

TOXIC: THE BRITNEY SPEARS STORY
CHAPTER 9: STRONGER

WITNESS DOCS

JUDGE BRENDA PENNY: So next, I'm going to get the appearance of the attorneys and the parties [FADE DOWN]

TESS BARKER: It's June 23, 2021. Judge Brenda Penny, is kicking off today's probate court hearing for Britney's case. This is leaked audio. You may occasionally hear some typing or noises from the person who recorded it.

JUDGE PENNY: So I'm going to give the appearance of counsel first and then I'm gonna get the appearance of the parties. Ms. Thoreen I've got you on video as well.

VIVIAN THOREEN: Yes. Good afternoon, Your Honor. Vivian Thoreen of Holland & Knight appearing on behalf of James Spears [FADE DOWN]

TESS: There are only a handful of reporters beside me in the courtroom audience, and we've already been told sternly to stay quiet. To keep our phones off. We're not even sure we'll be **allowed** to stay for the whole hearing. Maybe the proceeding will be closed and we'll be asked to exit a few minutes in. People are antsy. Anxious to get the ball rolling.

TESS: But none of the people in the audience appear as anxious as the 7 faces on the video conference screen to the right of Judge Penny's bench: the attorneys in Britney's case. They call in from offices with country club art. One has a framed Lakers jersey behind him. In the top left video square is Sam Ingham, Britney's attorney. Ingham is usually a fairly chipper guy. He's prone to making some corny joke before getting into business. But today, he looks a little shaky. His eyes dart as he talks.

SAMUEL INGHAM: Yes, Good afternoon, Your Honor. Samuel Ingham, court-appointed counsel for Britney Jean Spears. My client is free to discuss any aspect of the conservatorship that she wishes and is welcome to say whatever she likes. For the record, I would like to state that I have not in any way attempted to control or filter or edit anything that she has to say today. These are entirely her words, and that's all I have to say, your honor, at this point.

TESS: Britney is scheduled to virtually address the court today - . She's actually the one who *requested* this hearing. Britney hasn't spoken in court for two years, and she's never made public remarks about her conservatorship... so it's a pretty big deal. All morning long, the major news stations have been reporting live on the countdown to this hearing. Babs and I have ideas about what Britney might say. We think maybe she'll ask for her dad to be kicked out of her conservatorship. Or for special permission to get married. But we have no clue if the public will be allowed to hear her statement.

JUDGE PENNY: Did any of the counsel have anything they wanted to say before I hear from Ms. Spears?

LAURIANN WRIGHT: Your Honor, I did want to ask — we don't know, obviously, what Miss Spears is going to say, and we're happy that she's here today to address her concerns with the court. I would ask that we please seal the transcript and clear the courtroom so we can preserve those medical rights. I think it's really important

TESS: Here it is. One of the attorneys. Making the move we're expecting...asking to close the courtroom to the public. I'm thinking, "Great. Now I'm gonna have to leave with the rest of the reporters, so *more stuff* will happen behind closed doors."

THEME MUSIC

LAURIANN WRIGHT: And it could be that she brings up issues related to her family and her minor children and they have their own privacy rights. And I think anything said about them

BRITNEY SPEARS: I think they've done a good job at exploiting my—my life. I feel like it should be an open court hearing and they should listen and hear what I have to say.

MUX DROPS

TESS: Oh my god. Oh my god. Britney interrupts to say she wants to keep the hearing open. All of us reporters in the audience shift in our seats. We need to stay silent. But we gesture to one another. Make faces through our masks. It's happening. Britney is speaking out.

THEME MUSIC FADES DOWN

BRITNEY: Ok, so I have this written down. I have a lot to say. So bear with me. [FADE DOWN]

BABS: Britney Spears is addressing the court today by phone. And she's prepared some things to say. 23 minutes worth of things, actually. She starts reading from her notes, and the words just tumble out. The judge has to ask her a few times to slow down so the court reporter can transcribe accurately.

