted me to eat, my body became strong and my fire came back. I had confidence, and I started to like how I looked again. I love playing dress-up on Instagram. I know that a lot of people don't understand why I love taking pictures of myself naked or in new dresses. But I think if they'd been photographed by other people thousands of times, prodded and posed for other people's approval, they'd understand that I get a lot of joy from posing the way I feel sexy and taking my own picture, doing whatever I want with it. I was born into this world naked, and I honestly feel like the weight of the world has been on my shoulders. I wanted to see myself lighter and freer. As a baby, I had my whole life in front of me, and that's how I feel now, like a blank slate.

I really do feel reborn. Singing as I walk around at home just like I did as a little girl, I enjoy that feeling of the sound leaving my body and bouncing back at me. I'm finding the joy again of why I wanted to sing to begin with. That feeling is sacred for me. I do it for me and for nobody else.

I keep getting asked when I'm going to put on shows again. I confess that I'm struggling with that question. I'm enjoying dancing and singing the way I used to when I was younger and not trying to do it for my family's benefit, not trying to get something, but doing it for me and for my genuine love of it.

Only now do I feel like I'm getting back my trust in other people and my faith in God. I know what makes me happy and brings me joy. I try to meditate on those places and thoughts that enable me to experience it. I love beautiful places, my sons, my husband, my friends, my pets. I love my fans.

When it comes to fans, people sometimes ask me about my special relationship with the gay community.

For me, it's all about love—unconditional love. My gay friends were always protective of me, maybe because they knew that I was kind of innocent. Not dumb, but way too kind. And I think a lot of the gay guys around me took on a supportive role. I could even feel it onstage when they were beside me. If I

thought I didn't do my best performance, I could count on my friends to realize I didn't feel great about it and still say, "You did so good!" That kind of love means everything to me.

Some of my favorite nights were when I would go out with my dancers. One time in Europe we went to a gay club where I felt like everyone around me on the dance floor was so tall. The club played great electro dance music and I loved it. I danced until six o'clock in the morning and felt like it went by in two seconds. My heart was so alive. It was like the mystical time in Arizona—it was a spiritual experience to be with people who I could feel loved me unconditionally. With friends like that, it doesn't matter what you do or say or who you know. That's true love.

I remember one time in Italy, too, I went to a showcase where some drag artists were doing my songs. It was so amazing. The artists were beautiful. They were living in the moment and I could tell they loved to perform. They had such heart and drive, and I respect that a lot.

Once I was freed from the conservatorship, I got to go to the two vacation places that I'd missed, Maui and Cancún. I swam in the ocean; sat out in the sun; played with my new puppy, Sawyer; and took boat rides with Hesam. I read a lot and I wrote this book. While I was traveling, I found out that I was pregnant. I'd wanted another baby for so many years. For a long time, Hesam and I had been eager to start our own family. I have an appreciation for how stable he is. I love that he doesn't even drink. He's a gift from God. And to find out that he and I were about to have a child together made me feel giddy.

I was also scared. When I was pregnant with Sean Preston and Jayden, I suffered from depression. Pregnancy this time felt the same in a lot of ways—I felt a little sick and loved food and sex—and so I wondered if the depression would return, too. I did feel a little bit slower. I like to be up and with it. But my life was so much better and I had so much support that I felt confident I could make it through.

Before the end of my first trimester, I miscarried. I'd been so thrilled to be pregnant that I'd told the whole world, which meant I had to un-tell them. We posted on Instagram: "It is with our deepest sadness we have to announce that we have lost our miracle baby early in the pregnancy. This is a devastating time for any parent. Perhaps we should have waited to announce until we were further along. However, we were overly excited to share the good news. Our love for each other is our strength. We will continue trying to expand our beautiful family. We are grateful for all of your support. We kindly ask for privacy during this difficult moment."

I was devastated to have lost the baby. Once again, though, I used music to help me gain insight and perspective. Every song I sing or dance to lets me tell a different story and gives me a new way to escape. Listening to music on my phone helps me cope with the anger and sadness I face as an adult.

I try not to think too much about my family these days, but I do wonder what they will think of this book. Because I was silenced for thirteen years, I wonder if, when they see me speaking out, they've had the occasional thought, Maybe

Chapter 16

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16

Justin ended up sleeping with six or seven girls in the weeks after we officially broke up—or so I heard. Hey, I get it, he was Justin Timberlake. This was his first time to go solo. He was a girl's dream. I was in love with him. I understood the infatuation people had with him.

I decided if Justin was going to date, I should try to get out there, too. I hadn't dated in a while, since I'd been heartbroken and on tour. That winter I saw a guy who I thought was handsome, and a club promoter friend said I had good taste.

"That guy is so cool!" my friend said. "His name is Colin Farrell, and he's shooting a movie right now."

Well, talk about balls—I got in my car and I drove up to the set of his action movie, S.W.A.T. Who did I think I was?

There was no security or anything, so I went straight onto the soundstage, where they were doing a set piece in a house. When the director saw me, he said, "Come sit in my chair!"

"Okay," I said. So I sat in the chair and watched them shoot. Colin came over and said, "Do you have any pointers for what I should do here?" He was inviting me to direct him.

We wound up having a two-week brawl. Brawl is the only word for it—we were all over each other, grappling so passionately it was like we were in a street fight.

