

TOXIC: THE BRITNEY SPEARS STORY

CHAPTER 6: CIRCUS

WITNESS DOCS

ARCHIVAL TAPE - CIRCUS MUSIC PLAYS

PEREZ HILTON (ARCHIVAL): Enter one enter all...

BABS GRAY: This is the opening video for Britney's Circus tour, in 2009. That's gossip blogger Perez Hilton speaking. He's dressed like a demented queen of hearts.

PEREZ HILTON (ARCHIVAL): I'm here tonight to give you a treat. A woman, yes I've maligned in the past. I was a bit of a beast, I admit it. I'm bad.

TESS BARKER: So the man who'd written so many demeaning blog posts about Britney... is now opening her "comeback" tour. When we interviewed Perez, he said he'd been told that Britney approved of his appearance in the video. But he never spoke with Britney or even saw her while shooting it.

PEREZ HILTON (ARCHIVAL): I'm feeling so fierce to give you the return of the fine lady Spears. She's the queen of the circus. The mistress of ceremonies, the ring leader in charge.

BABS: The 2009 Circus tour did present Britney as literally this. The ring leader. She wore a top hat and a coat with tails. At one point in the show, she cracked a whip at her backup dancers.

TESS: But, in reality - Britney was hardly calling the shots.

INTERVIEWER (ARCHIVAL): Do you feel out of control in your life?

BRITNEY SPEARS (ARCHIVAL): No, I don't feel like it's out of control. I think it's too in control. There's no excitement. There's no -- there's no passion. There's no, like -- it's just like Groundhog Day every day.

B: This is Britney just a few months after the conservatorship was put in place. She's speaking in a documentary called "For the Record." It was filmed as Britney geared up for the Circus tour - in which she would perform 97 shows around the world.

T: For 13 years, this documentary was the only time Britney spoke publicly about the constraints on her life under her conservatorship.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): If I wasn't under the restraints, that I'm under right now, you know, with all the lawyers and doctors and people analyzing me every day and all that kind of stuff, like if that wasn't there, I'd feel so liberated and feel like myself.

B: This documentary, *For the Record*, came out in 2009. And in the dozen years that followed, we could not find a single interview where Britney mentions her conservatorship. Or even implies that she's in one.

THEME MUSIC

T: In today's episode of *Toxic*, we're going to cover this long period... the period *after* Britney was conserved but *before* she gave her explosive open court testimony in June 2021. We're going to refer to this as the "Smoke and Mirrors" era. Because for this decade plus of Britney's conservatorship, by most outward appearances, Britney seemed to be doing well. Sure, it was public knowledge that she was in a conservatorship, that she was under the control of her father - but the public was led to believe Britney was thriving. Britney's career had many successes during this time. But this image of Britney as a content, rejuvenated pop star, rising from the ashes? It was an illusion.

B: We're going to go chronologically through the "Smoke and Mirrors" era - from the *Circus* album up until what would have been Britney's second Vegas residency.

T: We're going to cover what the public *saw* - TV appearances, dancing, and softball interviews, and what they *didn't* see - manipulation, isolation, and Britney's own fight for her freedom.

MUSIC FADES

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): The *Circus* comes out on December 2nd. And it's significant because it's my birthday. I'm really excited and it's going to be fun.

T: This is Britney in a promo interview for *Circus*, the album Britney recorded just a few months after that life-altering weekend when she was conserved. Here's Britney talking about one of the album's biggest singles, *Womanizer*.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): The song is about basically a guy who is just into a bunch of different women and he can't help himself, he's just a womanizer, just a complete butthole, and he gets away with it.

B: *Circus* debuted at number one on *Billboard*, and Britney got a Grammy nomination for *Womanizer*. But while Britney was outwardly having a "comeback," we know from court documents, conversations with people close to Britney, and other reporting, that this was actually a pretty harrowing time for Britney. The "Smoke and Mirrors" era is a difficult time to get people to talk about - most of the people we've spoken to who worked with Britney in this period say they signed strict non-disclosure agreements. And some sources have told us they're scared about retaliation from Britney's dad, Jamie, or his team.

