

TOXIC: THE BRITNEY SPEARS STORY
CHAPTER 4: LONELY

GPS VOICE: The destination is on your left, 18360 Ventura Boulevard. Arrived.

BABS GRAY, HOST: Tess and I are in the car. We're on a self-guided tour of Los Angeles, visiting hot spots of Britney history from 2007.

BABS (ARCHIVAL): Where is it? I can't even like see it.

TESS (ARCHIVAL): Here's what, a three six. Oh my God, this is it? Wow. This is it?

TESS BARKER, HOST: There's a popular Britney meme that's been around for a while - you can buy it on a coffee mug or a t-shirt - I've been tagged in it a good five dozen times. It reads: If Britney Spears can survive 2007, you can survive today.

BABS: The joke is... 2007 was a super shitty year for Britney. It's the year she swung an umbrella at a paparazzo's car. The year she and K Fed finalized their divorce. ... And it's the year she shaved her head.

BABS (DRIVING): This is it.

TESS: We just pulled up to the salon where Britney took the clippers into her own hands. It's a small building behind a strip mall. It's basically hidden behind an old mechanic's place. Esther's hair cutting studio.

BABS (DRIVING): And now it's like pouring rain. Oh, my God. OK, let me hook up the other thing and go in here. These people are going to think we're absolutely insane.

BABS (DRIVING): All right. OK. We are going into the salon.

BABS: I don't know exactly what we were expecting. I guess we were picturing a salon that was at least visible from the sidewalk. Something Britney Spears - an international celebrity - might have driven past and noticed. Esther's is just a single-room in a tan stucco building.

TESS: We walk up to the salon door and there's a giant wrought-iron gate with "Keep Out" signs. It is kind of nerve-wracking.

SALON WORKER: Hi.

TESS (ARCHIVAL): Hi.

BABS (ARCHIVAL): Hi, how's it going?

SALON WORKER: Good, you?

BABS (ARCHIVAL): Good, we're - I know this is random, but this is the place where Britney shaved her head, right?

SALON WORKER: Yes.

BABS (ARCHIVAL): Is there anybody we can talk to about it? We're doing a podcast about it.

SALON WORKER: No, the owner's not here.

BABS (ARCHIVAL): Oh, the owner's not here? Is she the one who knows about it?

SALON WORKER: She's the one you would have to speak with.

BABS (ARCHIVAL): Oh, OK.

SALON WORKER: She charges for interviews, so if that's, I don't know.

TESS (ARCHIVAL): How much does she charge for an interview?

SALON WORKER: I honestly don't know, you would have to call the shop and speak with her. Her name is Esther.

TESS (ARCHIVAL): OK, cool, thank you so much.

BABS (ARCHIVAL): No problem. Thank you.

SALON WORKER: Take care.

BABS: You heard that correctly, the owner of the salon *charges* for interviews about Britney. Paying for interviews... not our jam. We'll leave that to the tabloids. We scurry back to the car.

BABS (ARCHIVAL): Oh my God, she was like - I think she knew exactly what we were doing.

TESS (ARCHIVAL): Like, there was not a hint of surprise in her voice when we walked up with this microphone.

BABS (ARCHIVAL): Exactly, it was like, all right. I know what these bitches want, they're going to ask about Britney. Oh, my God.

TESS (ARCHIVAL): [laughs]

TESS: I guess we weren't the first randos to show up at Esther's place. And no wonder - this moment is kind of burned into our collective memory. Photos from this night show Britney in the salon, electric shaver in hand as she buzzes off her long brown hair. They're action shots. She's smiling in some of them. In others, she looks forlorn.

THEME MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: People talk to Tess and I about Britney all the time. At parties, meetings, interviews. And one question we get a lot is "Didn't she need a conservatorship back then, though? I mean, she did shave her head." And to that I'm usually like..."Okay. And? It was just a haircut."

TESS: It's not illegal to shave your head. It's not hurting anyone. Nobody would think twice if a man did it. But this moment, those photos, are *still* being used as proof that Britney is permanently damaged. That she shouldn't be in charge of her own life.

THEME MUSIC POSTS

BABS: There's another important part of 2007 for Britney that doesn't come up in the meme. This year was her last year of freedom before being conserved.