In the course of our fun time together, he took me to the premiere of a spy thriller he was in called *The Recruit*, with Al Pacino. I was so flattered he asked me to go. I wore a pajama top. I thought it was a real shirt because it had miniature studs on it, but I see the photos and I think: Yeah, I definitely wore a full-blown pajama top to Colin Farrell's premiere.

I was so excited to be at the premiere. Colin's whole family was there, and they were so warm to me.

As I had before when I'd felt too attached to a man, I tried to convince myself in every way that it was not a big deal, that we were just having fun, that in this case I was vulnerable because I wasn't over Justin yet. But for a brief moment in time I did think there could be something there.

The disappointments in my romantic life were just one part of how isolated I became. I felt so awkward all the time.

I did try to be social. Natalie Portman—who I'd known since we were little girls in the New York theater circuit—and I even hosted a New Year's Eve party together.

But it took a huge amount of effort. Most days, I couldn't even bring myself to call a friend on the phone. The thought of going out and being brave onstage or at clubs, even at parties or dinners, filled me with fear. Joy around groups of other people was rare. Most of the time, I had serious social anxiety.

The way social anxiety works is that what feels like a totally normal conversation to most people, to you feels mortifying. Being around people at all, especially at a party or some other situation with expectations of presenting well, for no apparent reason causes surges of embarrassment. I was afraid of being judged or of saying something stupid. When that feeling hits, I want to be alone. I get scared and just want to excuse myself to the bathroom and then sneak out.

I veered between being very social and being incredibly isolated. I kept hearing that I seemed so confident. It was hard for anyone to imagine that someone who could perform for thousands at a time could, backstage with just one or two people, be gripped by panic.

Anxiety is strange that way. And mine grew as it became clear to me that whatever I did—and even plenty I didn't do—became front-page news. These stories were often illustrated by unflattering photos of me taken when I least expected it. I was already designed to care what others thought about me; the national spotlight turned my natural tendency to worry into something unbearable.

While the news about me was often not all that friendly, the entertainment press was full of positive stories about Justin and Christina Aguilera. Justin was on the cover of *Rolling Stone* half-naked. Christina was on the cover of *Blender*, dressed like a madam from the Old West. They were together on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, him in a black tank top, looking at her with sexy eyes, her looking out at the camera, wearing a lace-up black shirt. In that story, she said she thought Justin and I should get back together, which was just confusing, given how negative she'd been elsewhere.

Seeing people I'd known so intimately talk about me that way in the press stung. Even if they weren't trying to be cruel, it felt like they were just pouring salt in the wound. Why was it so easy for everyone to forget that I was a human being—vulnerable enough that these headlines could leave a bruise?

Wanting to disappear, I found myself living in New York City alone for months, in a four-story NoHo apartment that Cher used to live in. It had tall ceilings, a terrace with a view of the Empire State Building, and a working fireplace much fancier than the one that had been in the living room of our house in Kentwood. It would have been a dream apartment to use as a home base to explore the city, but I hardly ever left the place. One of the only times I did, a man behind me on an elevator said something that made me laugh; I turned around and it was Robin Williams.

At one point, I realized I had somehow lost the key to the apartment. I was arguably the biggest star on earth, and I didn't even have a key to my own apartment. What a fucking idiot. I was stuck, both emotionally and physically; without a key, I couldn't go anywhere. I also wasn't willing to communicate with anyone. I had nothing to say. (But trust that I always have the key to my house these days.)

I didn't go to the gym. I didn't go out to eat. I only talked with my security guard and Felicia, who—now that I no longer needed a chaperone—had become my assistant and was still my friend. I fell off the face of the earth. I ate takeout for every meal. And this will probably sound strange, but I was content staying home. I liked it there. I felt safe.

On rare occasions, I went out. One night I put on a \$129 Bebe dress and high heels, and my cousin took me to a sexy underground club with low ceilings and red walls. I took a couple hits from a joint, my first time smoking pot. Later, I walked all the way home so I could take in the city, breaking one of my heels along the way. When I got to my apartment, I went to my terrace and just looked up at the stars for hours. At that moment, I felt one with New York.

One of my few visitors during that strange, surreal time was Madonna. She walked into the place and immediately, of course, she owned the room. I remember thinking, It's Madonna's room now. Stunningly beautiful, she exuded power and confidence. She walked straight to the window, looked out, and said, "Nice view."

"Yeah, it's a nice view, I guess," I said.

Madonna's supreme confidence helped me see a lot about my situation with fresh eyes. I think she probably had some intuitive sense of what I was going through. I needed a little guidance at that time. I was confused about my life. She tried to mentor me.

At one point, she did a red-string ceremony with me to initiate me into Kabbalah, and she gave me a trunk full of Zohar books to pray with. At the base of my neck, I tattooed a word in Hebrew that means one of the seventy-two names of God. Some Kabbalists think of it as meaning healing, which was the thing I was still trying to do.

In many ways, Madonna did have a good effect on me. She told me I should be sure to take time out for my soul, and I tried to do that. She modeled a type of strength that I needed to see. There were so many different ways to be a woman in the industry: you could get a reputation for being a diva, you could be professional, or you could be "nice." I had always tried so hard to please—to please my parents, to please audiences, to please everyone.