T: But there are some things we do know - and one of them, is that during this entire time, Britney was trying desperately to escape the grip of her father. And this effort began as soon as the conservatorship was put in place.

T: As we've said, Britney had only a court-appointed attorney representing her during this period. Remember, she'd tried to hire attorney Adam Streisand while she was still in the hospital, but was denied.

B: That didn't stop Britney from trying to hire other lawyers. She would get burner phones snuck to her, and she would make secret calls. Like this one, to a lawyer named Jon Eardley.

AUTOMATED VOICEMAIL (ARCHIVAL): Received January 21st at 12:29 a.m...

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): Hi my name is Britney Spears. I called you earlier.

T: Britney is a little hard to understand in this message. We know from a close friend of Britney's that she's speaking in hushed tones because her dad Jamie is in the next room.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): I'm calling again because I just wanted to make sure during the process of ending the conservatorship that my father has threatened me several times, you know, he'll take my children away.

B: Britney says she is calling because she wants help ending the conservatorship - and she wants this attorney, Jon Eardley, to know that her father has been threatening to take her children away.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): I just want to be guaranteed that everything will be fine with the process of you guys taking care of everything—that things will stay the same as far as my custodial time. That's it, bye.

T: Britney asks to be guaranteed that everything will be fine and she'll be granted access to her kids. This audio was leaked online in 2009, and we have confirmed that it is definitely Britney. In fact we know from a source on background that Britney wanted this audio to be leaked. She was hoping it would put some attention on her conservatorship. The voicemail *did* make the rounds on Britney fan sites, but never crossed over into mainstream media. Britney later complained to a friend that “nothing even happened” after this leak.

B: We know from our reporting that throughout the entire “Smoke and Mirrors” era, access to Britney's children was one of her father, Jamie's, main forms of coercion. Britney often confided in friends that she feared if she didn't stay quiet, she wouldn't be able to see her kids.

T: Britney was the one reaching out to attorney Jon Eardley in that voicemail you just heard - but Eardley actually contacted her first. Just three days before Britney was conserved, Eardley sent Britney a letter in which he actually predicts what's about to happen. Here's a small excerpt.

Your case will continue to spiral, until they have denied you your children, your freedom and your assets. By then, it will be too late. What they ultimately want is to get you into a

*conservatorship, at that point, your **freedom** will be denied, giving them the full opportunity to steal all of your money and deny you any access to your children.*

T: According to Eardley, Britney DID attempt to retain him as her attorney, mere days after her conservatorship was implemented. So Eardley got to work. He tried to move Britney's case to federal court...because, as he stated in court documents, he believed Britney's constitutional rights were being violated. He argued that Britney was living as a prisoner in her own home. That she'd been cut off from receiving phone calls or mail. And that she had suffered significant verbal attacks by Jamie, who was living with her.

B: Ultimately the judge agreed with Jamie's lawyers that, yet again, Britney couldn't hire her own attorney. Eardley was out. And soon after, Jamie's camp issued a restraining order against him.

T: Even though Britney's early attempts at freedom fail, she just keeps working. She tours. She does endorsement deals.

B: And in 2011, Britney's next album is released. Here she is talking about it in a promotional interview.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): The name of the album is called *Femme Fatale* and that means "empowerment," and "very strong woman." I think that's very important for girls to hear that message and that's why I called the album *Femme Fatale*.

T: And this same year, Britney gets engaged to a man named Jason Trawick. Trawick started working with Britney as her agent in 2008, and they began dating soon after.

B: Here's Britney on a UK radio show in 2011, talking about her and Trawick at her kid's birthday party... and she makes an interesting blunder.

HOST (ARCHIVAL): I wanna know were you dressed up though?

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): Oh I didn't dress up at all.

HOST: Come on! I could see a Wonder Woman or a Catwoman...