TESS: Britney lays everything out. She details exactly what she thinks of her conservatorship, all the people involved in it, and the legal system that's allowed her to remain in this position for so long. She's impassioned. Her arguments are cogent. And it's astonishing to hear. For years now, the public's only view into Britney was through stilted, nervous-seeming Instagram videos. Posts where she's posing for the camera, or dancing. She rarely speaks. I didn't know if this fiery person was still inside of Britney. Here she is, though. Persisting.

BRITNEY: The people who did this to me should not get away and to be able to walk away so easily. Recap: I was on tour in two thousand eighteen, I was forced to do.
[FADE DOWN]

BABS: Britney begins her testimony by telling the court a disturbing story about what happened to her just after her Vegas Residency, Piece of Me, wrapped at the end of 2017. She says her management team coerced her to immediately begin a world tour.

BRITNEY: He handed me a sheet of paper as I got off the stage in Vegas and said I had to sign it. It was very threatening and scary and with the conservatorship, I couldn't even get my own attorney. So out of fear, I went ahead and I did the tour. When I came off that tour, a new show in Las Vegas was supposed to take place.

TESS: A new Vegas show - called Domination. We mentioned Domination in our last episode - it was the big "announcement of an announcement." In this show, Britney was slated to make over half a million dollars a night - more than any other act on the Vegas Strip at the time. Britney immediately got to work on the new residency.

BRITNEY: I started rehearsing early, but it was hard because I'd been doing Vegas for four years and I needed a break in between. But no, I was told this is the timeline and this is how it's gonna to go. I taught my dancers my new choreography myself. I take everything I do very seriously. There's tons of video with me at rehearsals.

ARCHIVAL BRITNEY DANCING

BRITNEY: 5, 6, 7, 8 Oh we in the club, pop pop. Gonna turn this shit up, pop pop.
Gonna turn this shit up, down.

BABS: Britney's right - there is a bunch of footage of her rehearsing from this time. Here she is instructing dancers on moves for her song "Scream and Shout".

ARCHIVAL BRITNEY DANCING CONTINUES

BRITNEY: Down. Get up in the club, look. All eyes on us, look. All eyes on us, pop look.
All eyes on us.

TESS: When these videos were first posted to her Instagram, they were getting us *hyped* about the new Vegas show. Britney was crushing her choreo - her moves were sharp. It was peak Brit.

BRITNEY: I wasn't good. I was great.

BASS HEAVY MUSIC

BABS: In Britney's telling, the level of control her team had over her was extreme. In one example, Britney disagreed with some choreography, and her team retaliated against her.

BRITNEY: My therapist sat me down in a room and said he had a million phone calls about how I was not cooperating in rehearsals and I haven't been taking my medication. All of this is false. Ma'am, I'm not here to be anyone's slave. I can say no to a dance move.

BABS: After this therapy session, Britney testified that her father, Jamie, forced her to go to a residential treatment facility. The same treatment center a paralegal left us a voicemail about on Britney's Gram. Britney also said her doctor started her on the drug lithium against her will.

BRITNEY: He put me on lithium out of nowhere. He took me off my normal meds I'd been on for five years. And lithium is a very, very strong and completely different medication compared to what I was used to. You can go mentally impaired if you take too much, if you stay on it longer than five months. But he put me on that and I felt drunk.

BABS: Lynne Spears has said in court docs Britney's doctor was prescribing what she and many others thought to be quote "entirely inappropriate medicine" to Britney. Medicine that Britney testified she did not want to take.

TESS: Just weeks after being released from that center in 2019, Britney appeared in court in person to describe all of these events to Judge Penny. Which means her testimony today, right now is not even the first time Britney has told the judge about all this. She calls out the judge for her inaction over the last two years.

BRITNEY: I will be honest with you. I haven't been back to court in a long time because I don't think I was heard on any level when I came to court the last time. I'm telling you again, because I'm not lying. I want to feel heard. And I'm telling you this again. So maybe you can understand the depth and the degree and the damage that they did to me back then.