TESS: In this episode of Toxic, we're parking ourselves in 2007. Because there's much more to Britney in this time than the unflattering tabloid photos would have you believe.

BABS: Britney in 2007 could be sweet and giving. She was one of the young moms in the Malibu Starbucks line. She was a surprisingly approachable regular at gay bars in West Hollywood. She could also be vulnerable. Maybe a little too vulnerable.

TESS: This would create the perfect opportunity for someone to step in and gain Britney's trust. Someone who seemed to show up out of nowhere. Someone who would change the course of Britney's life.

THEME MUSIC FADES

TESS (DRIVING): Oh, yeah, so this is my old hood.

BABS (DRIVING): Cool bars.

TESS (DRIVING): Wow, this is a trip. Yeah, so this is my old apartment.

BABS (DRIVING): This one right here?

TESS (DRIVING): This one right here.

BABS: Another stop on our driving tour is Tess's old apartment in West Hollywood. Tess lived here in 2007. And she used to see celebrities come and go from the bars and clubs on her block.

TESS (DRIVING): So this was my apartment right here where the fence is. That, where you see that white truck is, that was one of the hottest bars where, like, everyone would go.

BABS (DRIVING): Oh.

TESS (DRIVING): So one night I was working it was four o'clock in the morning, and my window just like -- it was almost like a flash of lightning. And I looked out and Britney was pulling out of this driveway and she was just being chased by so many paparazzi that just lit up.

BABS (DRIVING): Whoa. I can totally see it.

TESS (DRIVING): Yep.

TESS: During this time, the nightlife here was explosive. There was always a new hot club opening up with a line of barely dressed people trying to get inside. I know. I was one of them. Once you got it in, these places were small and sweaty. A celeb could be at any of the booths in the corner, or dancing in the dark next to you.

DANIEL MUSTO: So it's just like this magical gay night in Hollywood.

BABS: This is Daniel Musto. He's a celebrity stylist. And in 2007, Daniel had the night every Britney fan dreams of. He got to go clubbing with her. During this time, Britney still seemed to

have that fuck-it free spirit we saw in “Chaotic,” but now she was on the rebound from K-Fed, so she made the most of it by hitting the clubs.

TESS (QUESTION): What bar were you guys at?

DANIEL: Yeah, it was called Tiger Heat and it was like the only gay bar that like Janet Jackson would go to. All the Britney dancers were regulars there. They texted me and said, “How is it? We want to come with Britney.” They escorted her upstairs. She came up and treated all the boys with such love. Of course, we had our private area because it would get crazy. But like anyone who wanted to give her eye contact to throw her a peace sign, they would. Her dancers call it auditioning.

TESS: Of course they were auditioning. Britney is worshipped by men in the gay community.-If Britney Mother Fucking Spears was one of the stars who appeared in the dark ether of the dance floor, you had to take your shot.

DANIEL: When boys are at a gay bar and they see that Britney's there, they start doing like full choreo around her. And they're like, “we have some people auditioning.” Meanwhile, I was one of them. But like she was always down to do all that, like she would, like, push me up against the wall and we'd dance. I actually had a fedora on because every guy in 2006 or 2007 wore fedoras and she kept taking it off my head. And then she left with my hat. [laughs]

TESS (TO DANIEL): Best way to lose a hat.

DANIEL: Rest in peace H&M fedora.

BABS: These days, it's pretty hard to get to Britney's inner circle. Her conservator can restrict and monitor who visits Britney, and choose her security guards. But in 2007... her entourage was like a carousel of friends, assistants, nannies... People would come in for a few months, then make their exit.

TESS: And after his night clubbing with Britney... Daniel became one of those people. In that elite crew for a few months. Up close with one of the most famous people in the world.

DANIEL: I, by way of friends in the styling world, ended up at Britney's house twice, went to bars with Britney about like two or three times, and all of a sudden was engulfed in her world where she was literally just the exact personality of one of my sweet girlfriends from my country hometown, but partying and being followed by paparazzi everywhere.

BABS: Daniel reached out to us, asking if he could tell us about this era of Britney's life. He says he tried to talk to the tabloids in 2007 and tell them *nice* stories about Britney... but all they ever wanted to hear was dirt.

TESS: We were excited to get a more intimate look at Britney in this really crucial time in her life.

At this point, Britney was recently divorced, a single mom of two. Living an hour away from the clubs of West Hollywood in Malibu, California.