I must have learned that helplessness from my mom. I saw the way my sister and my dad treated her and how she just took it. Early in my career, I followed that model and became passive. I wish I'd had more of a mentor than to be a badass bitch for me so I could've learned how to do that sooner. If I could go back now, I would try to become my own parent, my own partner, my own advocate—the way I knew Madonna did. She had endured so much sexism and bullying from the public and the industry, and had been shamed for her sexuality so many times, but she always overcame it.

When Madonna accepted her Billboard Woman of the Year award a few years ago, she said she'd been subjected to "blatant misogyny, sexism, constant bullying, and relentless abuse... If you're a girl, you have to play the game. What is that game? You're allowed to be pretty, and cute, and sexy. But don't act too smart. Don't have an opinion."

She's right that the music industry—really the whole world—is set up more for men. Especially if you're "nice," like me, you can be completely destroyed. By that point, I'd become almost too nice. Everywhere I went, Felicia would write thank-you notes to the chef, the bartender, the secretary. To this day, as a Southern girl, I believe in a handwritten thank-you note.

Madonna saw how much I wanted to please and how I wanted to do what others did instead of locking something down and saying, "Okay, everyone! Listen up! This is what's going to happen."

We decided to perform together at the VMAs.

Every time we rehearsed it, we did an air kiss. About two minutes before the performance, I was sitting on the side of the stage and thinking about my biggest performance to date at the VMAs, when I'd pulled off a suit to reveal a sparkly outfit. I thought to myself: I want a moment like that again this year. With the kiss, should I just go for it?

A lot was made of that kiss. Oprah asked Madonna about it. The kiss was treated as a huge cultural moment—"Britney kissing Madonna!"—and it got us both a lot of attention.

While we were rehearsing for the VMAs, I'd also had an idea for a collaboration. In the Culver City studio, my team and I were sitting on silver metal folding chairs, talking about how the record company was lukewarm on my new song "Me Against the Music"—a song I loved. I'd just done "I'm a Slave 4 U" on my last record, and Barry Weiss, who ran my label, wanted more songs like that. But I was pushing for "Me Against the Music"—hard.

Chapter 20

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I will provide the chapter now.

20

When Sean Preston was very little, Kevin started working harder on his own music. He wanted to make his own name, which was something I encouraged. He was recording a lot, which was his passion. Sometimes I'd drop by a studio where he was working and it seemed like a clubhouse. I could smell the weed wafting out of the studio door before I even walked in. He and the other guys would all be getting high, and it felt like I was in the way. I wasn't invited to their party.

I couldn't stand being around pot smoke. Even the smell of it nauseated me.

And I had the baby and was pregnant, so it wasn't like I could hang out all day. So mostly, I stayed home. It's not as if that was such a hardship. I had a beautiful home—a dream home. We would hire an amazing chef—too expensive to use very often. But one time, eating something the chef cooked, I said, “Oh my God, this is the most delicious thing I've ever had and can you just live with us? I love you so much!” And I meant it—I loved him. I was so grateful for any additional help around the house.

Maybe this is the way married couples are, I thought as Kevin and I grew more and more estranged. You take turns letting each other be a little selfish. This is his first taste of fame for himself. I should let him have it.

I gave myself pep talks: He's my husband. I'm supposed to respect him, accept him on a deeper level than I'd accept someone I was just dating. He's the father of my kids. His demeanor is different now, but if it changed, it could change back. People say he's going to break up with me while I have tiny children, like he did with the mother of his first two children when they were infants, but no way! How he was with his other family won't be the way he is with me.

In trying to make up all these excuses in my head, I was lying to myself—totally in denial this whole time that he was leaving me. I flew to New York to see him. He'd been so out of touch that I thought we needed to have some time together as a family. In the city, I checked into a nice hotel, excited to see my husband.

But he wouldn't see me. It seemed like he wanted to pretend I didn't exist.

His manager, who had been on my team for years, wouldn't see me, either.

He was on Kevin's team now and it seemed they were done with me.

“Damn, really?” I said.

All I could think was that I wanted to get close enough to Kevin that I could ask him what was going on. I wanted to say, “When you left to come out here, we hugged. You kissed me. What's going on? What happened?”

I'd suspected something was up, that he was changing, especially once he started getting press and feeling himself. One time he came home late and told me he'd been at a party. “Justin Timberlake was there!” he said. “Lindsay Lohan was, too!”

Do you think I care about your stupid party? I thought. Do you have any idea how many parties like that I've gone to? I've known some of those people longer than

I've known you. Do you know how much I went through in my years with Justin? No—you know none of it. I didn't say any of that, but I wanted to say it and a whole lot more.

Kevin was just so enthralled with the fame and the power. Again and again in my life I've seen fame and money ruin people, and I saw it happen with Kevin in slow motion. In my experience, when most people—especially men—get that type of attention, it's all over. They love it too much. And it's not good for them.

Some celebrities handle fame well. They have perspective. They have fun being admired but not too much fun. They know whose opinion to listen to and whose opinion to ignore. Getting awards and trophies is cool, and in the beginning—those first two years when you become a celebrity—well, it's a feeling you can't explain. I think some people are great at fame.

I'm not. My first two or three years I was good at it, and it was fine, but my real self? In school I was a basketball player. I didn't cheerlead, I didn't wanna be out there. I played ball. That's what I loved.

But fame? That world isn't real, my friends. It's. Not. Real. You go along with it because of course it's going to pay the family's bills and everything. But for me, there was an essence of real life missing from it. I think that's why I had my babies.

