

TOXIC: THE BRITNEY SPEARS STORY
CHAPTER 3: GIMME MORE

Witness Docs

SCENE TAPE: [Babs checks the microphone while Tess and Jason Alexander talk about CBD in the background.] [FADES BEHIND HOST]

BABS GRAY: Tess and I are setting up our recording equipment inside the Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. The Biltmore is a historic place. They started the Oscars here back in the 1920s. And now, in 2020, we're here with Jason Alexander, who invited us to his hotel room.

JASON ALEXANDER: So but it's weird that people call me a celebrity. I just don't think of myself as a celebrity. But I mean, I was married to one, I guess

TESS BARKER: Jason is the guy who got hitched to Britney Spears in Vegas in 2004. They were married for an exciting 55 hours.

BABS: Jason is in his late thirties now. And sitting here with him, you can see how he was Britney's type. He's an ex-football player. He's got some Southern charm. Tattoos. He's into CBD. He even gave us some samples from his CBD company. And yeah, Tess tried some.

TESS: And yeah. It was good shit! Jason's room is nice in that trying-to-be-fancy way that hotel rooms can have. There's a king bed, a flat-screen TV and distressed mirrors. On the desk is a folder full of old photos of Jason and Britney as kids. They grew up together in Britney's hometown: Kentwood, Louisiana. In fact, Jason still lives there.

JASON: Yeah, I'm an entrepreneur. You know, I have my own business now and I work construction. You know, I'm a contractor. So it's just a normal regular life.

BABS: Jason is sitting on the edge of the bed, and Tess and I are both sitting in the type of club chairs you find in any hotel room.

TESS: My skin is kind of sticking to the chair's upholstery. LA's in the middle of a heatwave, and we're also in the middle of a Covid spike. Neither Babs nor I have been inside anywhere other than our own homes for, like, a while. But talking to Jason feels like a risk worth taking. Not only is he Britney's ex-husband, but from what we've gathered, he has a unique perspective on Britney's situation.

[MUX ENTERS]

BABS: And Jason actually reached out to us. He'd been following the #FreeBritney movement and made plans to fly out from Louisiana to L.A. for a rally at the courthouse. While he was in town, Jason agreed to meet up with us to tell his and Britney's story-- on the record.

JASON: I've always felt like if there is a way to help Britney, like I would be part of it

TESS: In the annals of Britney history, her quickie wedding to Jason marked a turning point. Miss American Dream had made her first big mistake. Britney's label, Jive Records, said "Britney and a friend took a joke too far." Look, the story was fascinating. And funny. Water cooler talk, nail salon gossip. It was the beginning of an era where the public expected a front row seat to *every* move Britney made.

BABS: The marriage *also* created an opening for the people in Britney's orbit to swoop in and take control of her personal decisions...years before the word conservatorship would ever be uttered.

TESS: So, grab some Kleenex and pick out some comfy heels. Brit's gettin' hitched! Hey, it's her prerogative.

[MUSIC EXITS]

TESS: In Jason's stack of childhood photos, there's pics of him and Britney in pirate costumes with the rest of their class. There's one of them in third grade or so, just after a track meet.

TESS: How old were you and Britney, do you think, when you guys first fell in love?

JASON: You seen the pictures? I don't know. It was like kindergarten.

BABS: In one of the photos, a group of kids around five years old are standing in front of a school bus— Britney and Jason's kindergarten class. The two of them stand right in the center. They're smiling, squinting. But it's not that fake camera smile kids can give sometimes. It's like we've caught them in the middle of a giggle. They're holding hands.

TESS: Jason and Britney stayed friends. Through elementary school, middle school, and Britney's teen stardom. Jason watched it all happen from back home in Kentwood.

JASON: It's weird when you're young like that because you don't you don't really know. I mean, I guess you know what love is, but it's just a feeling. It's like a butterfly feeling just like this obsession with this person. But when you get older, you know, you get closer. It was always there. It was always there, it just wasn't consistent, like it was periodic, but consistent, you know what I mean?

BABS: We kinda do know what Jason means. A lot of us have someone like this in our life where the timing just never seemed to work out, but whenever you see them it's like no time has passed. Not so much the one that got away, but the one that stuck around.