BABS (DRIVING): Yeah, so we're about to hit the PCH, Pacific Coast Highway. Yeah, the PCH runs most of California right on the water, basically.

TESS (DRIVING): And this stretch of the PCH is yeah, Malibu. So the bulk of the city of Malibu is kind of right here on this coastal area, and the houses are in the back.

BABS: Malibu is somewhere that we're always looking for an excuse to go to. It feels like everyone there cracked some kind of code -- while the rest of the dumb world is working boring jobs, here are the people of Malibu, in the middle of the day, wearing wetsuits and driving convertibles.

TESS: We turn off the PCH and into the community where Britney lived in 2007. It's tucked away behind a shopping center with boutiques that sell breezy linen stuff. And, of course, a Starbucks.

BABS (DRIVING): Oh my gosh, I can't imagine living here. Yeah. In your early 20s, just living in a giant place in Malibu.

TESS (DRIVING): I mean, the dream.

BABS: The houses in Malibu are closely guarded. And that's where all the celebs live -- where they throw the kind of parties that are worth driving 45 minutes from the city for, if you're lucky enough to be invited. In 2007, Daniel was lucky enough. He'd come here to hang with Britney. And there was a process he and his friends would go through to meet up with her.

DANIEL: We definitely all didn't have her number, one person had her number. We didn't at the time have to go through anyone to get access to her, but she did- I guess people had like faked access to her community in Malibu behind Starbucks. So she would have to physically get in her car and come to the gate if she really wanted someone to come and give them the hi sign and eye contact to say they can come in. But in true Britney form, of course, she wanted a coffee, so she would like - she threw Sean Preston in the car, went to Starbucks, met us there, and then we followed her in.

BABS: Sean Preston, again, is Britney's oldest son. He was just a baby in 2007. Her other son Jayden, had been born just a few months prior.

TESS (QUESTION): Do you remember any of the decorations in her house?

DANIEL: Oh, it was the most traditional ever. Literally my mom and Britney Spears, I think, are the same human. And I remember going in her house and thinking like, wow, this is literally the way my mom dresses, just super traditional.

BABS: Daniel says Britney's taste in decor was very 90s *mom*. Floral fabrics. Cream color-schemes. Versailles-inspired vibes.

DANIEL: But she definitely didn't have people around when we'd show up, it was kind of just like her, Sean Preston, the nanny, you know, in her sweet home that was decorated so sweet.

BABS: This was the side of Britney the public wasn't seeing - the mom, at home, with her beach reads and her kid's toys lying around. The thoughtful hostess.

DANIEL: We'd be at her house and she would just make sure anything she was enjoying, whether it was music, Red Bull, conversation, she wanted everyone to be in on it. I was like in her closet picking out outfits for her friends because she, unlike all other celebrities I've worked with, she wanted her like assistant and everyone to just, like, "Wear my clothes, just go in my closet, just take it like whatever you want is yours." If someone was in the room who was a little off, she would make sure they were OK, got what they needed. You know, whether it was a cocktail or some gumbo, like whatever it is that you need to be on our level, like she wanted to make sure everyone was that.

TESS: At this time, Britney wasn't talking to her family. Like many people in their early 20s do, Britney seemed to be making her friends her family. Daniel remembers one night in particular where being in Britney's crew really had its perks.

DANIEL: Her manager had showed up the first time I went to her house and he had the final cut of the Blackout album and wanted to play it just for her. And she's like, no, brought us all outside to the Escalade. He blasted it in the driveway and we danced the Blackout album like into the night in Malibu.

MUSIC ENTERS

TESS: Okay we thought we were jealous of Daniel before for dancing in the club with Britney, but this is another level. Blackout is my favorite Britney album. It's a lot of people's favorite Britney album. It's a lot of people's favorite *album*.

TESS: You know what you're in for the first second of the first track, "Gimme More." Before there's any music, any baseline, anything - there's one phrase. It's a proclamation. It's an affirmation.

BRITNEY SPEARS: It's Britney, bitch.

BABS: Blackout was Britney's way of reclaiming her crown. People had been kind of writing her off a has-been. She'd had a few under-performing albums, including a Greatest Hits at just 22 years old. Her street style of pajama pants and a messy bun made people think she'd given up on super-stardom. Then, Britney recorded Blackout against all odds - seven months pregnant, with papps hounding her, and her marriage on the fritz. And she delivered. Danja, her producer, said he'd never seen a work ethic like hers.