So getting awards and all that fame stuff? I liked it a lot. But there's nothing lasting in it for me. What I love is sweat on the floor during rehearsals, or just playing ball and making a shot. I like the work. I like the practicing. That has more authenticity and value than anything else.

I actually envy the people who know how to make fame work for them, because I hide from it. I get very shy. For example, Jennifer Lopez, from the beginning, struck me as someone who was very good at being famous—at indulging people's interest in her but knowing where to draw lines. She always handled herself well. She always carried herself with dignity.

Kevin didn't know how to do any of that. I'll confess, I'm not great at it, either. I'm a nervous person. I run away from most kinds of attention as I've gotten older, maybe because I've been really hurt.

At the time of that rough trip to New York, I should have known my marriage was over, but I still thought it might be salvageable. Later, Kevin moved on to another studio, this one in Las Vegas. And so I went there, hoping to talk to him.

When I found him, he had his head shaved. He was getting ready to shoot the cover for his album. He was in the studio all the time. He really thought he was a rapper now. Bless his heart—because he did take it so seriously.

And so I showed up in Vegas carrying Sean Preston, still pregnant with Jayden James, full of sympathy for Kevin's situation. He was trying to make something happen for himself and everyone seemed to be doubting him. I knew what that was like. It is scary to put yourself out there like that. You do really have to believe in yourself even when the world makes you wonder if you have what it takes. But I also felt like he should have been checking in more and should have been spending time with me. Our little family was my heart. I'd had his babies inside of me for a very long time, and I'd sacrificed a lot. I had all but abandoned my career. I had done everything to make our life possible.

Chapter 26

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26

Flailing those weeks without my children, I lost it, over and over again. I didn't even really know how to take care of myself. Because of the divorce, I'd had to move out of the home I loved and was living in a random English-style cottage in Beverly Hills. The paparazzi were circling extra-excitedly now, like sharks when there's blood in the water.

When I first shaved my head, it felt almost religious. I was living on a level of pure being.

For when I wanted to go out into the world, I bought seven wigs, all short bobs. But if I couldn't see my sons, I didn't want to see anybody.

A few days after I shaved my head, my cousin Alli drove me back to Kevin's. At least I'd thought there'd be no paparazzi to see it this time. But apparently someone tipped one of the photographers off, and he called his buddy.

When we stopped at a gas station, the pair of them came for me. They kept taking flash pictures with a giant camera and videotaping me through the window as I sat, heartbroken, in the passenger seat, waiting for Alli to come back. One of them was asking questions: "How are you doing? You doing okay? I'm concerned about you."

We drove on to Kevin's. The two paparazzi kept following us, taking pictures as I was, once again, denied entry to Kevin's. Turned away, trying to see my own children.

After we left, Alli pulled over so we could figure out what to do next. The videographer was right there at my window again.

"What I'm going to do, Britney—all I'm going to do—is I'm going to ask you a few questions," one of them said with that mean look on his face. He wasn't asking if he could. He was telling me what he was going to do to me. "And then I'm going to leave you alone."

Alli started begging the men to go away. "Please, guys. Don't, guys. Please, please..."

She was being so polite, and she was pleading with them as if she was asking them to spare our lives, which it sort of felt like she was.

But they wouldn't stop. I screamed.

They liked that—when I reacted. One guy wouldn't go away until he got what he wanted. He kept smirking, kept asking me the same terrible questions, over and over, trying to get me to react again. There was so much ugliness in his voice—such a lack of humanity.

This was one of the worst moments of my whole life, and he kept after me.

Couldn't he treat me like a human being? Couldn't he back off? But he wouldn't. He just kept coming. He kept asking me, over and over again, how I felt not being able to see my kids. He was smiling.

Finally, I snapped.

I grabbed the only thing within reach, a green umbrella, and jumped out of the car. I wasn't going to hit him, because even at my worst, I am not that kind of person. I hit the next closest thing, which was his car.

Pathetic, really. An umbrella. You can't even do any damage with an

umbrella. It was a desperate move by a desperate person.

I was so embarrassed by what I'd done that I sent the photo agency an apology note, mentioning that I'd been in the running for a dark ?lm role, which was true, and that I wasn't quite myself, which was also true.

Later, that paparazzo would say in an interview for a documentary about me, "That was not a good night for her... But it was a good night for us—'cause we got the money shot."

Now my husband, Hesam, tells me that it's a whole thing for beautiful girls to shave their heads. It's a vibe, he says—a choice not to play into ideas of

Chapter 18

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18

We hit the road once again. More buses. More costume racks. More long rehearsals. More step-and-repeats.

That was already one of the darkest times of my life, and the vibe of the tour was dark, too—a lot of sweaty numbers, dark themes, and moody lighting. The tour also marked a change in my relationship with my brother, Bryan.

Working now as part of my team, Bryan was very well paid—and so was I—for the Onyx Hotel Tour. He also did a huge deal for me with Elizabeth Arden. And yet, I had trouble not resenting him a bit once I went out on what was to be an unbelievably grueling tour while he stayed in Los Angeles and New York and enjoyed his life.

I lost track of my brother in those years. And so, in many ways, it felt as though I lost Justin and Bryan around the same time.