BRITNEY: No, no. Actually me and my hu--my boyfriend, I was gonna say my husband. We do that every once in a while. He'll put on like —We're goobs, I know we're goobs! So embarrassing!

[FADE DOWN]

T: A year after this, Britney and Trawick's relationship goes a step further. Trawick joins Jamie as co-conservator of Britney's person. So this means Trawick is not only her romantic partner. He also has a say in her day to day activities and medical decisions. *And* her business deals. Directly after becoming Britney's conservator, Trawick helps broker a record-breaking gig for Britney - a \$15 million contract as a judge on the music competition show, *X-Factor*. On the show, Britney coaches contestants alongside Simon Cowell.

SIMON COWELL (ARCHIVAL): Okay, I'm gonna go to Britney, what do you think?

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): You're so bright and beautiful on stage, and you exude so much confidence, you're flawless.

B: Shortly after Britney's stint on X-Factor ended, Britney and Trawick broke up, and he was removed as co-conservator. But when we were poking around in Britney's accounting reports late one night...we found something. Something that makes us think there's a hidden element to Trawick and Britney's story.

AUSTIN BERTRAND: OK, you guys are digging deep.

T: This is Austin Bertrand. He's the estate specialist you may remember from our last episode, where he helped us get into Britney's finances. We're quickly checking back in with Austin, because we wanted to ask him about this line item that had piqued our interest. We spotted it under Britney's "legal fees."

AUSTIN: Let me see if I can hop to what you're talking about.

BABS: Let's see, it was yeah, the fifth report, so it's for 2012.

AUSTIN: And I'm in the fifth report right now.

BABS: It is on page 63.

AUSTIN: Thank you. Let me get to that.

BABS: So it looks like the law offices of Alexandria Leichter for nine thousand dollars

AUSTIN: I see that. Nine thousand one hundred fifty dollars on October 1st, 2012.

Consultation on dissolution of marriage, and this is under Conservatee's legal fees. Ok so, my assumption would be that those were legal services that were rendered directly for her benefit and nobody else's. Dissolution of marriage only means one thing, which is divorce.

T: Divorce. That is something you do after you're *married*. And the public was not aware of Britney being married to *anyone* in 2012. The last husband the public knew about was K-Fed, who she divorced in 2007!

B: Yeah, so, we believe this consultation on dissolution of marriage may mean that Britney was secretly. Married. To. Jason Trawick. And then, secretly divorced!

AUSTIN: Yeah, that's probably what's going on, and it looks like they missed a redaction. Way to go, guys. You guys might have investigated something brand new for the public.

B: We searched for a marriage certificate, but those can be confidential in California. We also reached out to both Britney's publicist and Jason Trawick for comment, but we didn't hear back.

T: It's always struck us as a bit unsettling that during this period, Trawick held so many overlapping roles in Britney's life. And one thing that strikes us as really odd about this seemingly secret wedding is that we know from Britney's testimony and court records that

Britney has been prevented from marrying other partners. So why would Trawick be given the greenlight? Was this union advantageous from a business perspective? If this marriage did happen, was Britney even on board? And why hide it?

MUSIC ENTERS

B: In 2013, Britney released a new album, the self-titled “Britney Jean.” And her career continued to reach new heights.

HOST (ARCHIVAL): The one and only Britney Spears drops out of the sky, ladies and gentlemen, in a helicopter and joins us this morning. Britney, thank you so much. I saw you in the helicopter. See the folks out here? What was going through your mind?

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): It's craziness, it's so chaotic. Actually I got sick in the helicopter. I was like, oh my God, but this is amazing, this is so cool.

TESS: This is a video from Good Morning America. Britney's announcing a huge venture: her brand-new residency, “Piece of Me,” in Las Vegas.

HOST (ARCHIVAL): You think you'll be spending a lot of time in Vegas, 50 shows, it's a lot.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): That is a lot of shows, we'll see. We'll see.

HOST: And everybody should know that tickets go on sale today, by the way, so you can pick up everything you want, the album starting in December, the tickets now at Planet Hollywood in Vegas.