TESS: What makes Blackout so impressive -- besides the fact that it's literally bop after bop, is that it feels like Britney's really taking the moment she's living through and channeling it into her art. "Freak Show" has the dark edgy vibe of the L.A. club scene. "Gimme More" feels ripped from the pages of the tabloids. And in "Piece of Me," Britney directly addresses the media feeding frenzy around her.

BABS: Daniel was hanging out with Britney in the months right after she recorded Blackout, a time when she was being pursued daily by dozens of guys with cameras. He was also around in the weeks right before she shaved her head. In fact, Britney's trip to Esther's Haircutting Studio wasn't a total surprise to Daniel.

DANIEL: We were sitting there and I had a shaved head at the time, and I remember this conversation where like -- we were there to put in her hair extensions. That's what my friend was doing for her. And she was just like, "You're so lucky." You don't really think at the time. How many times does a girl tell a guy like, "You just have to shower, dry off and go out." It felt like that. Like when girls tell you like "You can just wear a t- shirt and jeans, I have to put on a dress and heels and all that." And it just felt so casual. And then that happened. And I'm like, you know, her hair to me, even to this day, I probably have 40 friends who have done her hair over the course of 18 years, and she's always looking to do something different. And it is such a sexualized part of her.

MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: I think a lot of people with long hair, especially women, can identify with the impulse to shave your head. I have a mane of curly, red hair - and I think about shaving my head ALL the time. My hair is how people identify me - how they sexualize me. Being able to just shed that and force people to look at me in a whole different light is really appealing.

TESS: Daniel was supposed to see Britney the night she ended up at Esther's salon. She didn't show up for a friend's birthday dinner. And then, he never saw her again.

DANIEL: After she shaved her head. I don't know how they carried it out, but I know that, like, phones were taken away and like any number that she had after that was like she had to run into someone somewhere and get it again. I remember being told that because I was like, "Why can't we see her?" And it was like, "We just don't have access to her."

MUSIC ENDS

BABS: The headshave incident couldn't have come at a worse time for Britney's custody battle. As often seems to be the case in nasty divorces, both sides were looking for dirt on the other to use as evidence in a custody hearing.

TESS: In the early phases of their split, Kevin *and* Britney were both often spotted partying. But in the tit-for-tat game that their divorce case became, Britney was at a disadvantage. Her new ex-husband was the barely-relevant artist behind songs like “Popozão.”

POPOZÃO (SONG): In Portugese it means bring your ass, on the floor and move it real fast, I wanna see ya kitty and a lil bit of titty....

BABS: Even with masterful songs like “Popozão” to his name, K-Fed was able to fly a little more under the radar. Britney, meanwhile, was having her every move, her every decision recorded, blasted out to masses. She was being pursued in car chases by paparazzi who used the photos they got to criticize her driving. Her naughty behavior would be reported by magazines, and then Kevin’s lawyer would call in the people from those stories to testify against her.

TESS: And look, there are examples from this year of Britney acting erratically. Once she was spotted shopping wearing only panty hose and no underwear. Sometimes she would talk in a British accent as the paps surrounded her.

ARCHIVAL:

UNIDENTIFIED PAPARAZZI: Hey Britney! Hi Britney!

BRITNEY: [in british accent] where’s your friend? ...

UNIDENTIFIED PAPARAZZI: Right here.

BRITNEY: No not that friend.

BABS: Some outlets speculated that these behaviors were reasons to be concerned about Britney’s mental health. A lot of people diagnosed her based on what they saw in the paparazzi footage.

TESS: We don’t know what exactly Britney was going through-- medically or mentally-- during this really stressful time, and honestly it’s Britney’s choice if she ever wants to share that. But what we do know is that Britney’s family and manager Larry Rudolph saw the head shaving as a cry for help. And their version of help was to push Britney into rehab. What she needed rehab for isn’t clear. Maybe just as a break from the world or all the attention.

BABS: The night before Britney went into rehab, Kevin took over temporary custody of the kids. A TMZ article reported that he, too, had been part of the group pushing to get Britney into treatment. After Britney got out of rehab, Kevin’s custody went up from visitation 3 days a week to 50/50 custody.