TESS: After that 2019 testimony, which was closed to the public, Britney didn't get what she wanted. Her dad didn't resign. The conservatorship didn't end.

BABS: So here she is in court, making her case again. This time, it's an open hearing - accessible via audio on the court's video conference system. People across the world are listening in. And Britney's not holding anything back. She tells the court exactly how she feels about her dad, Jamie. About how cruel he was in sending her to the treatment center against her will.

BRITNEY: I cried on the phone for an hour and he loved every minute of it. The control he had over someone as powerful as me—to hurt his own daughter. One hundred thousand percent. He loved it.

MUSIC ENDS

TESS: Britney has been vocal about her father's mistreatment of her for years. And it's not just her — Britney's sons even have a restraining order against Jamie... their own grandfather. Kevin Federline sought the restraining order in 2019, after Jamie reportedly broke down a door and shook Britney's 13 year old son, Sean Preston. In a truly infuriating series of events... this restraining order ended up costing Britney. At the time, Jamie had to be present when Britney had the boys, and Britney's official custody was reduced after the incident -- to around 10%.

BRITNEY: My dad and anyone involved in this conservatorship and my management who played a huge role in punishing me when I said, no, ma'am, they should be in jail.

CROWD OUTSIDE THE COURT: [CHEERS] What did she say? She said they should be in jail? Come on Britney! So should the judges! Come On Britney.

BABS: I'm outside the courthouse, screaming along with all the FreeBritney supporters out here. We've all been huddled over one cell phone, listening to Britney's testimony. It's one of the most exhilarating scenes I've ever experienced. Like being at the NBA finals and watching your team come back in the 4th quarter. I keep looking around at the faces of these people I've come to know over the past few years and see each one of them process the fact that all their work is finally coming to something.

KEVIN WU: Can you give us the phone?

LIZ: We're plugging it in right now. Guys stand back. SHHHH

BABS: We're still all crouched around the one phone, so supporters start scrambling to find a way to plug into the speaker they have set up for the rally.

(Britney's voice comes onto the speaker)

KEVIN: Quiet!

BRITNEY: I'm so angry and I cry every day. It concerns me I'm told I'm not allowed to expose the people who did this. For my sanity. I need you the judge to do an interview where I can be heard [FADES DOWN]

BABS: Everyone moves to the speaker, set up in front of a giant pink Free Britney backdrop. A young woman sits down on the ground next to it, her arms wrapped around her legs. She leans in, like she's at a sleepover and listening to someone telling a secret.

TESS: Britney's statement is just rapid-fire. She spares no one. Certainly not her immediate family.

BRITNEY: Not only did my family not do a goddamn thing, my dad was all for it. My whole family did nothing. And considering my family has lived off of my conservatorship

for thirteen years, I won't be surprised if one of them has something to say. Go forward and say, we don't think this should end. We have to help her.

TESS: Britney calls out Jodi Montgomery, the current conservator of her person.

BRITNEY: Yes Even Jodi is starting to kind of take it too far with me. She made me feel like my dad does — very similar her behavior and my dad, but just a different dynamic.

BABS: Britney says she doesn't like the therapy plan Jodi has put her on. Britney doesn't like that she has to go across town to see a therapist who makes her uncomfortable.

BRITNEY: It takes too much out of me going to this man I don't know. Number one, I'm scared of people. I don't trust people with what I've been through. I don't like it. I don't want to do that. I want to meet with a therapist once a week, not twice a week. And I want him to come to my home because I actually know I need a little therapy. [giggles]

TESS: And in this 23 minute speech — Britney *also* brings up her court appointed attorney.

BRITNEY: I know my lawyer Sam has been very scared for me to go forward. He told me I should keep it to myself really.

TESS: Ingham has a long history of not advocating for Britney's wishes. The New York Times has reported about a 2014 hearing in which Ingham joked with the judge about not informing Britney of her right to marry under the conservatorship. Another time, he told on Britney to the judge for saying a swear word in front of her children. Again, this guy was supposed to be *Britney's* advocate. And then there's this.