BEAT

FENTON BAILEY: This residency was a real seismic shift in Vegas.

TESS: This is Fenton Bailey, who, no big deal, co-created Ru Paul's Drag Race! He also co-directed the documentary “I Am Britney Jean.” This documentary came out in 2013, right before the Vegas show debuted. The film was executive produced by Britney's management team¹, and followed Britney and her crew preparing to bring the show to life.

FENTON: I think a lot of people thought it was a huge career risk and was actually probably doomed to failure.

B: Fenton is right about Britney's Vegas show being a risk. At the time, Vegas was seen as something artists did later on in their careers. But Britney ended up ushering in a new era of Vegas residencies for artists who were still in their prime. Once Britney did it, other stars like Lady Gaga, J.Lo, and Christina Aguilera followed in her footsteps.

¹ [IMDB](#) lists Larry and Adam Leber as EPs

T: Fenton self-identifies as a Britney fan. He was thrilled to get to have access to one of his favorite pop stars. But soon he'd realize that no one *really* gets access to Britney Spears.

FENTON: When you make a documentary, you really do want to get to know the subject of the film, and I think sometimes as a fan, you also want to have a special bond with that person or a moment of connection. And I think going into it, I came to understand that that just wasn't going to happen.

MIDROLL

FENTON (ARCHIVAL): What's your favorite bubblegum??

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): Watermelon. Watermelon bubblegum, man. It's the best. It's so good.

B: This is the opening scene from Fenton's documentary "I am Britney Jean."

FENTON: One of the very first interviews we did with her, she was chewing gum. And I think her management said, you know, take the gum out, and she took it out and put it on the side of a Starbucks cup. And we left that in the cut. But, you know, the management made us take it out.

B: Fenton says that his interviews with Britney were tightly controlled - that he had to have all of his interview questions cleared ahead of time by Britney's team. This included her dad, Jamie, her manager Larry Rudolph, and a woman named Robin Greenhill.

FENTON: And Robin just seemed to be the person who said no to us all the time. And it was a lot of other people saying no all the time. But that was Robin's consistent -- she was the consistent no.

T: Robin is an employee of Lou Taylor's company Tri Star. Background sources have told us that Robin managed most of Britney's personal and professional day-to-day, and friends of Britney's have described Robin to us as the gatekeeper to Britney. According to them, Robin was Lou Taylor's quote "Boots on the ground." And like Lou, Robin was close with Britney's dad, Jamie. Robin was even on that trip we mentioned in the last episode, where Lou and Jamie got baptized in the Jordan River.

B: When we reached out to Robin Greenhill for comment, a lawyer for TriStar responded saying that before and during Britney's Vegas residency, Robin was one of a large team of people managing Britney's personal and professional engagements. They also said that it was Britney's management team, including Larry Rudolph, who approved interview questions for "I Am Britney Jean."

B: For Fenton, the no's he got from Robin and the rest of the management team became par for the course.

FENTON: They were there to make sure that we didn't go off script. But, you know, we try it occasionally. We would go off script.

B: One of Fenton's big off-script moments? Asking Britney about a lyric for his favorite bop, Slave 4 U.

FENTON: The question I have been always wanting to know all my life well, you know, is it "come and get it, get it" or is it "kitty kitty"?

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): "Get it. Get it. Get it. Get it."

FENTON (ARCHIVAL): It is "Get it. Get it."

BRITNEY: "Get it. Get it." Yeah.

FENTON: Has anyone said that to you before, that it sounds like...

BRITNEY: Actually people have thought that that was "kitty kitty."

TESS: "I Am Britney Jean" has a lot of light-hearted interviews like this one, and footage of the residency coming together. Britney picks up choreography and weighs in on what the set should look like. Honestly, the first time I watched this documentary I got so excited for Brit's residency that I literally choked on my Perrier. At that time, I didn't really know much about the conservatorship, and I just took the doc at face value.

BABS: But, knowing what we know now, about how tightly controlled Britney's life was, certain scenes do stick out. Scenes like this one.