PLAINTIVE MUSIC ENTERS

TESS: Although formal interviews with Britney around this time are rare, there was one platform she used to express herself - her official website where she would post what she called “Britney’s Letters of Truth.” In the letter dated May 28, 2007, she addressed what she was going through.

ACTRESS AS BRITNEY SPEARS: Recently, I was sent to a very humbling place called rehab. I truly hit rock bottom. Till this day I don’t think it was alcohol or depression. I was like a bad kid running around with ADD.

I feel like some of the people in my life made more of some issues than was necessary. I also feel like they knew I was beginning to use my brain for a change and cut some ties, so they wanted to be in more control of my life than me. I think it is actually normal for a young girl to go out after a huge divorce. I am only human people and I love you for still loving me.

MUSIC FADES

MIDROLL BREAK

MARGI BLASH (ARCHIVAL): Hi guys, I'm here in Las Vegas at the Palms Casino and Resort for the 2007 MTV Video Music Awards.

TESS: This is Hollywood TV's red carpet coverage from the 2007 VMAs. Celebs like Pam Anderson, Steve-O from Jackass, and Ludacris are there. Britney was the big story of the evening, so the host had the same question for pretty much everyone.

MARGI (ARCHIVAL): Who are you guys looking forward to seeing tonight, are you looking forward to Britney's big performance?

PERSON 1 (ARCHIVAL): I'm looking forward to Britney, I still love Britney you know.

BABS: Performing at the VMAs was nothing new for Britney, but her 2007 show was especially anticipated. She was seven months post-head shave. Britney's current single "Gimme More" was her highest charting song since "...Baby One More Time." But, she wasn't performing much, aside from a handful of sporadic pop-up dates. Britney seemed to be both everywhere and totally elusive.

TESS: Unfortunately, despite all the build up, nothing about this performance went well for Britney. She knew the dance moves, but unlike previous Britney performances, she didn't seem totally engaged with the choreography. The whole thing was just kinda uncomfortable.

REPORTER (ARCHIVAL): She wanted to show everyone that she could do it. And this has just made things worse for Britney.

TESS: This is an UsWeekly reporter, recapping the event on CNN.

REPORTER (ARCHIVAL): We actually did a flash poll on US magazine dotcom immediately afterward asking, is Britney back? And eighty one percent said no.

BABS: CNN wasn't the only outlet critiquing Britney's performance. The New York Post's headline the next day was "Lard and Clear"... a reference to Britney's body in her bra-top and hip hugging underwear. Many reporters wondered if Britney had been drunk or on drugs. Dr. Phil said the performance was like buying tickets to a train wreck. It was a full-out media pile-on.

CHRIS CROCKER (ARCHIVAL): Leave her alone. You're lucky she even performed for you bastards. Leave Britney alone!

BABS: *This* is a video called, you guessed it...“Leave Britney Alone”. In it, a 19-year-old named Chris Crocker wears eyeliner. They have cropped, straightened blond hair that frames their face. They hold the camera close, and look directly into it. It feels almost like a confessional.

CHRIS (ARCHIVAL): I know it's hard to see Britney Spears as a human being, but trust me, she is. She's a person. She's like you or I. And I don't know about you, but I know that I would be pretty shaken up right now.

TESS: Chris Crocker made this video as a response to the negative coverage of Britney's performance. They released it the day after the VMAs - and within 24 hours, “Leave Britney Alone” had over 2 million views. It was one of the first viral videos. People shared it because they thought it was funny - this kid was extremely emotionally invested in a pop star. But now, it feels like Chris was on the right side of history. They were standing up for Britney in a moment where any sort of public empathy was really lacking.

CHRIS (ARCHIVAL): And how fucking dare anyone out there make fun of Britney after all she's been through, she went through a divorce. She had two fucking kids. Her husband turned out to be a user, a cheater. And now she's going through a custody battle.

TESS: The VMAs were in early September 2007. A week later, Britney's divorce attorney walked away from the case. The day after that, the court ruled that she would be subject to random drug testing. By October 1st, Britney lost custody of her kids. And it's worth noting, Britney was *still* estranged from her parents at this time. Reports said she blamed her mom Lynne for taking Kevin's side.