JASON: So we never were like boyfriend girlfriend. But we always when any opportunity she was in home in Kentwood we seem like we always would link up some way or another. We ended up hanging out.

TESS: What was it like to watch her get so famous, like when you guys were teenagers?

JASON: It was just like someone made it. So it was hopeful for the rest of us. You know, as a football player. I'm like, wow, one of us got out of Kentwood this is possible, you know?

[UPBEAT MUSIC ENTERS]

BABS: On the heels of her fourth studio album, *In The Zone*, 22-year-old Britney planned a trip to Vegas for New Year's. She invited some of her friends... her besties from back home, and her school bus crush, Jason.

TESS: Britney was a baller at this point. She flew everybody in on a private jet and booked a suite at the Palms Hotel.

BABS: I will say, Tess and I: never flown to Vegas in a private jet, never booked a suite at the Palms, but we have taken a bus to Vegas and gotten a room for six people in Hooters.

TESS: Vegas is like this magic permissive place where time and consequences don't exist. Where you're allowed to release your life's pressure valve and drink foot-long-margaritas wearing nothing but your bikini while you peruse the buffet. [laugh]

BABS: I mean, if you can't tell, we love Las Vegas. I love it personally because people are just there to celebrate. You know? They're there to be happy. You meet people from all over the world and they've made this their destination to get fucked up for three days. You tend to bond with folks.

TESS: Oh yes. There is no last call in Las Vegas. There are no clocks. No windows. Nothing telling your body that you should go home and go to bed. And if you're 22-year-old Britney Spears... you're going to be up until dawn making some very Vegas-y decisions.

JASON: It was like 5:00 in the morning. We were still in bed talking. I don't know. We were just talking about the trip and the future. And she wanted me to come on tour with her. And I was like, I can't. I would love to come on tour with you, but I got to go back and I have my senior year football. I earned a scholarship. I'm not going to just walk

away. And that that was when she was like, well, I got something I got to ask you, and I'm like what's that? And she has pretty much asked me about getting married

ARCHIVAL BRITNEY SPEARS: Honestly, I really wanted to see what it was like.

TESS: Here's Britney on Entertainment Tonight -- her first interview following the surprise marriage. Just a few weeks after it had happened.

BRITNEY: Maybe that sounds silly, but in— in that moment, I was just I was with a friend and that I love dearly. And I wanted to do something wild and crazy and I wanted to get married.

BABS: Britney and Jason were partying... reminiscing... planning. Jason was playing college football at the time, hoping to make it to the NFL. Britney was about to go on tour. Jason says they knew it would be hard to make a relationship work. But maybe... a wedding would help?

JASON: We felt like this was a way that would bond us together, regardless of how far or separated we were... we're married, you can't not let us, you know, reunite.

TESS: And so, with that wholesome notion in mind, Britney and Jason headed outside to Flamingo Road. No doubt they passed a few barefoot bachelorettes and maybe a business man on his way to a convention.

JASON: We just left on our own accounts and didn't tell anybody. So we're like, look, we need a limousine. We're trying to go to a chapel. So they got us a car. We went to a little white wedding chapel. The limousine driver walked her down the aisle and we did the whole thing. There was another couple getting married that morning. So they recognized her and we took a picture. Later I found out that couple got paid like one hundred grand for that picture. So I was like, what a great wedding gift for them.

BABS: It *is* a good photo. It's Britney and Jason and the other couple, standing by the stained-glass chapel doors. The other two are dressed formally - their engagement period seems to have been a little bit longer.

TESS: Britney is wearing white. A white baseball cap, to be clear. She has on a matching choker and ripped jeans. Her black long-sleeved shirt is tied up.

[MUSIC ENTERS]

Jason stands behind her, in a black coat. He touches her waist lightly...kind of like how you would in a prom photo. Their smiles seem genuine. They both look giddy.

JASON: And then we left, consummated the marriage in the limousine on the way back to the hotel. And then when we got back to the hotel, like, hey, guess what, we're married. And everybody fucking freaked out and no one was happy. And I was like, oh, shit, this is about to get interesting.