SCENE TAPE

T: So, there's about a dozen people seated around a conference table, going over Britney's schedule. Robin and Larry are discussing Britney's work calendar for the first week of December.

UNIDENTIFIED (ARCHIVAL): So five, four, two. Two, she can work two?

LARRY (ARCHIVAL): Two is her birthday. Is she going to be OK working on her birthday?

ROBIN (ARCHIVAL): Sure. What do you want her to play?

LARRY: I don't know, I mean can she rehearse on her birthday?

ROBIN: She's *gonna* rehearse on her birthday.

LARRY: Yeah, that's what I'm asking.

B: So Robin decides Britney will work on her birthday. On the surface, this might feel normal. We assume celebrities have to make sacrifices for their careers all the time. But again, this is a woman who, since 2008, has not been legally allowed to make decisions about her own life. And the people making these choices for her are the ones profiting off of her work.

T: When he started filming, Fenton wanted to talk about that time period right before Britney got conserved -- which he calls "The Blackout Period." Blackout, as in, the legendary album Britney made around that tumultuous time.

B: Fenton broached the sensitive subject of the Blackout Period with one of the people on Britney's team.

FENTON: We sat down with Adam Leber who was working with Britney then and I said to Adam, "you know, we got to talk about the blackout period in this film. How do you guys deal with it in your relationship with her?" He, you know, he said that it was a nightmare and it was horrible. And they got through it as a kind of family unit. And they just moved forward. It's not something that they look back on. And him saying that to me made me really take a step back and realize that I understood why they would move on and not talk about it. And I felt in the film we were making it didn't have a place. It wasn't about whitewashing anything. It was just, we were making a film about her putting on this Vegas residency, and to sort of go back and bring all that back up, just there was nowhere to go with it.

T: So in the end, Fenton's documentary, "I am Britney Jean," avoids the subject of the conservatorship completely.

FENTON: I mean everything we saw on set between her, her dad and Larry was just really -- it felt very convivial and it felt very much like a family. I didn't see any cracks or anything or any sort of weird stuff.

B: Fenton may not have seen any cracks in the veneer of Britney's relationship with her dad and team, but we know that during the Vegas residency part of the "Smoke and Mirrors" Era, Britney was waging a private war to get Jamie out of her life.

T: The New York Times reports that during this time, Britney told the court that she wanted her dad removed as conservator because she believed he was drinking again. Britney wanted Jamie to be subject to alcohol testing, a request to which the judge replied quote "Absolutely inappropriate. And who is she to be demanding that of anybody?"

B: Britney also reportedly told a court investigator that her dad was "obsessed" with her, and wanted to control everything in her life, from who she befriended to the color of her cabinets.

T: Here is Britney on a UK music channel around this same time in 2013, when her single "Work Bitch" had just come out. She's playing a pop up interview game with... some kind of robot?

ROBOT (ARCHIVAL): Please confirm your name.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): Hi, I'm Britney Spears.

ROBOT: Please confirm you're ready to play Would You Rather.

BRITNEY: I'm ready to play Would You Rather.

ROBOT: Well that's lucky.

B: Britney looks tense. Not like she really wants to be playing this game, with this robot. And then, things take a turn.

ROBOT (ARCHIVAL): First up, in which of these dangerous locations would you rather be stranded? Standing in a shark infested pool, like your video for "Work" or standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon like your video for "I'm Not A Girl."

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): I think I would rather be standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon because it's up to me whether to jump or not. And I have control over that.

TENSE MUSIC ENTERS

T: And she would have control over that. So much of what we've learned about the intense controls on Britney's life around this time, almost make it feel like she was living in a spy movie. She was always changing her phone number - she was positive that her communications were being surveilled. And people close to Britney have also told us that they believed *they* were bugged while talking to her.

B: Lynne Spears has told the court that throughout the conservatorship, Jamie has exercised quote "absolutely microscopic control" over Britney and her actions. That Britney's household staff, medical aides, and security all reported Britney's every move back to Jamie. And friends of Britney's have told us that as Britney's boys grew older, Jamie continued to use them as a means of coercing her into compliance.