BABS: The day after Britney lost custody of her kids, a radio DJ in Detroit offered a thousand dollar prize for anyone who correctly guessed when Britney would commit suicide. The station made him stop the contest the next day... but still, this is the kind of sentiment about Britney that was pretty common at the time.

TESS: Chris Crocker says cruel jokes like this are what directly inspired their video. We actually interviewed Chris for this show. They're a delight and a really compelling person. We had a great conversation with them about the backlash to “Leave Britney Alone.” And their thoughts about Britney all these years later. That's available as a bonus episode of this podcast, so go check it out!

BABS: But right now, we're going to hear from someone who spent time with Britney during those last few months of freedom before she was conserved.

LEAH FRAND: My name is Leah Frand and I know Britney Spears because I worked for her. I was her nanny in 2007.

TESS: At just *19 years old*, Leah was hired as a live-in nanny for one of the world's biggest stars. According to Leah, in the later part of 2007, Britney had visitation with her boys about every other weekend. When the kids weren't there, Leah helped Britney with stuff around the house.... But mostly, Leah says, they just hung out. Went to Starbucks. Watched movies.

LEAH: We would have had heads down handstand contests just kind of like just having fun, dancing around, listening to music. You know, when you drink your drink with whipped cream and you let the whipped cream sit on your top lip and make a mustache -- funny, normal, goofy things like that.

BABS: Leah told us that even in this tumultuous period for Britney, there were happy times. But Leah says Britney was *happiest* when she had her boys with her.

LEAH: I want to say that she was an amazing mom, very loving, very hands on when she obviously had them. She loves her boys. Even when they weren't there, she just totally acted like a mom, still. It was sad, almost like she wanted to cook breakfast for them, but they weren't there.

TESS (TO LEAH): Were you the only person living there?

LEAH: I was, yeah, it was, yeah. I mean, other than Sam overextending his welcome and stay, Sam Lutfi, like, yeah, I was technically the only person hired to, like, be working there and live there.

TESS: Sam Lutfi. We talked about Sam Lutfi in episode one. He's the guy who Britney's parents didn't like. The guy who called himself Britney's "manager." And we believe, based on court documents and testimony, he is one of the main reasons why Britney wound up in a conservatorship.

BABS: Britney met Lutfi earlier that year, the same way she met Daniel Musto, and KFed... at a club. Britney tried to take Lutfi's hat and he wouldn't give it up. Soon after that, they appeared pretty much inseparable.

TESS: Leah says that while she lived with Britney, Lutfi was around The Summit house almost every day - this is supported in court documents. And Leah says that even though he didn't seem to have a romantic interest in Britney, he just kind of showed up and was "creepily over-extending his stay."

LEAH: And when I say creepily over extending his stay, there was this room upstairs in our house, and it was just one of those like extra rooms that was like a study or something, there was like a library in there and piano, and a really uncomfortable couch that I believe was probably just for show. And I just remember Sam lying down with the lights fully on. I believe his shoes were still on and his arms crossed and he was just

lying there and said he's going to stay over. And I remember us whispering, we're like, what is he doing? Why is he still here? Like, we both had no idea what he was doing.

MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: According to Lutfi, after a few months of hanging out with Britney, he became her manager. He's said in court documents that he got this role kinda by default: He was at a meeting with Britney and some record execs, who weren't comfortable discussing business unless Lutfi was a part of Britney's team. So Britney was kinda like ok, he's my manager then.

TESS: From what we could find, Lutfi didn't have any previous experience in entertainment management. Before he came into Britney's life, Lutfi was a self-described businessman, and at one point called himself a counselor for wayward teens. And we know that prior to meeting Britney, Lutfi had restraining orders issued against him from three different people.

BABS: Lutfi seemed to have a hand in all aspects of Britney's life, both professionally and personally. Here he is with Britney on Ryan Seacrest's morning show to promote Blackout, in October 2007.

RYAN SEACREST (ARCHIVAL): All right, it's 102.7 Kiss FM, 9:16 in the morning.

SAM LUTFI (ARCHIVAL): Woo-hoo!

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): [laughs] Hi.

RYAN SEACREST (ARCHIVAL): Good morning, Britney.

BABS: Ryan Seacrest asks Britney what she's doing to promote the new album, and Lutfi answers for her.

LUTFI (ARCHIVAL): This is it.