The tour felt so depressing. In Moline, Illinois, I hurt my knee really badly toward the end of the show. I'd had a previous knee injury while rehearsing for the music video for "Sometimes" o? my ?rst album. That was more extreme: I'd cried hysterically. With this injury, I only had to reschedule two dates, but in my mind, I'd already started to check out. I was craving some lightness and joy in my life.

Then Kevin Federline was holding me. That's the thing I remember best. We met at a club called Joseph's Café in Hollywood, where I used to sit at a table in the back. Right away, from the moment I saw him, there was a connection between us—something that made me feel like I could escape everything that was hard in my life. That very ?rst night we met, he held me—and I mean held me—in a pool for hours.

That was how he was to me: steady, strong, a comfort. I remember we would go swimming, and he'd just wrap his arms around me in the water and not let me go until I wanted him to, no matter how long that took. It was beyond a sexual thing. It wasn't about lust. It was intimate. He would hold me as long as I wanted to be held. Had anyone in my life ever done that before? If so, I couldn't remember when. And was there anything better?

After what I'd gone through with J, I hadn't been with someone in a real way

in so long. Meanwhile, the press kept suggesting famous men who I should date—royalty, CEOs, models. How could I explain that I just wanted to be held for an hour by a man in a swimming pool?

I feel like a lot of women—and this is definitely true of me—can be as strong as they want to be, can play this powerful role, but at the end of the day, after we've done our work and made our money and taken care of everyone else, we want someone to hold us tight and tell us everything's going to be okay. I'm sorry. I know it sounds regressive. But I think it's a human impulse. We want to feel safe and alive and sexy all at the same time. And that's what Kevin did for me. So I held on to him like there was no tomorrow.

In the beginning, my relationship with Kevin was playful.

Kevin liked me the way I was. As a woman who'd spent so much time trying to live up to society's expectations, being with a man who gave me permission to be exactly who I was felt like such a gift.

Kevin had a "bad boy" image. Still, I had no idea when we met that he had a toddler, nor that his ex-girlfriend was eight months pregnant with his second baby. I was clueless. I was living in a bubble, and I didn't have a lot of good, close friends to confide in and get advice from. I had no idea until after we'd been together for a while and someone told me, "You know he has a new baby, right?" I didn't believe it, but when I asked, he told me it was true. He told me he saw them once a month.

"You have kids?" I said. "You have children? Not only one child but two children?"

So, a number was done on me, obviously. I had no idea.

That spring of 2004 I had to go back to work to make good on my contracted dates, even though I was in no mood to do it. I figured it would be tolerable if Kevin could go with me, and he agreed to come. We had so much fun together on that tour; he helped keep me distracted from the work, which felt as challenging as it ever had. After the shows, I didn't have to go back to my hotel room alone. Flying home, we were chatting away, and I asked him to marry me. He said no and then he proposed.

We filmed tour diaries together. The original concept was a documentary like Madonna's Truth or Dare, but it became more like a collection of our home movies, especially after I got hurt again, and it was later released as a reality show called Britney and Kevin: Chaotic.

The Onyx Hotel Tour was just rough. It was too sexual, for a start. Justin had embarrassed me publicly, so my rebuttal onstage was to kind of go there a little bit, too. But it was absolutely horrible. I hated it in the moment. In fact, I hated that entire stupid tour—so much that I prayed every night. I said, "God, just make my arm break. Make my leg break. Can you make something break?" And then, on June 8, 2004, with still two months of shows to go, I fell again on the set of my video for "Outrageous," got another knee injury, and had to have surgery. The rest of the tour dates were scrapped. I thought back on how much I'd suffered as a teenager doing physical therapy for my knee. The experience had been excruciating. I had to move my legs up and down even as they were causing me unspeakable agony. So when the doctors offered me Vicodin, I took it. I didn't want to experience that level of pain again.

I just went to my apartment in Manhattan, got into my princess bed, and if anyone—friends, family, people in the business—wanted to talk to me during this time, I said, "Leave me alone. No, I don't want to do anything or see anyone." And I definitely didn't want to go back out on tour for a while if I could help it.

Part of it was that I believed I had earned the right to make my own decisions

in my personal life after such a grueling schedule. I felt like I'd been manipulated into going straight back to work after the breakup with Justin, because it was all I knew. The Onyx tour was a mistake. But in my mind I thought I should just do what I was supposed to do, which was work.

I realize now that I should've sat back and taken my time getting over the breakup with Justin before I resumed touring. The music industry is just too hard-core and unforgiving. You often visit a different city every day. There's no consistency. It's not possible to find stillness when you're on the road. When I made the Britney Spears: Live and More! video special in Hawaii in 2000, I began to realize that TV is really easy. TV is the luxury part of the business; touring is not.

My sister had also just landed a huge Nickelodeon deal. I was happy for her. Seeing her learning her lines and doing wardrobe fittings reminded me that I would have loved to have a job that was more like the cozy world of children's television. I liked thinking about the Mickey Mouse Club and remembering how easy everything had seemed back then.

I thought Kevin would give me the stability I was craving—and the freedom, too.

Not a lot of people were happy for Kevin and me. Whether or not I liked it, I was one of the biggest stars in the world at that time. He was living a more private life. I had to defend our relationship to everyone.

Kevin and I got married that fall. We held a "surprise" ceremony in September, but the lawyers needed more time with the prenup, so the legal event didn't take place for a couple weeks.