[MUSIC]

BABS: Britney and Jason's honeymoon period lasted all of ten minutes. I mean that limo ride sounds like the perfect climax to a great Vegas Story. But then they got back... and it all came crashing down.

JASON: And then mom was called and Jamie was on the phone and they're telling me everything horrible I've ever done is going to be, you know, brought up and then all these bad things are going to happen. And then my football career was going to be over And I'm like, what are you talking about? But they were just like throwing all this negative, you know, comments about how my life was ... just I was going to ruin Britney's career

BABS: At this point, Britney's career was something A LOT of people were interested in protecting. She was a brand. Sexy, but safe. Sure, she'd kissed Madonna onstage the year before, but that move had been carefully orchestrated. A quickie Vegas wedding had *not* been part of the plan. But the newlyweds were determined.

JASON: We were going to fly to Ibiza and go on a honeymoon. She was fucking packing up. She was like we're going. Fuck this, we're leaving.

BABS: Jason started to panic.

JASON: And I'm like, your mom said, she's coming and I'm like, I'm scared to death. You know, I'm like, I don't think we should run away like that, you know? And so my dumb ass, you know, talked her into staying. And then I was like swarmed by Britney Corporation, like men in black, showed up within hours and had Britney and I separated. They brought her in another room and left me in another room.

TESS: Here come the Men in Black. Those guys who show up in suits and sunglasses. Their job is to clean up the situation, then zap your memory so you forget it ever happened.

JASON: When she came back into the room a couple hours later, an hour later, whatever it was, I knew I could tell right away when she walked in the room, her face. I knew that they talked her into something. But they were making promises to me. You know, they told me if I would sign the contracts, the annulment, that they would let me and Britney continue our relationship. And if we felt the same way in six months, they would give us a proper marriage. So, I had no reason to believe otherwise. I thought that's what the truth was.

BABS: This is where our minds were really blown. Everyone always talks about this whirlwind union between Britney and Jason as a flash in the pan or a stunt. But according to Jason, the desire to stay married was real. Yes, they'd annul the marriage, now. But they could have a big

wedding later on. Jason says this deal was put on the table for him and Britney in their suite at the Palms.

JASON: We sat down right next to each other on the couch and they lined all the papers down in front of us. And we both just sat there quiet and signed. And then it was just like nothing happened. We literally it was kind of over with. We were all in the hotel room. It was it was just kind of an awkward moment. And we went to dinner. Everyone went to dinner—the brother, the mom, me, Britney, everyone that was on the trip together, the family. And at dinner, they brought me flight reservations to leave. And I left the table and they brought me to the airport and dropped me off.

BABS: Jason was on his way back to Kentwood before the waiter had even dropped the check on the table.

JASON: They sent me home in a taxi and left me in New Orleans without a ride when I got there. So I had to call my dad and wake him up. He had wait an hour and half for him to pick me up, bring me home to, you know, pretty much a yard full of reporters. That's when it hit me like, oh, fuck. You know, this is this is a big deal.

TESS: The media was all over the wedding. That week, a Seattle newspaper ran the headline “Britney Spears misses at being a missus”. The New York Times joked that there was “no word yet” as to whether Britney’s blue jean wedding ensemble was designed by Vera Wang. And US Weekly ran. Britney on the cover with the headline “Surprise Bride! Britney: Out of Control.”

BABS: Even as reporters were swarming Jason with questions, his big focus was reuniting with Britney. He found a lawyer who explained that if he wanted to stay with Britney, he could contest the annulment. But Jason only had thirty days to do it.

JASON: They were allowing Britney and I to still have phone communication. So we were talking every day. And I still believed the story that I was told that they were going to let us continue to talk and then we would have this marriage, right, in the future if we felt the same way.

TESS: The lawyer helping Jason warned him not to trust Britney’s team. If he didn’t contest the annulment... it would stick.

[MYSTERIOUS MUSIC ENTERS]

JASON: They told me they were like, look, you got what they're doing is, is they're tagging you along for 30 days and then they're going to cut that contact off and you're never going to see Britney again. And I'm like, no, I didn't believe them.

TESS: But Jason had faith in the deal he had struck.