T: We also know from materials provided to us that Britney had to hide even small purchases, such as buying an app on her phone. In 2014, she hid these transactions by using BitCoin. Yes, that's right, Britney was using BitCoin in 2014 - way before the fuckbois on Reddit were talking about it.

B: And there's one more thing we discovered in the course of our reporting about this time period - Britney so badly wanted to be free of this conservatorship that she was considering trying to escape the country. We've reviewed materials in which she discusses plans to obtain British citizenship. She dreamed of buying a country house outside London, where California probate laws would not apply to her.

T: Throughout all these years of efforts on Britney's part to get free, she continued to show up in public, smiling, doing choreography, and sitting for interviews like this one.

JONATHAN ROSS (ARCHIVAL): That's right, it's Britney Spears ladies and gentlemen!
(audience cheers)

B: This is Britney in 2016, on a UK talk Show hosted by comedian Jonathan Ross. Britney is there to discuss her residency and her new album, *Glory*. Most of the conversation is typical late night banter about Britney's life in Vegas.

T: But, then at one point in the interview, Britney reportedly says the c-word - conservatorship. We've confirmed this with two different audience members who were there that day. One of them sent us a voice message describing what he saw:

FEIM: She did talk about the conservatorship. So I think the question was how *Glory* was different to other albums in the past. And she did say that she had much more control of things during the recording on this album. I think she said exactly, "so I've been under a conservatorship" and then hesitated a bit, being like I was under the conservatorship, so she didn't have much power in the past, but she said that she's gaining control little by little, and then it was just this very awkward silence in the whole studio.

B: Four days later, when the episode comes out... that portion of the interview doesn't air. Instead, we get hard hitting exchanges like this one:

ROSS (ARCHIVAL): Then what else do you do, do you like to order food in, do you like to cook -- do you cook?

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): I cook -- I like a lot of different rices. I like rice and um jambalaya. Don't laugh, oh my God! [LAUGHTER FADES DOWN]

ANDREW HAMPP: So it was widely understood that interviewing Britney isn't really, quote unquote, interviewing Britney.

B: This is Andrew Hampp. He interviewed Britney for a Billboard cover story in 2015. She was about a year and a half into the Vegas residency at this point.

TESS (TO ANDREW): And were people talking about her conservatorship and what was actually going on with her legally sort of behind the scenes. Was that a discussion that was going on?

ANDREW: No, it wasn't an active part of the chatter in 2015 era, I would say. It's funny, right in retrospect, I think because you know, it's a testament to how good of a job the conservatorship did of putting the wall over all of our collective eyes, right? That's why the discourse has shifted to the media being complicit in all of this, because we absolved some of the things that we didn't choose to look into at the time.

B: Andrew's interviewed a lot of big names: J.Lo, Enrique Iglesias, Pink. And for all of them, he flew to a different city to sit down with the subject, usually for an hour or so at a time. He says an hour face to face is the *minimum* amount of time he needed to write a cover story about someone.

ANDREW: Especially if the goal is to make the reader learn something they didn't already know about the person, that's virtually impossible to do over a phone interview without being able to disarm them the way you would face to face.

T: But for Andrew's piece on Britney, Billboard let their usual conditions for a cover story slide. Andrew got just 15 minutes with Britney... over the phone.

ANDREW: I knew for sure that Larry Rudolph, her manager, would be on the line. There was never a roll call at the top of that phone call to confirm who or what other participants might have been on there.

B: According to Andrew, it's standard for everyone - publicists, managers, people like that - to announce themselves at the top of a call like this. So it struck Andrew as odd that he didn't know whether other members of the Britney Corporation were on the call with him and Britney.

T: Andrew sent us a written transcript from this call. He kicks things off by complimenting Britney on her Vegas show. He asks her why she wanted to come to Vegas in the first place. She tells him she's excited to be in one place and not moving around while touring.