BRITNEY: Ma'am I didn't know I could petition the conservatorship to end it. I'm sorry for my ignorance, but I honestly didn't know that.

TESS: Britney didn't know she could petition the court to end her conservatorship. And not for a lack of talking to her lawyer about wanting to get out. According to court records obtained by the New York Times, Britney had spoken to Ingham many times over the years about how she wanted the conservatorship to end - and Ingham - her *lawyer* - never told her how to do that! But if the conservatorship ended, his paycheck from Britney was going to end. Remember, Ingham was billing Britney up to 10k a week.

BABS: So it's not entirely surprising to hear in court today that Ingham wants Britney to keep silent.

[BRITNEY'S VOICE OVER SPEAKER OUTSIDE, CROWD RUSTLES]

BABS: Outside, the crowd is quiet, hanging on Britney's every word. For years, the Free Britney movement has been really critical of Ingham and his utter lack of action on Britney's case.

BRITNEY, over loudspeaker: I haven't really had the opportunity by my own self to actually handpick my own lawyer by myself. And I would like to be able to do that. (HUGE CHEER).

BABS, outside: So Britney is talking about how she wants to get her own... to be able to hire her own attorney, finally. I'm just, I'm in total shock. I don't even know how to react to this. I can't believe ...I can't believe that I just can't believe this happening (CRIES). I can't believe Tess is inside right now, listening to this. She must be freaking out.

TESS: Inside the courtroom, my hand is cramping from taking notes so fast. My jaw is like, on the floor. I'm so proud of Britney. And periodically glancing at that video conference screen, where Ingham and the rest of the lawyers are staring, deer in headlights, into their cameras. And Britney just. Keeps. Going.

BRITNEY: I shouldn't be in a conservatorship if I can work and make money and provide for myself and pay other people. It makes no sense. The laws need to change. What state allows people to own another person's money and account and threaten them and saying you can't spend your money unless you do what we want you to do. And I'm paying them. It's been a long time since I've owned my money. And it's my wish and my dream for all of this to end without being tested. Again, it makes no sense whatsoever for the state of California to sit back and literally watch me with their own two eyes, make a living for so many people and be told I'm not good enough. But I'm great at what I do, and I allow these people to control what I do, ma'am, and it's enough.

BABS: And then Britney gets into what she really wants in life. It seems pretty simple. Or at least, should be.

BRITNEY: I would like to progressively move forward and I want to have the real deal. I want to be able to get married and have a baby. I was told right now in the conservatorship, I'm not able to get married or have a baby. I have a IUD inside of myself right now, so I don't get pregnant. I wanted to take the IUD out so I could start trying to have another baby. But this so-called team won't let me go to the doctor to take it out because they they don't want me to have any more children.

BABS: This was one of the most disturbing parts of Britney's testimony. And afterwards, it was one of the most reported-on details. Britney has said in multiple interviews that she wants more children. In this 2016 "Carpool Karaoke" segment, she broaches the subject with James Corden.

ARCHIVAL Britney on Carpool Karaoke

BRITNEY: I want more.

JAMES CORDEN: Do you? You want to have more kids?

BRITNEY: Yeah. I'd like to have like three more.

CORDEN: Three more?

(Studio audience chuckles)

BRITNEY: I just (sings) All that she wants is another baby.

(Corden, studio audience laugh)

BABS: And now here is Britney, in open court. Saying she's being coerced to use birth control. By the way, this is not unique to just Britney's situation. According to disability rights experts, forced birth control and sterilization are routine for women under conservatorship in the U.S.

TESS: Britney also tells the court that she's been researching conservatorships. And that she's totally aware of the systemic problems at hand.

BRITNEY: I truly believe this conservatorship is abusive. And now we can sit here all day and say, oh, conservatorships are here to help people. But ma'am there's a thousand conservatorships that are abusive as well.