JASON: And so I turned it. I decided not to follow through with the contesting the annulment. So, like, literally the next day after, like the 30 days was up, I remember

trying to call the number that I had for Britney and it was like, bah, bah, bah. And I'm like, fuck they got me! Motherfuckers. So that was it.

BABS: So that was it. The Britney Corporation had won: Britney and Jason were done.

BABS: We got a look at the annulment paperwork. Here's what it says: "Plaintiff Spears lacked understanding of her action to the extent that she was incapable of agreeing to the marriage." There it is, the idea that Britney was incapable of being trusted with her own decisions. It's eerie seeing it written out like this in 2004, years before her conservatorship was put in place..

TESS: To us, though, it seems like Britney knew what she was doing. She may have done something impulsive but she had a reason for it. Here she is talking about her decision with Matt Lauer.

BRITNEY ON MATT LAUER: I was on the road for a while and I was doing a lot of what I was told, instead of what I really wanted to do and I didn't know how to break out of that. So in my young mind I'm just like I'm just gonna get married to one of my home friends.

BABS: This interview was two years after the wedding, in 2006. And Britney stuck to her guns.

BRITNEY: But I have no regrets, with anything.

BABS: Look, we're not saying that marrying someone during a Vegas bender is the best idea. Who knows what would have happened if Jason and Britney stayed together past that weekend. But if it was a mistake...wasn't it Britney's right to find that out? Isn't that what being in your 20s is? I mean, aren't you supposed to be learning life's greatest lessons, such as don't marry a guy with a goatee? When we met up with Jason in person, he seemed like he was genuine. The story he told us seemed to come from the heart, as did his love for Britney. But like so many people in Britney's circle, Jason has given us plenty of reasons not to trust him.

TESS: Jason has a troubling record. He was arrested for domestic abuse in 2015, and had a restraining order issued against him. Months after *our* interview with him, our Britney google alerts went off... because Jason was spotted at the Capitol insurrection in D.C. He said on social media that he stayed outside and didn't breach the capitol building, but I mean, pretty upsetting news to find out. We'd been in a hotel room with this dude. We asked Jason for comment about this and he never got back to us.

[DARK MUSIC ENTERS]

BABS: In making this podcast, sometimes we feel like we've kind of lifted up a rock and a bunch of creatures have scurried out. There's a lot of darkness, and questionable motives, and it makes the truth about Britney's situation feel all the more elusive. It makes us wonder: who CAN we believe in this story? That's a question that we'll be returning to a lot in this series. In the aftermath of the Vegas wedding, it was like the media wanted Britney to grovel. To apologize for

her mistake. But she proudly stood by her choice. Britney was going to keep doing things unapologetically, in her own way.

TESS: And never was this more clear than when she entered a relationship just 3 months later — with one backup dancer slash DJ slash rapper. By the name of Kevin Earl Federline.

[MUSIC EXITS]

[CHAOTIC THEME MUSIC]

TESS: This is the theme song for Britney's reality show, Chaotic. The song is clearly a jam but sadly never made it to the top 40. The *SHOW* chaotic aired on UPN in spring 2005, and featured Britney behind the scenes as she toured, travelled, and expressed her random thoughts. It was raw. It felt real. It had a barebones crew. Britney takes the camera into her own hands sometimes... as does the new man in her life, K-Fed. Here he is, talking about meeting Britney in a nightclub.

CHAOTIC EPISODE

KEVIN FEDERLINE: You know, it was just a regular night, you know, just like any other night. That you go out and didn't expect anything. Britney was there.

BRITNEY SPEARS: He just seemed not fazed by anything and just his whole vibe was really sexy. I like that.

KEVIN: She wound up dancing with me that night for a couple of minutes, maybe seconds maybe. And I don't know, magic happened.

BABS: Chaotic is like a fever dream of these two people that are madly in lust. They're constantly smoking cigarettes, coming home from the club at 4 am, giving confessionals in night vision. They talk about how deep their relationship is. The show feels like a rare window into the true Britney.

TESS: And Britney is pretty candid in Chaotic about the toll being a megastar is taking on her. She complains about working too much and says she's over the expectations that have been placed on her.

ARCHIVAL BRITNEY: I was on the road for a while and whoever scheduled my tour must have been out of their mind. I was doing way too much stuff. I was over it.