RYAN (ARCHIVAL): This is it.

BABS: This whole interview is... kind of a mess. Ryan Seacrest apologizes for waking Britney up. He seems to be stretching to keep Britney and Lutfi on the line. Eventually, the conversation turns to Britney's parenting.

RYAN (ARCHIVAL): And do you feel like you're doing everything you can for your kids?

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): Oh, God, yeah. Yeah.

RYAN (ARCHIVAL): And how often will you see them?

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): Oh, we are- that's like all in the court, like stuff like my lawyers know all that stuff.

LUTFI (ARCHIVAL): Let's talk about fun stuff!

RYAN SEACREST (ARCHIVAL): OK, Sam, what do you want to talk about? [FADES DOWN]

BABS: By the way, during this interview, Lutfi is standing over Britney while she's in bed. You know, normal manager stuff. And though, in our opinion Lutfi comes off as extremely unprofessional in this interview - or at least, overly casual, he also... has a certain charm? He seems to be one of those people who knows how to get his way.

TESS: Maybe this is why The New Yorker recently called Lutfi "a Hollywood operator with a knack for insinuating himself into the lives of turbulent female stars." People like Amanda Bynes and Courtney Love, who ultimately filed a restraining order against him.

BABS: We also know how Lutfi operates because... we've had our own personal interactions with him. He first reached out in 2019 after we released that bombshell Britney's Gram episode - he gave us props for "exposing the truth." We didn't even respond for a year, because we were a little freaked out considering what we knew about him.

TESS: But eventually, we reached out to see if he wanted to come on mic for this podcast, and tell his side of the story. At first, he acted like he was willing to. But then he kept dodging our requests to set a time to record. And this set off a sort of cat and mouse game with Lutfi. He would give us what seemed like good tips, but would evade follow-up questions. Some days he was complimentary, other times he was antagonistic.

BABS: And the thing is, as frustrating as we *personally* find Lutfi...he knows things. He was there with Britney when all the shit went down. And he seemed to be calling the shots. He would text paparazzi with Britney's schedule, and use the rationale that it was like having "free bodyguards." According to his own statements in court documents, he at one point hired drug sniffing dogs to search Britney's house.

TESS: That's partly why we were so interested in talking to Britney's nanny, Leah: because she had witnessed Lutfi and Britney's dynamic first-hand. When we were fact-checking this episode we reached out to Lutfi for a response to what Leah had said about him— that he was creepily over-extending his stay in Britney's home. Lutfi got back to us in under 10 minutes - and his response really threw us for a loop. We were in the studio that day, so we decided to record what went down.

TESS (IN STUDIO): We just sent a routine kind of request for comment to Sam Lutfi.

BABS (IN STUDIO): And we were saying, hey, we have all the stuff that Leah who said she was the nanny who lived with Britney for quite a few months. At the end of 2007, we said, hey, what's your response to this, this and this that Leah said. And Lutfi went on a tirade. He freaked out and he sent back this long email about how Leah was only hired for two days. And now he's texting me, and he's talking about how Leah basically made

up the whole thing, that she worked with Britney for months. And we don't we have not been able to confirm her actual timeline. So I'm worried that it's true.

TESS: Suddenly we felt kind of whiplashed between two conflicting stories. To be clear, Leah DID at one point work for Britney, even Lutfi doesn't dispute that - but now the details of her employment felt very much in question.

BABS: When we talked to her, Leah told us she had worked as Britney's nanny for months. She couldn't remember the specific dates, though. After Lutfi's message, we dug deeper. We found paparazzi photos of Britney and Leah together... but only for a few consecutive days. So we called Leah and asked her again how long she'd worked for Britney. She got pretty defensive. She still couldn't give us exact dates... but she maintained she'd worked there for more than a week.

TESS: This was a blow, to be honest - we'd talked with Leah for over a year before she'd agreed to do an interview. We built up a relationship. And suddenly it was like wait...which of her details can we trust? Leah had seemed so genuine in the way she talked about Britney and in no way like someone just looking for the limelight. Here's us, again, in the studio, hashing everything out.

BABS (IN STUDIO): We don't know who out of these people- like Lutfi seems like he is telling the truth. He just texted me, "On my mother's life she's lying to you." And we all know he's a mama's boy. [laughs]

TESS (IN STUDIO): But I also don't feel like I can ever completely trust anything Lutfi says.