TESS: Britney's right. As we've said in a previous episode - there are over a million people currently conserved in the US, but there's essentially *no* data on how often abuse is occurring. And if Britney Spears is having this much trouble getting out of her situation, imagine how hard it is for people without a global army fighting for them.

BRITNEY: I'm done. All I want is to own my money, for this to end, and my boyfriend to drive me in his fucking car. And I would honestly like to sue my family, to be totally honest with you. It's embarrassing and demoralizing what I've been through. And that's the main reason I've never said it openly. And mainly I didn't want to say it openly because I honestly didn't think anyone would believe me. I thought people would make fun of me or laugh at me and say, she's lying. She's got everything. She's Britney Spears. I'm not lying. I just want my life back. And it's been thirteen years and it's enough. And that's all I wanted to say to you. And thank you so much for letting me speak to you today.

JUDGE PENNY: Oh, Ms Spears you're quite welcome. And also, I just want to tell you that I certainly am sensitive to everything that you said and how you're feeling. And I know that it took a lot of courage for you to say everything you had to say. OK, do any of the council have anything that they want to add this afternoon.

THOREEN: Your honor, Vivian Thoreen. Thank you, Your Honor. I appreciate Ms. Spears comments and the courage it took her to make the remarks to the court. I would like to request a brief recess so that I may consult with my client. [FADE DOWN]

BABS, outside: Holy shit, they're taking a recess. [CROWD CHEERS]

JUNIOR: She went *in*.

BABS: Britney went in. Outside the courthouse, we're all excited and chattering on about what just happened.

RICK BLACK: Big day, Barbara!

BABS: I see Rick Black, the advocate we spoke with a few episodes ago, who you may remember had a father-in-law under an abusive guardianship.

BABS, outside: So how do you feel about what Britney said?

RICK: Britney had her best performance ever. And it was from the heart. And it helped thousands of others that she may not even appreciate. And I hope now we get to see her freed from this odyssey.

BABS: When the recess is over, Judge Penny tells the court she's stopping the live audio feed because people are recording it. Everyone outside can no longer hear what's going on inside the courtroom. So I wait for Tess to come out. We haven't been able to text or anything since she went inside.

BABS, outside: Oh, she's there. Oh, my God. OK, I got to find—Excuse me. Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry. Got to find Tess, I gotta find Tess. Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Holy shit dude, what the fuck.

TESS, outside: What the fuck that was so crazy

BABS: She said, like all of it

TESS: everything she said everything.

BABS: And she just validated literally everything that's been

TESS: Literally everything

BABS: beyond.

MUSIC ENTERS

TESS: Yeah. I'm, like, still in shock.

BABS: So what the fuck happens now?

TESS: As of recording this episode... Britney Spears, like countless other American citizens, is *still* under a conservatorship.

BABS: But things are changing - in the days after her testimony, Britney's team and the whole operation behind her conservatorship start... well, acting like they're on a sinking ship.

TESS: Britney's longtime manager Larry Rudolph quits.. And. *Finally*. Britney's court-appointed attorney Sam Ingham submits his resignation.

BABS: And then, just as we're recording one of our last episodes - I get a news alert that says Jamie Spears is stepping down as conservator. Tess and I get texts with champagne emojis and all-caps YOU DID IT. But then, we read the documents... and actually, Jamie has just filed papers with the court saying that he is *willing* to step down as Britney's conservator ...when the quote "time is right." In his filing, Jamie's lawyers still maintain that the conservatorship "saved Britney from disaster" and that Jamie has done nothing wrong. Sure, Jan.

TESS: So the battle's not over yet. But now, Britney actually has a lawyer *she* picked. That's right, Thirteen and a half years after her conservatorship was cemented, Britney Jean Spears has appointed the lawyer she actually wants to hire. But what happens now? What more will it take for Britney to finally break free?