TESS: Chaotic also showcases Britney's signature dorky side.

BRITNEY: Have you ever had butter beans?

KEVIN: I mean I don't know.

BRITNEY: [laughs] what? [burps]

KEVIN: Dude, we're gonna do clips of you burping. Because I got like 20 of them.

BABS: Okay. Tess and I have watched all five riveting episodes of Chaotic, many times. And one thing I've really noticed is, there doesn't seem to be anyone there making sure the Britney brand is staying polished. We know at the time things between Britney and her manager Larry Rudolph, are tense. He reportedly didn't approve of the relationship with Kevin.

TESS: But Britney is in her early 20s. She seems to want to do what most of us want to do at that age. Party and find herself. Find a man. Find love.

BRITNEY: Something happened that we didn't have control over, you know.

KEVIN: She has everything that I've ever hoped for in a woman, everything. Sweet, kind hearted, down to earth, she's proud of what we are together. I mean, we talk to each other and it's like we're one.

BRITNEY: It's instant and it takes over your whole body. I found my soulmate.

TESS: Once again, Britney moves quickly. On a long flight, she and Kevin help themselves to bottomless mimosas, and by the time their private jet has landed, the two of them have something new to cheers. Britney has proposed to Kevin.

BABS: The last episode of Chaotic features their surprise wedding. Britney and K-Fed invite 30 of their closest friends and family to what they call an "engagement party". Upon arrival, guests are handed an invitation...to the *wedding* they are currently at.

TESS: Everyone quickly gets on board. Everyone except the father of the bride. Jamie. He is not amused by the surprise.

KEVIN: He looked at me and was like well that changes everything and turned around and walked off.

JAMIE SPEARS: Don't do that shit to me

TESS: "Don't do that shit to me" he says. But despite Jamie's initial misgivings, he does walk Britney down the aisle. The guests stand crowded around Britney and Kevin as they exchange their vows.

BABS: And we cannot mention this wedding without mentioning the outfit change. At the reception, the bridesmaids slip into pink Juicy Couture tracksuits with the word "Maids" on the back. And the guys wear white tracksuits with "Pimps" on theirs. Kevin's jacket reads "The Pimp." Britney's reads "Mrs. Federline." Just, chef's kiss.

TESS: A few short months after that blessed day, Mr. and Mrs. Federline had a *new* announcement: they were expecting. They had their first son, Sean Preston in 2005. Then came Jayden, almost exactly a year later.

[MUSIC ENTERS]

BABS: It should have been a blissful time for Britney and Kevin. But the 20-something newlyweds soon ran into trouble. The clubbing lifestyle that brought them together ended up tearing them apart. K-Fed, with his new-found fame as Britney Spears's husband, was treated like a celebrity, and he partied like one, too.

TESS: Britney's dream was to be happily married with kids, but two months after their youngest son Jayden was born, and just two years after saying "I do", Britney filed for divorce. The date was commemorated by the hosts of daytime talk show "The View."

ROSIE O'DONNELL: It's the biggest news in the country. Britney Spears is leaving KFed!!!!!! [crowd cheers] Confetti!!!!!!

BABS: Here, Rosie O'Donnell is absolutely overjoyed as she hypes up the studio audience into cheering for the divorce. I mean, it was a common sentiment, honestly.. A lot of people viewed K-Fed as a hanger-on who just got lucky. They were glad to see him go. Unfortunately, though, this situation was about more than Britney and K-Fed. There were kids involved.

TESS: Soon after the divorce petition came the ugly custody battle. Britney and Kevin both wanted the kids full-time, and neither wanted to budge. This was 2006 and Britney Spears couldn't so much as walk outside without paparazzi mobbing her. Helicopters would circle her house in Malibu. Having kids made this even worse because now the media could question her child-rearing. Everyday it was something different. Bloggers would call Britney a bad mom, They'd accuse her of making her babies cry... as if babies aren't known for *crying*.

BABS: Perez Hilton was one of those bloggers that ran many of these stories. A lot of Perez's Britney posts were straight up harassment. He called her "Unfitney." As in, an unfit mom. He made disparaging remarks about her *toddler's* looks. He wrote articles with titles like "Take her babies away!!" All in a day's work, I guess?