People shot the ceremony. I wore a strapless dress and the bridesmaids wore burgundy. After the ceremony, I changed into a pink sweatsuit that read MRS. FEDERLINE and everyone else put on Juicy tracksuits, too, because we went to a club after to dance all night. Now that I was married and thinking about starting a family, I decided to start saying no to things that didn't feel right—like the Onyx tour. I parted ways with my managers. I posted a letter to fans on my website in which I told them I was going to take some time off to enjoy my life.

Chapter 31

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31

The conservatorship was created supposedly because I was incapable of doing anything at all—feeding myself, spending my own money, being a mother, anything. So why was it that a few weeks later, they had me shoot an episode of *How I Met Your Mother* and then sent me on a grueling world tour?

After the conservatorship started, my mom and my brother's girlfriend got short haircuts and went out to dinner drinking wine—paparazzi were there, taking their picture. It all felt set up. My dad took my boyfriend away and I could not drive. My mom and dad took my womanhood from me. It was a win-win for them.

I remained shocked that the state of California would let a man like my father—an alcoholic, someone who'd declared bankruptcy, who'd failed in business, who'd terrified me as a little girl—control me after all my accomplishments and everything I had done.

I thought about advice my father had given me over the years that I'd resisted, and I wondered if I'd be able to resist anymore. My father presented the conservatorship as a great stepping stone on the road to my “comeback.” Just months earlier I'd released the best album of my career, but none. What I heard in what my father said was: “She's great now! She's working for us! It's a perfect situation for our family.”

Was it great for me? Or was it great for him?

How fun! I thought. I can go back to working again like nothing at all happened! Too sick to choose my own boyfriend and yet somehow healthy enough to appear on sitcoms and morning shows, and to perform for thousands of people in a different part of the world every week!

Acknowledgments

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you follow me on Instagram, you thought this book was going to be written in emojis, didn't you?

Thank you to the team who worked so hard to help me bring my memoir into the world, including: Cade Hudson; Mathew Rosengart; Cait Hoyt; my collaborators (you know who you are); and Jennifer Bergstrom, Lauren Spiegel, and everyone at Gallery Books.

Thank you to my fans: You have my heart and my gratitude forever. This book is for you.

Chapter 24

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24

One of the people who was kindest to me when I really needed kindness was Paris Hilton. So much of America dismissed her as a party girl, but I found her elegant—the way she posed on the red carpet and always had an arched eyebrow when anyone was mean about her.

She saw that I had babies and that I was suffering from the breakup, and I

think she felt sorry for me. She came over to my house, and she helped me out so much. She was just so sweet to me. Aside from that night in Vegas with Jason Trawick, it felt like no one had been sweet like that to me in ages. We started hanging out. She encouraged me to try to have fun for the first time in a long time.

With Paris, I went through my party stage. But let's be clear: it was never as wild as the press made it out to be. There was a time when I never went out at all. Finally, when—with the kids properly supervised at home by capable caregivers—I did leave home for a few hours, stayed out late, and drank like any other twentysomething, I heard nothing but that I was the worst mother who'd ever lived and a terrible person, too. The tabloids were full of accusations: She's a slut! She's on drugs!

I never had a drinking problem. I liked to drink, but it was never out of control. Do you want to know my drug of choice? The only thing I really did except for drinking? Adderall, the amphetamine that's given to kids for ADHD. Adderall made me high, yes, but what I found far more appealing was that it gave me a few hours of feeling less depressed. It was the only thing that worked for me as an antidepressant, and I really felt like I needed one of those.

I have never had any interest in hard drugs. I saw plenty of people in the music world doing all that, but it wasn't for me. Where I grew up, what we did

Chapter 27

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27

It felt like I was living on the edge of a cliff.

Sometime after I shaved my head, I went to Bryan's apartment in Los Angeles. He had two girlfriends from his past in Mississippi with him—my mom was there, too. It was like my mom wouldn't even look at me because I was ugly now. It just proved that the world only cares about your physical appearance, even if you are suffering and at your lowest point.

That winter, I'd been told it would help me get custody back if I went to rehab. And so, even though I felt I had more of a rage and grief problem than a substance abuse problem, I went. When I arrived, my father was there. He sat across from me—there were three picnic tables between us. He said, "You are a disgrace."

I look back now and I think, Why didn't I call Big Rob to help me? I was so ashamed and embarrassed already, but here was my dad telling me I was a disgrace. It was the definition of beating a dead horse. He was treating me like a dog, an ugly dog. I had nobody. I was so alone. I guess one positive of rehab was that I started the healing process. I was determined to make the best of a dark situation.

When I got out, I was able to get temporary 24-hour custody through a great attorney who helped me. But the battle kept raging with Kevin and it was eating me alive.

Blackout, the thing I'm most proud of in my whole career, came out right around Halloween in 2007. I was supposed to perform "Gimme More" at the VMAs to help promote it. I didn't want to, but my team was pressuring me to get out there and show the world I was ?ne.

The only problem with this plan: I was not ?ne.

Backstage at the VMAs that night, nothing was going right. There was a problem with my costume and with my hair extensions. I hadn't slept the night before. I was dizzy. It was less than a year since I'd had my second baby in two years but everyone was acting like my not having six-pack abs was o?ensive. I couldn't believe I was going to have to go out onstage feeling the way I felt. I ran into Justin backstage. It had been a while since I'd seen him. Everything was going great in his world. He was at the top of his game in every way, and he had a lot of swagger. I was having a panic attack. I hadn't rehearsed enough. I hated the way I looked. I knew it was going to be bad.