MUSIC

MIDROLL BREAK

ARCHIVAL PRESS CONFERENCE OUTSIDE COURTHOUSE

MATTHEW ROSENGART: My firm and I are going to be taking a top to bottom look at what's happened here over the past decade.

BABS: This is Matthew Rosengart... Britney's attorney as of July 14th, 2021.

TESS: Rosengart is a salt and pepper haired bigshot - a former federal prosecutor who has represented celeb clients like Stephen Spielberg. And okay this is totally a rumor, but we *heard* Madonna's the one who sent this guy to Britney.

ARCHIVAL PRESS CONFERENCE OUTSIDE COURTHOUSE

ROSENGART: We feel that today was a big step in the interest of justice [FADES DOWN]

BABS: We hope that Rosengart backs his words up with action. That he helps Britney accomplish what she wants - to end this thing once and for all.

TESS: But how does that actually happen? How do you get emancipated from a conservatorship once you're in one?

BABS: Our research into this yielded frustrating but predictable results: since there's virtually no oversight or collected data on conservatorships, it's impossible to know how often they end up terminated. But, the general consensus seems to be that it's extremely rare.

TESS: One thing that advocates say helps immensely though, is hiring your own counsel. So we went searching for someone like Britney. Someone else who's dumped their court-appointed attorney and then *actually* gotten out of their conservatorship. And we found a woman named Dorothy O'Brien.

BABS: This is about Britney Spears, do you know who Britney Spears is?

DOROTHY O'BRIEN: Yes.

TESS: Any thoughts on her music?

DOROTHY: I'm not a fan. Then again, you know, my era was big band swing and rock and roll, early rock and roll, rhythm and blues it was called back then.

TESS: Dorothy is 86 years old. We visited Dorothy at her home in Southwestern Los Angeles in March 2021.

BABS: Dorothy has lived in the same house for over 50 years. She worked in special education for decades, but she's retired now. We sat outside on her front porch to interview her.

TESS: So what do you like to do now that you're not working? What's your, what are your hobbies? What do you like to do with your days?

DOROTHY: Well, I don't, I'm not into a lot of hobbies. It's more just get through the day and do what I can do. Some days are good days and I get a lot done. And other days, especially Tuesdays after I've been - Monday's trash day Tuesdays go pick up the Meals on Wheels. City of Gardena is wonderful about providing us with a frozen meal that we can heat up for every day of the week.

PLODDING MUSIC

TESS: Like Britney, Dorothy was also placed in a conservatorship by a family member. A conservatorship she didn't want or need. Like every conservatorship or guardianship case... the details of Dorothy's case are complicated. But we'll give you the cliff notes.

BABS: Dorothy has three grown children. According to court filings, a few years ago, one of her sons started moving money out of one of her accounts and into her trust ... basically, making it easier for *him* to access the money. He did this without telling her. When Dorothy found out, she threatened to call the police on him for stealing her money. About a month later, Dorothy's son filed to temporarily conserve her. A move she feels was retaliation.

TESS: Dorothy came back from a vacation to a notice from the court.

DOROTHY: I had like less than two weeks, I think, to show up in the court, and they had appointed a court appointed attorney.

TESS: Dorothy's son was successful. The conservatorship was approved at that hearing in January 2020.

DOROTHY: I couldn't believe, first of all, that my two very religious kids. And I mean, one of the Ten Commandments is honor your father and your mother. They're not honoring me, they're dishonoring me. And if they're taking my money, why aren't they helping me pay the bills? Why am I living on savings for two years while they are taking my money away from me? Somebody is wrong somewhere, and it's not me.

BABS: Dorothy's son managed to convince the court that she wasn't capable of taking care of herself alone - that she wasn't taking her medicine properly. A claim Dorothy's own doctor refuted in court filings. Still, the court kept Dorothy under conservatorship. So, she got to work.

TESS: Right away, Dorothy told her court-appointed attorney -- I want out of this thing. She explained all the reasons why she believed it was wrong for her to be conserved in the first place. But just like Britney, Dorothy didn't feel like her attorney was listening. She told us that instead, it felt like her court appointed attorney's sole focus was getting her into a nursing home.