[MUSIC EXITS]

PEREZ HILTON: She is by far the person or thing that I've spoken about the most over the last 17 years of blogging.

BABS: This is Perez. We promised him we'd let you know he also has a podcast, The Perez Hilton podcast. But most of us know him from the website he started in 2005: PerezHilton.com.

PEREZ: I discovered the world of blogging and I said, well, that seems easy. Let me try it. I knew right away. I just wanted to talk about celebrities.

TESS: When I was just out of college, and trying to pass time at the million temp jobs I had, I was always checking Perez's site.

BABS: Oh yes, this is right before Tess and I met. And I like to imagine us, kindred spirits, both in temp offices, one tab open to Perez, one open to the dick jokes we're currently working on, and one on the actual work we should be doing.

TESS: Apologies to my former temporary employers. The thing about Perez's site is that, while much of it was *definitely* in poor taste... it offered instant gratification. It was as though every time you went to check the fridge there was something new to snack on. And it was more immediate than the tabloids.

PEREZ: Thanks to the Internet and social media, as soon as something happened, you could see it in real time. This celebrity talking smack about that other celebrity and that one celebrity getting turned away from the club.

[MUSIC ENTERS]

BABS: There was always a new post where you could read the tea on Paris Hilton and Nicole Ritchie's latest spat, or see what nickname Perez had chosen today for Amy Winehouse - Wino and Crackhouse were among his favorites.

TESS: Perez's signature move was hastily marking up paparazzi photos in Microsoft paint. He liked to draw white dots near people's noses to indicate cocaine use, or sometimes he'd simply write the word "LOSER" above their heads.

BABS: Looking back, this was the beginning of my addiction to constant updates. I can draw a direct line from scrolling Twitter to scrolling Perez's posts back in the day. And of course, many of those posts revolved around our gal.

PEREZ: The thing about Britney is. It's — she defies the norm. Last year, the year before that, the year before that. Headlines after headlines like there is just still so much interest in her and news that comes out of her life.

BABS: The Britney making headlines when Perez was first starting out was kind of a new version of Britney. Gone was the airbrushed Pepsi ad. This Britney was constantly stepping out with her bra showing and rips in her tights. She wore giant shades and perpetually had the vibe of someone on a walk of shame. She seemed to be kind of defiant, refusing to change her life just because people were obsessed with how she lived it.

TESS: Here's Britney again in that Matt Lauer interview we heard from earlier.

BRITNEY: I don't allow anybody to change me. I still walk out of my house in rollers and I take walks. I do not care what people think. And I think that's the thing, why they keep on talking is because they know they can't touch me.

MATT LAUER: So you have a little bit of a "blank you" attitude about it.

BRITNEY: Yeah, basically.

TESS: Britney DID have a fuck-you attitude. And that's what I couldn't look away from. Even though everyone tore her apart for her love of gas station snacks and her barefoot aesthetic, these things inspired a kind of admiration in me. She refused to conform to what people expected of her. Really, this is when I doubled down as a Britney fan. I found myself constantly compelled to stick up for Britney. She was now an underdog, and I was on her team.

BABS: Unfortunately, when I look back at reading all these horrible things Perez and others wrote... at the time, it didn't even sink in how awful it was. Because it was happening so often. Like I'm sure on some level I knew it was wrong, but it scratched some kind of terrible itch that I think a lot of us have. We love a window into other people's drama, and Perez was serving that up on the daily ... whether the subjects wanted him to or not.

TESS: And look, a lot of people lately are re-examining Britney's story and making a list of who owes her an apology. Perez is on that list. And he says he's a changed man.

PEREZ: Yeah, I mean, back in the day, I used to doodle inappropriate things and give people nasty nicknames, and I don't do those things anymore. And at the time I just thought it was juvenile and silly and fun. And I talk about this a lot with my therapist. Many to most people ... most people will continue to forever judge me for the things that I said and did in my 20s

BABS: Like Britney Spears in her 20s [laughs]...

PEREZ: Yeah, and mistakes that I made at that time.

TESS: Perez has been making apologies like this in interviews for well over a decade. In the wake of Britney's public testimony, he said he carried deep shame and regret over the way he treated Britney. But when talked to him, in early 2021, his remorse only extended so far.