I went out there and did the best I could at that moment in time, which—yes, granted—was far from my best at other times. I could see myself on video throughout the auditorium while I performed; it was like looking at myself in a fun-house mirror.

I'm not going to defend that performance or say it was good, but I will say that as performers we all have bad nights. They don't usually have consequences so extreme.

You also don't usually have one of the worst days of your life in the same exact place and time that your ex has one of his best.

Justin glided down the runway into his performance. He was ?irting with girls in the audience, including one who turned around and arched her back, shaking her breasts as he sang to her. Then he was sharing the stage with Nelly Furtado and Timbaland—so fun, so free, so light.

Later that night, the comedian Sarah Silverman came out onstage to roast me. She said that at the age of twenty-?ve I'd done everything worthwhile in my life I'd ever do. She called my two babies "the most adorable mistakes you'll ever see." I didn't hear that until later, though. At the time I was backstage sobbing hysterically.

In the days and weeks that followed, the newspapers made fun of my body and my performance. Dr. Phil called it a train wreck.

Chapter 23

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23

When I married Kevin, I meant it with all my heart. If you look into my eyes in my wedding photos, you can see it: I was so in love and so ready for a new phase of my life to start. I wanted babies with this man. I wanted a cozy home. I wanted to grow old with him.

My lawyer told me that if I didn't ?le for divorce, Kevin would. What I gathered from this was that Kevin wanted to ?le for divorce but he felt guilty

doing it. He knew that it would make him look better publicly if I was the one who filed. My lawyer told me that Kevin was going to file for divorce no matter what. I was led to believe that it would be better if I did it first so that I wasn't humiliated.

I didn't want to be embarrassed, so in early November 2006, when Jayden was almost two months old, I filed the papers. Kevin and I both asked for full custody of the boys. What I did not understand was that Kevin would then insist I pay for his legal bills. And because legally, I had set the divorce in motion, I would be held responsible in the press for having broken up my young family. The media attention was crazy. It was probably good for Kevin's album, which came out a week before we announced our divorce, but I was vilified. Some people tried to be supportive—but in the press, they often did this by being cruel toward Kevin, which actually wasn't that helpful.

Later that month, I presented at the American Music Awards. As I waited to go out onstage, Jimmy Kimmel delivered a monologue and skit about Kevin, who he called "the world's first-ever no-hit wonder." They sealed a stand-in into a crate and put it on a truck and dumped it into the ocean.

But this was the father of my two infant sons. I found the violence toward him unsettling. The whole audience was laughing. I hadn't known that was

Chapter 34

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34

While overall I was miserable, day-to-day I was able to find joy and comfort in the boys and in my routine. I made friends. I dated Jason Trawick. He was ten years older than me and really had his life together. I loved that he wasn't a performer but was an agent, so he knew the business and understood my life. We ended up dating for three years.

When we went out together, he was hypervigilant. I knew I could be clueless sometimes. (I'm not clueless anymore. Now I'm basically a CIA agent.) He was always scoping everything out, obsessively controlling situations. I'd been around the paparazzi so much that I knew what was up; I knew the deal. So to see him in a suit, working at this huge agency, getting in the car with me, I felt he was almost too aware of who I was. He cared too much about managing things. I was used to photographers swarming me on the streets and I hardly noticed them anymore, which I suppose isn't really good, either.

We did have a great relationship. I felt a lot of love for him and from him.

I was still messed up psychologically from everything that had happened with Kevin and my kids, and from living under the strictures of the conservatorship my father had set up. I had a place in Thousand Oaks, California. My kids were young at the time and my father was still in charge of my life.

Even though I was on a break after the Femme Fatale Tour, my father second-guessed every little thing I did, including what I ate. It puzzled me that my mom never said anything about it—my parents got back together in 2010, eight years

after their divorce. And I felt so betrayed by the state of California. My mom seemed to love that because of the conservatorship, my dad now had a real job. They watched Criminal Minds on the couch every fucking night. Who does that?

When my father told me I couldn't have dessert, I felt that it was not just him telling me but my family and my state, like I was not allowed legally to eat dessert, because he said no.

Eventually, I started to ask myself, Wait, where am I? Nothing really made sense anymore.

Feeling like I needed more direction, I decided to go back to work. I tried to occupy myself by being productive. I began appearing on more TV shows—including, in 2012, as a judge on The X Factor.

I think a lot of people are really professional on TV, like Christina Aguilera and Gwen Stefani. When the camera is on them, they thrive. And that's great. I used to be able to do that when I was younger, but again, I feel like I age backward when I'm afraid. And so I got to where I was very, very nervous if I knew I had to be on air, and I didn't like being nervous all day long. Maybe I'm just not cut out for that anymore.

I've accepted that now, and it's okay. I can tell people who try to push me in that direction no. I've been forced into things I didn't want to do and been humiliated. It's not my thing at this point. Now, if you got me a cute cameo on a fun TV show where I'm in and out in a day, that's one thing, but to act skeptical for eight hours straight while judging people on TV? Uh, no thank you. I absolutely hated it.