DOROTHY: I decided that she isn't going to protect me.

TESS: Were you afraid at all during that time period that you weren't going to be able to get out of it?

DOROTHY: If I didn't have a strong faith of my own, I probably would have gone crazy or felt like suicide. But I was determined to find a way, or ways, to get out of this.

TESS: The best way to get out, Dorothy decided, was to pursue an attorney of her own choosing. So she called up a lawyer she'd met years before, Susan B. Geffen. Susan is an elder law specialist.

BABS: Susan told Dorothy that the first step would be getting the court to approve Susan's appointment.

DOROTHY: It took some doing. Because they were saying that I wasn't competent to choose an attorney.

BABS: There's another thing Dorothy has in common with Britney — her competency, too, has been questioned in court. But Dorothy felt competent. In fact, her longtime primary care doctor had even written a letter to the court saying Dorothy could take care of herself. But it hadn't been enough. So she and Susan hatched a plan. Together, they decided to have Dorothy's competency evaluated by a psychiatrist.

TESS: This kind of psychiatric evaluation is something Britney has had to go through, too. In fact, in her testimony in June 2021, she told the court she found the process traumatic and offensive. Britney said she wanted her conservatorship to end without any further evaluations.

BABS: But Dorothy was willing to do it if it meant getting out. Susan and Dorothy picked a doctor who'd done these kind of assessments before, one affiliated with the court system.

DOROTHY: He came with an attitude of making me at ease and let's try and get the best out of you. And he declared me 100 percent perfect in every area. But that wasn't good enough.

BABS: According to Dorothy's court filings, her son's lawyers objected to the doctor's report. They demanded a so-called neutral psychiatrist re-evaluate Dorothy. So they picked another doctor everyone agreed on.

DOROTHY: So I had to go through the procedure with another psychiatrist, and she came with the attitude that we're going to get down to business and I'm going to prove just how senile you really are.

TESS: What were some of the things that she was doing that made you feel that way?

DOROTHY: "What country are we in? What state are we here? What city are we in?" And at that point, I said, "oh, you forgot what county you were in, it's Los Angeles." She didn't like that. [LAUGHTER] "And how much money do you have coming in?" And I said, "none." She said, "You don't remember?" I said, "No, I remember. My son has my pension of four thousand dollars a month and he has my rent money. Three thousand dollars a month. My son is getting seven thousand dollars a month of mine and I get nothing."

TESS: Just like Britney, Dorothy ended up paying for these evaluations herself. Dorothy and Susan told the court that the first doctor, the one Dorothy chose, had charged \$2,800 dollars for this evaluation. But the second doctor, the one Dorothy's son approved, charged \$10,000... for the exact same evaluation.

DOROTHY: I think that's outrageous, especially when she was trying to prove that I was senile. She was trying to determine how much dementia I had, it was obvious.

BABS: How does that feel to have someone trying to make you, you know?

DOROTHY: Well, you can cry, you can get angry or you can make it humorous. And I just had fun with her.

BABS: In the end, the second psychiatrist agreed with the first one — Dorothy was competent. The judge allowed Dorothy to hire Susan as her attorney. And it didn't take long for Susan to convince the judge that the conservatorship itself was a farce. It was lifted in November 2020.

TESS: What do you remember about the day you are emancipated?

DOROTHY: Susan called me and told me, I think it was Friday afternoon. And I started calling everybody. And said “I won, [LAUGHTER] I won.” and I didn't know what. What money I was going to get back. But just the fact that I felt free again.

MUSIC

TESS: Dorothy wasn't just free... she was armed with an attorney who *continued* to fight for her. With the conservatorship lifted, Susan helped Dorothy file for a petition of surcharge — basically asking the court to make Dorothy's son pay her back for all those fees her estate incurred while she was conserved. The psychiatrist examinations, the legal fees... in total almost \$20,000 in ultimately unnecessary fees. All racked up in just eight months. The court hasn't granted this petition yet, it's still ongoing.