TESS: Has becoming a dad changed how you view on those things that you said about Britney?

PEREZ: Most of them. And some of them, no. Not all of them, I'm not going to lie.

TESS: And why is that?

PEREZ: Because the first thing that comes to mind was that moment where she was, I think she was driving with her young son in the car on her lap. I regret how I talked about it. Yes. But I don't want to make a blanket statement that I regret all of the post because that'd be a lie and I'm not going to lie.

TESS: Yeah, fair enough. What would it mean for someone to call you an unfit parent?

PEREZ: It wouldn't bother me. Because I choose not to let the negative opinions of strangers affect me, because if it did, then I wouldn't be able to get out of bed every day. And, then I've also just been so disliked for so long that, you know, now I'm just used to it.

TESS: Is their power in having a lot of people dislike you?

PEREZ: I wouldn't say there's power in it, but for a long time... Actually, this is still the case: I would rather be disliked than ignored

BABS: Perez, by the way, is certainly still disliked by Britney's fans. A lot of the Britney army can't forgive the fact that he profited off his negative coverage of Britney. They argue his posts about her often veered into full-stop sexism and fed a narrative that Britney was damaged and beyond saving.

TESS: Plus, in addition to the doodles and the mean nicknames, Perez also did things like out famous gay people before they were ready. As recently as December 2020, he was banned from TikTok for hate speech and bullying, though he denies he did either of those things on the platform.

PEREZ: A lot of people are wanting villains from this, and I don't think it's as simple as that.

[MUSIC ENTERS]

PEREZ: A lot of people also aren't aware of everything going on, even us right now, like in a way, this, too, right now, what we're doing in this moment, us creating this and everybody listening, we're exploiting Britney Spears once more. Are you guys going to reveal any new information? Unlikely. You're just going to regurgitate the past and frame it in a new light. And I agreed to do your podcast. I'm here talking to you. But I'm also saying the only thing we should really be listening to is Britney in her own words, when, when and if she wants to tell her story.

TESS: As we've said - we recorded this conversation with Perez months before Britney spoke out in court. And did tell her own story. She said herself that she hasn't been allowed to give interviews or tell her side of things.

[MUSIC EXITS]

BABS: But at the time we chatted with Perez ...Britney still hadn't spoken out publicly about the conservatorship. And we have asked ourselves, many times - what's the value in us trying to tell Britney's story?

TESS: It's a fair question and something we've really wrestled with. Babs and I have been working on this story for over two years. We've thought about walking away countless times.

BABS: We get worn down. Beyond our concerns about being part of the problem, pursuing this story is also sometimes scary. There's some really powerful people wrapped up in it.

[DRAMATIC MUSIC ENTERS]

TESS: But every time we've thought about calling it quits... we've heard from an insider who's encouraged us to keep reporting. Here's an example: one morning I woke up to a missed call at 6 am from a close friend of Britney's ... someone I talk to regularly, but who won't agree to do an interview. When I called them back, they told me they were worried about Britney. They told me to keep going.

BABS: Someone else who worked with Britney for years finally emailed us back. He declined to be interviewed. But he signed off his email with this: "Please tell the movement to keep pushing for Britney. However bad they believe her situation is, I can assure them it's 100x worse." It's been frustrating... These folks don't want to come on the record. Or sometimes they've signed Non Disclosure Agreements and legally they can't come on the record. One of these people, an ex-boyfriend of Britney's, declined to talk because of his NDA...but then he also said he wished us luck in quote "finding and shedding light on the truth."

TESS: So as much as we've agonized over whether to continue what we're doing ... we get a message like that, and we have to keep going. And as morally complicated as digging into Britney's story has felt, staying silent about our findings has ultimately seemed like the worse option.

[MUSIC POST]

DANIEL MUSTO: I always have that feeling of, like, you wake up one day and something tragic could happen. And is that on you? Is that on us for not speaking up?

BABS: Next time on Toxic... we sit down with someone from Britney's past who IS willing to talk.

DANIEL: We'd be at our house and she would just make sure anything she was enjoying, whether it was like music, Red Bull conversation, she wanted everyone to be in on it