It was around that time that I got engaged to Jason. He got me through a lot of things. But in 2012, not long after he became my co-conservator, my feelings changed. I couldn't see it then, but I see now that having him tied up with the organization controlling my life might have played a part in draining the romance out of our relationship. There came a point when I realized that I didn't have any bad feelings toward him, but I also didn't love him anymore. I stopped sleeping in the same room with him. I just wanted to cuddle my kids. I felt such a bond with them. I literally closed the door to him.

My mom said, "That is hateful."

"I'm sorry, I can't help it," I said. "I don't love him anymore like that."

He broke up with me, but I didn't care because I'd fallen out of love with him. He wrote me a long letter and then he disappeared. He resigned as my co-conservator when our relationship ended. To me it seemed that he had something of an identity crisis. He put colored streaks in his hair and went to the Santa Monica Pier and rode bikes every day with a bunch of tattooed dudes. Hey, I get it. Now that I'm in my forties, I'm going through my own identity crisis. I think it was just time for us to part ways.

The tours under the conservatorship were strictly sober, so we weren't allowed to drink. Once, I ended up with most of the same dancers as Christina Aguilera. The dancers and I met up with Christina in Los Angeles. She seemed pretty messed up. But the dancers and I wound up swimming in a beautiful pool and sitting in a Jacuzzi. It would have been nice to have drinks with them, to get rebellious, sassy, fun. I wasn't allowed to do that because my life had become a Sunday-school Bible church camp under the conservatorship.

In some ways, they turned me into a teenager again; in other ways, I was a girl. But sometimes I just felt like a trapped adult woman who was pissed off all the time. This is what's hard to explain, how quickly I could vacillate between being a little girl and being a teenager and being a woman, because of the way they had robbed me of my freedom. There was no way to behave like an adult,

since they wouldn't treat me like an adult, so I would regress and act like a little girl; but then my adult self would step back in—only my world didn't allow me to be an adult.

The woman in me was pushed down for a long time. They wanted me to be wild onstage, the way they told me to be, and to be a robot the rest of the time. I felt like I was being deprived of those good secrets of life—those fundamental supposed sins of indulgence and adventure that make us human. They wanted to take away that specialness and keep everything as rote as possible. It was death to my creativity as an artist.

Chapter 6

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6

When I was ten, I was invited to be a contestant on Star Search.

On the first show, I did a spunky version of a song I'd heard sung by Judy Garland: "I Don't Care." I got 3.75 stars. My rival, a girl who sang opera, got 3.5. I advanced to the next round. The next episode taped later that day, and I was up against a bolo-tie-wearing boy with a lot of hair spray in his hair named Marty Thomas, age twelve. We were friendly; we even played basketball together before the show. I sang the Judds' "Love Can Build a Bridge," which I'd sung the year before at my aunt's wedding.

While we were waiting for our scores, Marty and I were interviewed onstage by the host, Ed McMahon.

"I noticed last week, you have the most adorable, pretty eyes," he said to me.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Why not?"

"They're mean."

"Boyfriends?" Ed said. "You mean all boys are mean? I'm not mean! How about me?"

"Well, it depends," I said.

"I get that a lot," Ed said.

I got 3.75 again. Marty got a perfect 4. I smiled and hugged him politely, and as I walked off, Ed wished me luck. I kept it together until I made it backstage—but then I burst into tears. Afterward, my mom got me a hot fudge sundae.

My mom and I kept flying back and forth to New York. The intensity of working in the city as a little girl was exciting for me, even if it was also intimidating.

I got offered a job: an understudy role in the off-Broadway musical *Ruthless!*, inspired by *The Bad Seed*, *All About Eve*, *Mame*, and *Gypsy*. I played a sociopathic child star named Tina Denmark. Tina's first song was called "Born to Entertain." It hit close to home. The other understudy was a talented young actress named Natalie Portman.

While I was doing the show, we rented a little apartment for my mom, baby

Jamie Lynn, and me near my public school, the Professional Performing Arts School, and I took classes nearby at Broadway Dance Center. But mostly I passed my time at the Players Theatre downtown.

The experience was a validation in some way, proof I had enough talent to make it in the theatrical world. But it was a grueling schedule. There was no time to be a regular kid or really make friends, because I had to work nearly every day. On Saturdays there were two shows.

I also didn't love being an understudy. I had to be at the theater every night until as late as midnight, in case I had to take over for the main Tina, Laura Bell Bundy. After a few months, she left and I took over the lead, but I was awfully worn out.

By the time Christmas came around, I desperately wanted to go home—and then I learned I was supposed to perform on Christmas Day. In tears, I asked my mom, “Am I really going to do this for Christmas?” I looked at the little mini tree in our apartment, thinking about the sturdy evergreen we'd have in our living room in Kentwood.

In my little-girl mind, I didn't understand why I'd want to do that—continue performing through the holidays. So I quit the show and went home.

The schedule of New York City theater was just too rough on me at that age. One good thing did come out of it, though: I learned how to sing in a theater with small acoustics. The audience is right beside you—just two hundred people in the room. Honestly, it's strange, but in that space, the feeling of singing is

About the Author

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Multiplatinum, Grammy Award-winning pop icon Britney Spears is one of the most successful and celebrated entertainers in music history, with more than 100 million records sold worldwide. In 2021, she was named one of Time magazine's 100 Most Influential People. Spears's album *Blackout* was added to the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame's Library & Archives in 2012. She lives in Los Angeles, California.

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