ANDREW: I asked Britney the seemingly innocuous question, what's your favorite song to perform during the residency? And she said, "'Toxic,' because I get showered on and it wakes me up." And then she laughed. And, you know, "I feel like I can give it my all." And I think that's great. OK, finally, I have something that's a little candid.

T: Andrew thinks this detail is funny. Human. Britney's show is 90 minutes of high-octane stunts... who wouldn't need a little reinvigoration halfway through?

ANDREW: And then Larry calls me and basically said, could I remove that reference to being woken up? Could I reword it, whatever it is?

beat

And of course I had to say no. Like she said it on the record. I don't understand. It's not even that big of a deal. So that was the only, frankly, nugget that I felt that we got in the story itself.

B: Why didn't Larry want the public to know about Britney feeling "woken up" in the middle of her show? Was her team so focused on micro-managing her public persona that they thought this was a bad look - or was this smoke and mirrors to cover something up - like Britney being overmedicated as multiple friends and coworkers of hers have said they thought she was in this time?

T: Looking back at the written transcript from this 15 minute interview now, years later, Andrew sees moments of real vulnerability from Britney. Moments that are evident even in the way the call is written out.

ANDREW: As I looked at the transcript, again, there are moments where I asked her about “What advice would she have for 17 year old Britney?” And all she said was, my advice would just be “Stay strong,” and then silence, you see in brackets in the transcript. So you could tell that there was a sadness that she was trying to communicate.

MUSIC BREAK

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL, WITH HIGH-PITCHED VOICE FILTER): My best friend told me today that I need to be mindful and read more books, but honestly, all I want to do is go to Paris and shop.

T: This is Britney on her Instagram in early 2017. She’s using one of those cartoon animal filters, as she liked to do around this period.

B: Nowadays, in the FreeBritney era, people often wonder whether it’s even Britney posting to her own feed. Her posts will have long captions that have nothing to do with the image attached, or there will be videos that are from quote “today” but are clearly from years prior. But, back when we were making a comedy podcast about her Instagram, we just kind of took it at face value that it was actually Brit.

T: And that was what made us so interested in it - there always seemed to be some je ne sais quoi going on there. Some piece of Britney that she was using her Instagram to get out to the world. Like in her comedy videos, which we referred to on Britney’s Gram as “Brit Skits.”

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): Okay so I’ve been in the kitchen slaving away for my children making them the best ice cream sundae.

B: This is a Brit Skit from summer 2018. Britney walks into the living room where her kids are hanging out.

BRITNEY: Boys? How do you like your ice cream sundae?

B: Then comes the classic comedic twist. Britney turns the camera to her sons staring idly at the TV.

BRITNEY: Well...they’re speechless.

THEME MUSIC ENTERS

T: As much as these Brit skits and filter videos were comedic gold, there always seemed to be a certain loneliness to Britney's posts. A tension between her goofy memes and the isolated life she was living. For example, she would often post fashion shows that were just her walking her own hallways in various outfits. These videos felt playful, and we loved seeing what Britney had in her closet, but watching them, we were like - where is everyone? It felt like Britney was having a slumber party, all by herself.

B: The enigma of Britney's Instagram is what kept us so fascinated by Britney's life. It's why we kept podcasting about it. By the fall of 2018 we were totally dialed into all things Britney. These are those same months we talked about in episode one, when we started closely examining Britney's conservatorship. And this is also when Britney made this totally befuddling appearance on the The Ellen DeGeneres Show.

ELLEN (ARCHIVAL) Britney Spears, what are you doing? I mean, it's wonderful that you're here, but what are you doing here?

B: Here's Ellen, introducing Britney on her talk show in October 2018. Both Britney and Ellen appear *genuinely* uncertain of why this segment is happening.

BRITNEY (ARCHIVAL): I actually have a huge announcement to make.

ELLEN (ARCHIVAL): You do? What is your announcement?

BRITNEY: My announcement is actually that I have an announcement.