BABS (IN STUDIO): Of course.

TESS (IN STUDIO): There's just too many people that have warned me personally about him that we know besides Britney have restraining orders against him.

BABS (IN STUDIO): I don't know, I'm just-

TESS (IN STUDIO): Well and then every time this happens, I feel it really gives me some perspective on what Britney went through or is still going through. We're just trying to tell this story, and we're constantly like in this funhouse trick of mirrors, like, "Oh, that's reality. Nope. Just kidding, it's this one. Nope. Just kidding, it's that one." Like, of course, I mean, it makes even more sense to me that Britney was manipulated in the way that she is because it seems like manipulative people are really, really attracted to her.

BABS (IN STUDIO): And also he's just this random dude! Like who are you? Why are you even in this?

BABS: This situation with Leah and Lutfi matters to us because it seems like it's ALWAYS like this with Lutfi. Someone on the other side saying the exact opposite of whatever Lutfi's saying.

TESS: Maybe the most important example of this? Britney's parents. Lynne Spears writes in her memoir that Lutfi was a gatekeeper to Britney in the final months of 2007. That he was trying to keep Britney's family out.

BABS: But Lutfi claims in court documents that he was just trying to help Britney and mend Britney's relationship with her parents. He's also told the court that he views Jamie Spears as a really controlling, unwelcome figure in Britney's life -- a dynamic that would become very clear in the days leading up to Britney being conserved.

TESS: We definitely agree with Lutfi's characterization of Jamie. But what else should we believe? Who can we trust?

THEME MUSIC ENTERS

BABS: To close out today, we want to share one more section of that letter you heard from earlier in this episode. Britney's "letter of truth." She wrote it in the months *right before* she met Sam Lutfi. Reading this letter, it's clear Britney is going through a lot. She comes down on herself for being too open. She seems a little lost. Lonely.

ACTRESS AS BRITNEY SPEARS: This letter is to not place blame on anyone, although I do see the world with a completely different set of eyes now.

I think the whole problem was letting too many people into my life. You never know another person's intentions or what another person wants.

I just want the same things in life that you want...and that is to be happy. It is just so weird because everyone has their own perception of me and how they think I really am. It is so weird how stories are told. There is your side, my side, and the truth. Somebody has to figure it out.

TESS: Next time, on Toxic, we try Brit. We try.

MUSIC FADES OUT

BABS: Don't forget! We had an amazing conversation with Chris Crocker, creator of "Leave Britney Alone." You can hear it now, only in Stitcher Premium.

TESS: We talked with Chris all about what it was like to defend Britney back in the day, and the backlash they faced.

CHRIS CROCKER: If I'm going through this on this tiny of a scale with this sort of 15 minutes of fame, whatever you want to call it, or infamy, rather, I can't imagine for decades being seen as not a person. I can't imagine how she even trusts anybody.

BABS: To listen to this exclusive bonus episode, sign up for Stitcher Premium. Go to stitcherpremium.com/toxic, select a monthly plan, and use code TOXIC for a month of listening free!

TESS: You can also hear every episode of our show *without* ads. That's stitcherpremium.com/toxic and the code "TOXIC" for a month of free listening.

TESS: Toxic was made with lots of help from our production team at Witness Docs! Senior producer Abigail Keel, producer Kevin "K-Tid" Tidmarsh, story editor Gianna Palmer, executive producer Kameel Stanley and head of content Peter Clowney.

TESS: Casey Holford is the technical director for Witness Docs. He mixed this episode and composed original music for Toxic.

TESS: Zoe Schwab is our researcher extraordinaire. Fact checking by Anakwa Dwamena. And super special thank you to actress Susan Burke for reading Britney's letter of truth.

TESS: Toxic is written and hosted by me, Tess Barker.

BABS: And me, Babs Gray! You can find a transcript for this episode, and for all our episodes on our website — witnesspodcasts.com

BABS: Got a tip? Reach out to the show at britnepod@stitcher.com and follow us on social [@britneysgram](https://twitter.com/britneysgram).

BABS: We know you don't want to miss ANY episodes of this show. So make sure you subscribe to Toxic: The Britney Spears Story in Stitcher, Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever you listen. That way new episodes will pop right up. Thank you!

TESS: Thanks!