BABS: Susan uncovered multiple instances in which Dorothy's son was misusing Dorothy's money. She also provided evidence to the court about the ways in which he wasn't acting as an actual caretaker. According to court docs, Dorothy's son never visited Dorothy or even had groceries delivered the entire time he was her conservator.

TESS: This is why having an attorney *you've actually chosen* is such a crucial piece of extricating yourself from a conservatorship. Why, the appointment of Britney's new attorney Matthew Rosengart is such a huge step forward. You need someone who you trust is on your side to show the court the wrongs that have been perpetrated against you. Someone who understands this complex and tedious system and will actually advocate for your interests.

BABS: The day we interviewed Dorothy, Susan was there too. She told us that she gets calls from people like Dorothy *all the time*. She sounded frustrated and resigned as she explained to us that far more people ask her for help than she actually has the ability to assist. Coming onto a case like Dorothy's is difficult. For one, an attorney has to start out working knowing they may never be paid. Because the *conservator* would have to approve their fees. Susan wasn't paid for her work until after Dorothy's conservatorship ended.

MUSIC ENDS

TESS: Susan's assistance to Dorothy goes way beyond the court hearings or the money. She respects Dorothy. She listens to her. She knows little details about Dorothy's life. As we wrapped up the interview, Dorothy mentioned that she plays ukulele and sings. Susan piped up.

SUSAN GEFFEN: Do you want to, do you want her to get her, you want to get your ukulele?

DOROTHY: Yeah, I could do that.

TESS: Oh, that would be awesome. Yeah, that would be awesome.

SUSAN: OK. Sometimes when she might want to tell you this, but sometimes Dorothy wakes up in the middle of the night and she can't go back to sleep. She leaves her ukulele in her bed and she plays it.

TESS: That's so cool. That's awesome.

BABS: Dorothy went inside, using the handrails she had installed to help her up the stairs. Something she paid for after the conservatorship was terminated and she got her income back. She came back out with her ukulele...

[DOROTHY STRUMS THE UKULELE]

BABS: How many Dorothys are out there? How many Britneys? Fighting against all odds, scraping together the resources they can--trying to make their case in a system that's rendered them powerless. How many of them will get that happy ending, where they get to say the words "I'm free."

TESS: Britney has said she loves fairy tales, so here's one - a princess has lost her voice. She is trapped in her California compound, doomed to spin around in her living room for all eternity. But then one day, the princess speaks out - she frees herself. After she's victorious, the princess rides off to Hawaii, without having to ask anyone if she can. And in a few years, she releases a new album. Maybe. Only if she wants to.

DOROTHY: [SINGING] Aloha, ee vay oh ah ooh wayyy [FADES DOWN]

THEME MUSIC

BABS: The next episode of Toxic is our last episode. We'll unpack the power dynamics surrounding Britney - and the veil of silence that's still wrapped around her story.

RONAN FARROW: I think we're still living in sort of the ruins of that structure of secrecy where, you know, there was an easy narrative presented for why this had to be the way that she was controlled.

TESS: Toxic would not be possible without our team at Witness Docs! Y'all know who they are by now: Abigail Keel, Kevin "Ktid" Tidmarsh, Gianna Palmer, Kameel Stanley and Peter Clowney. Plus! Casey Holford, who mixed this episode and composed all our original music.

BABS: Zoe Schwab has stayed up all night researching very random things for us. Anakwa Dwamena. Is our fact checker. And Toxic is written and hosted by me Babs Gray

TESS: And me, Tess Barker! Reach out to us with your questions and comments at britnepod@stitcher.com Or get in touch on social @britneysgram. Find transcripts for all our episodes at witnesspodcasts.com.

BABS: And subscribe to Toxic: The Britney Spears Story wherever you listen to podcasts. It really helps the show. Also send it to your friends... that helps us, too!

TESS: Thanks!

—END—