ELLEN: All right. Yes, OK. So there's an announcement to make an announcement. And what is the announcement of the announcement?

BRITNEY: I can't announce the announcement until October 18th.

T: What the hell is going on here? It feels like something is amiss behind the scenes. Obviously we'd seen a ton of celebrities appear to promote something on a talk show...never someone announcing an announcement. That's like sending a save the date for a save the date.

B: Needless to say, our interest is piqued. So, six days later, we tune in to the livestream of Britney's big, well, announcement. It takes place right in the heart of Las Vegas. Here's the host for the night, Kalen Allen, getting the crowd pumped.

KALEN ALLEN (ARCHIVAL): The one and the only, the legend, Britney Spears is about to make an announcement that you are not ready for everybody, YES!

B: And - he's right. We are not ready for it. And, apparently, Britney isn't either. She is nowhere to be seen.

T: Kalen is obviously waiting for Britney to make her big entrance. He vamps. He dances. He clearly doesn't think he was going to be on stage this long.

KALEN (ARCHIVAL) I wish I knew Britney choreo, but she - she a lot better dancer than me, so I don't think I'd be able to do it. But you know I can hit a little boom cack. Give me a little bit of foot action. A little leg twist... you know! You know! Uh, pop, pop, pop. Ok y'all! Now let's go back and see what's happening at Toshiba, she's coming, it's about to happen, it's about to go down in Las Vegas!

T: Finally, over an hour after the livestream was supposed to begin, something starts happening Britney's songs blare as graphics are projected onto the high-rise hotels behind the stage. There's a circus tent. A giant snake, and then, Britney's face - along with text that reads: Domination: The Las Vegas Residency. So, this is it - the announcement. A *second* Vegas residency.

B: Fireworks ignite. Dancers assemble. And then, Britney slowly rises in the center of the stage...looking...like she'd rather be literally anywhere else. She waves awkwardly, and shifts her hands on and off of her hips. She looks around like she's waiting for something.

UNIDENTIFIED (ARCHIVAL): Ladies and gentlemen, Britney Spears! [cheers, then weird silence]

T: We're all expecting Britney to say something here. "Thanks guys, I'm so excited." Remind everybody when the tickets go on sale. Even, "Hello." But - there's nothing. Britney doesn't say a peep.

MUSIC ENTERS

B: After what feels like the world's longest 12 seconds, Britney walks down the stairs. She hits the red carpet and takes it all the way through the crowd. Then, still without saying *anything*, she just keeps walking, and gets into a limo. And that's it. That's Britney's announcement.

T: Remember how we told you in the last episode that Britney is currently on a work strike? Well, we're pretty sure that *this* was the beginning of that strike. This announcement fiasco is the last time Britney has appeared live before an audience. Because...A few months later, she cancels the brand new residency altogether.

B: And two and a half years after that, the "Smoke and Mirrors" era would end. The illusion would be broken. By Britney herself.

BRITNEY (TO COURT): I just want my life back. And it's been thirteen years and it's enough.

T: Next time on Toxic, we'll finally hear Britney...unfiltered.

BRITNEY (TO COURT): I shouldn't be in a conservatorship if I can work and provide money and work for myself and pay other people. It makes no sense. The laws need to change.

T: Thank you Witness Docs for making this show with us! Abigail Keel is our senior producer. Kevin "Ktid" Tidmarsh is our producer. Our story editor is Gianna Palmer. Our executive producer is Kameel Stanley and our head of content is Peter Clowney.

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

T: Zoe Schwab is researched a ton of shit about britney for us! Our fact checker is Anakwa Dwamena. Special thanks to Meghan and Dustin Penn. Toxic is written and hosted by me, Tess Barker.

B: And me, Babs Gray! You can reach out to the show any time at britneypod@stitcher.com And you can follow us on social media @britneysgram. Find transcripts for all our episodes at witnesspodcasts.com.

T: And subscribe to Toxic: The Britney Spears Story to get every episode of the show right in your podcast feed. You know where to listen!

B: Thank you!